



## Development of Public Libraries in Colonial Bengal: A Historical Review

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### ABSTRACT

Bengali public library supporters have recognized the need for an organized and efficient public library system since the 1920. This knowledge is the result of decades of experience in library management. They came to the decision that many people will no longer find educational opportunities at public libraries. The functions of libraries have evolved significantly between the ancient and medieval periods to accommodate shifting social norms. The library only held collections of books and manuscripts that were historical or premodern. Books and documents were kept up-to-date at the library. At the library, collection and preservation came before service. The desire to acquire a particular or available book would draw readers to the library. The librarian, who looked after the books, put the collection's preservation ahead of their distribution. Information was passively stored in the library. In this article, development of public libraries in Colonial Bengal: a historical review has been discussed.

**Keywords:** *Public, Libraries, Colonial, Bengal.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of human civilization and culture, humans have collected and conserved cultural and civilizational representations of understanding, determination, insight, knowledge, assumption, ownership, achievement, and desire for future generations. The exterior forms of these accumulations resemble a series of developmental stages. The following phase is based on the current phase. Collectively, human civilization transmits knowledge. Time, place, or civilization has no bearing on this inheritance. Over thousands of years, human knowledge has been expressed in concrete form using several approaches. Frameworks and methodologies that humans have methodically developed have become significant turning points.

The wealth of contemporary knowledge in human society is a result of historical and accumulated information. The recent or distant past serves as its fundamental basis. Human civilization and culture have been constantly evolving in various directions. When the progress of knowledge pauses, it is revived by innovative discoveries. Academics have evaluated libraries' attributes and characteristics as well as the formal modifications made to their holdings. Since its inception, libraries have processed and preserved knowledge vaults in a multitude of formats, providing access to diverse information resources.

Before printing became widely used, library resources were handwritten texts. The absence of duplicate copies severely constrained the supply of library materials, leading to a decline in library patronage. The fifteenth century marked the start of the European Renaissance. During that period, they developed a ground-breaking monotype printing technique. The primary use of technology was in book production. The idea was definitely motivated by societal necessity, regardless of whether it originated with a group or an individual. Both society's need and intellectual pursuits led to the development of printing technology, which also established the social role of libraries. It was simpler to print each book separately, making them visible and readable. Human knowledge has grown in a wide range of domains. More people were able to access the book collection, which promoted greater literary engagement.

Reading books became ingrained in social consciousness as a result of the pursuit of knowledge. Instead of being a place for the enjoyment of a single founder or organizer, libraries nowadays are shaped by a common social conscience that directs their development and programming. To preserve equilibrium, society's forms and functions have changed over time. Societal demands led to the creation of different library types, which in turn shaped the requirements for library collections.

The growth of literary copies and the development of printing technology significantly impacted libraries. Today's libraries have gradually changed from being only collections of antiquated literature. Originally, printed books contained pictures and were based on handwritten text. It takes a few more decades for printed books to replace handwritten manuscripts. At the beginning, the quantity of printing decreased. With the emergence of printed books in significant quantities, manuscripts in libraries were replaced by printed volumes, and libraries were systematically restructured into a modern organization. The library's complex structure was influenced by its vast volume collection, the diversity of its themes and divisions, and the increasing number of authors.

Austria's first national library was established by Emperor Maximilian, who also constructed an advanced national library system. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the publishing house and library merged into a single entity. One company merged the functions of publisher, bookseller, and printer in the early days of printing. As printing technology developed, publishers began to disentangle their operations from printing companies. As publishing got more complex and laws were established, publishers concentrated on their own works, while libraries were required to purchase books in bulk from multiple publishers. As a result, publishers and booksellers began to function as separate organizations. Publishers created new libraries and added more publications and themes to their collections. The audience managed the range of topics with ease and at a low cost. Libraries are the only way for readers to interact with authors, publishers, or booksellers. Libraries connected authors, publishers, and books according to the needs of their users. Modern libraries fulfill their social obligations by fostering literacy and providing the reading public with access to the printed world.

People used various organization strategies at different times inside a single library. Libraries were acknowledged to need to be consistent and well-organized prior to the 18th century. Increased library use within this framework was the outcome of the eighteenth-century development of balance and uniformity in library structure, which laid the groundwork for the current system.

## 2. HISTORICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Adhikari, G. & Majhi, P. (2024). Education, literacy, and community development all depend on public libraries. Using a systematic technique that includes a literature review, questionnaires, interviews, and observational research, this extensive study investigates the current condition of public libraries in West Bengal, India. Through a thorough review of existing literature and empirical data, this study aims to clarify the challenges, possibilities, and prospects facing public libraries in West Bengal. Additionally, the authenticity and integrity of the aforementioned study results are ensured by adherence to the APA citation format.

Barman, M. & Lahkar, N. (2024). A key tool for providing necessary library services, obtaining funding, encouraging resource and network sharing among libraries, and improving administrative effectiveness is legislation pertaining to public libraries. To better comprehend the historical context of the Public Libraries Acts in the Southern Indian states, this study looks at a number of public library expansion-related topics. The study has a strong emphasis on comparing the governance systems and involvement of local library authorities in the southern Indian states. This study utilizes both primary and secondary data sources. Using the RRRLF website and pertinent state government gazetteer notifications as data sources, we looked at the Public Libraries Acts of the southern Indian states. The study has carried out a comparative evaluation of the different components of the local library authorities that are governed by the Public Libraries Acts in the states of South India. The study indicates that the state of Kerala has established block-level libraries and used other novel strategies to strengthen its local library authority. The study indicates that the local community and the library authority work well together to accomplish their respective objectives. Despite the Public Libraries Act of the southern states' sufficient provisions for local library bodies to be involved, disagreements about how the acts should be implemented nevertheless persist.

Bhattacharya, B. (2024). The advancement of society depends on the public library. Since public libraries serve everyone in society, regardless of social or economic background, they deserve a lot of focus and attention. This essay emphasizes how little progress has been made and how things are getting worse despite years of library legislation implementation. It emphasizes how difficult it is for Paschim Bardhaman's districts and local libraries to be sustainable and provide their users with quality services. Ten years after the government launched the National Mission on Libraries (NML) in 2014 with the goal of creating a world-class library system by incorporating contemporary amenities in public libraries across India, West Bengal is yet to see the expected advancements. The present state of district and town libraries in the Paschim Bardhaman region is explained in this study, along with the difficulties they encounter in providing their users with high-quality services.

Munshi, S.A., Ansari, M.A. & Barsha, S. (2024). The purpose of this research is to evaluate the facilities and services provided by rural public libraries in West Bengal, India. The purpose of the study is to evaluate how librarians see the use of ICT (information and communication technology) applications in libraries. The study combined quantitative and qualitative data collection approaches with a mixed-methods approach. We conducted a survey in 102 rural libraries using a standardized questionnaire as the main method of data gathering. To increase the data's neutrality, we also

conducted interviews with the relevant librarians. The findings revealed that rural libraries maintain a substantial collection of printed books, newspapers, and periodicals. The findings show that these rural libraries benefit their communities by offering a range of services and facilities. However, the study's findings showed that almost all of the libraries that were evaluated had a severe staffing shortage, which had an effect on services. The lack of ICT applications is a significant challenge for these libraries. However, the majority of librarians had positive opinions about ICT integration in rural libraries, recognizing its potential to enhance library services and reach a wider audience. To support ICT-based library services, the document suggests that the government provide the necessary ICT resources. The results of this study have the potential to improve and restructure rural libraries' infrastructure, services, facilities, and collections in developing countries.

Sarkar, R. (2023). Early and medieval India had royal book collections, but it wasn't until European settlers arrived that a modern library began to take shape. Bankura doesn't stand out. The modern construction of libraries in this area began in the 19th century, although several manuscripts were found in different village homes and in the Malla dynasty's royal collection in the Bankura district. The construction of libraries in the Bankura district was made possible during that time by several organizations, including Christian missionaries, progressive zamindars, the upper middle class, revolutionaries, and others. Their efforts brought the people of Bankura together via literature, the source of knowledge, in spite of their disparate goals. The main focus of the study is the development and growth of libraries in the Bankura district over the course of colonialism. It illustrates the basic features of the district's libraries prior to colonization, which were bolstered by the Malla monarchs of Bishnupur's support in the early years.

Munshi, S.A., Ansari, M.A. & Barsha, S. (2022). The purpose of this study is to investigate how public libraries in West Bengal, India, meet the intellectual needs of its rural citizens. The study employed a quantitative survey approach, utilizing a meticulously designed questionnaire. Users of 45 rural public libraries in five designated regions of West Bengal—students, officers/professionals, self-employed people, entrepreneurs, job seekers, retirees, and homemakers—were given questionnaires. According to the poll, the majority of participants were students and job seekers who sought academic and career-related material at rural public libraries. Many students from low-income families used public libraries exclusively, having borrowed certain textbooks from middle school through graduation. Job seekers mostly used the library's Career Guidance Section to prepare for various competitive exams. According to the study, public libraries have made an effort to provide various services and resources to satisfy the intellectual and informational needs of rural communities. To meet customer needs, the findings of this study will help public libraries in developing countries improve and modernize their collections, services, and facilities.

Buragohain, A. (2022). One of the most important periods in human intellectual history is the development and expansion of libraries. Libraries have existed in India since its founding. Historical records indicate that the universities of Nalanda and Taxila had well-maintained libraries with sizable book collections in the sixth century AD. The medieval era of Indian history, like the ancient age, is characterized by the presence of libraries; prominent library founders include the Mughal emperors

Babur, Humayun and Akbar. The British administration started the construction of libraries in the area under their control by taking several steps to build public libraries in India. The government and various non-governmental organizations greatly aided in the establishment of India's public library system after independence. This essay covers the growth and development of public libraries in India after independence.

Mandal, S. (2021). The library system has assessed the development of human civilization and culture. Gathering, preserving, organizing, and sharing any written, printed, or other preserved historical knowledge for present and future use are its four main duties. Societal demands influence the aims, objectives, nature, structure, documentation, organization, and service delivery model of a corporation. State collaboration, economic development, political stability, location, cultural enrichment, and individual and collective initiative, as well as an understanding of the library's mission, all played a vital role in the library's creation.

Roy, P. (2021). Modern society views the library as a cultural institution. The advancement of society depends on the library. All people are welcome to the library, regardless of their financial situation. Without a reader, a book is weak and ineffective. Both the author and the reader will feel proud and satisfied when there is a strong bond between the book and its reader. The authoritative textbook essentially links education, libraries, and cars. The library serves as both a conduit and a storehouse of civilization. Historically, the library has made information on civilization and human death accessible. The library is essential to the advancement of culture. In this country, a library plays a crucial role alongside schools, colleges, and hospitals. The library increases students' reading engagement. The purpose of this essay is to analyze the complexities of West Bengal's public libraries. The primary and secondary data gathered from 50 Malda inhabitants will be the main focus of the study.

Bhatt, R. K. & Kandhasamy, K. (2020). For civilization to advance socially, culturally, and economically, public libraries are essential. A society's literacy rate can be inferred from the direct and indirect accessibility to public libraries. You can identify problems with the current library system and generate suggestions for future library construction by examining how public libraries have evolved throughout time in various locations. The goal of this work is to present a critical analysis and comprehensive assessment of India's historical public libraries before independence. It also provides a thorough examination of a few prominent public libraries from that era. Three distinct eras may be distinguished in the history of public libraries in pre-independence India: the ancient (pre-1200 AD), the medieval (1200–1757 AD), and the British (1757–1947 AD) periods. Therefore, a deeper comprehension of the significance and influence of public libraries on society is made possible by the application of a perspective-based historical methodology.

Kumar, A. (2019). This essay provides a thorough examination of the development, growth, and current state of India's public library system and offerings. The changes that took place during the study period are also considered. Public libraries recognize their responsibility to serve the information needs of all society groups. Both the federal and state governments have taken action to make public libraries indispensable information sources for people in all official spheres of society.



Maity, D. (2018). Tylor's notion of culture as a complex system of values, norms, beliefs, rules, teachings, information, practices, and other abilities that an individual acquires within a society was examined by the author. Culture is the entirety of the human experience passed down through the generations, including how people study, eat, drink, behave, walk, dress, and work, among other things. The Bengal region of South Asia, which mostly includes Bangladesh and the Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam (Barak Valley), has Bengali as its official language and predominant language. With leaders ranging from Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal underwent a Renaissance in the nineteenth century that turned the area from "medieval" to "modern," propelled by a sizable gathering of thinkers, social and religious reformers, scientists, authors, and patriotic orators. The first modern public library in South Asia, the Calcutta Public Library, was established in 1836 and served as a catalyst for social reformers who went on to build several libraries as hubs for public education. Since then, the public library's function and target patronage have changed with time. In the cultural context of contemporary West Bengal, an overview of the public library movement and advancements in public library usage has been given.

Das, A. K. (2015). Because of its early connections to secular liberal Western education, the Bengal Province in India served as a centre for various socio-cultural and religious reform organizations during the 19th and 20th centuries. An educated Bengali population emerged as a result of the establishment of advanced higher education institutions by colonial rulers, European missionaries, and progressive social reformers. The Bengal Renaissance aided in the development of Bengali literature and language. Socially conscious reformers established neighborhood libraries as places for group instruction in their particular areas. There are still many libraries that are over a century old. Children, students, industrial workers, and lifelong learners were all welcome at this communal library. This essay will thoroughly examine the impact of the Bengal Renaissance on the development of public libraries in India under British colonial rule. This study examines the role of each reformist category in the province's development and implementation of effective outreach programs and public library services.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Libraries evolved from study spaces to lively leisure hubs as a result of the collection and sharing of a wide range of literature. Public libraries were established as cultural institutions in several parts of India, particularly Bengal, in the nineteenth century as a result of the prolific production of prose literature. Frequent developments show how quickly and unmatched science and technology have advanced. Significant advancements were made in both the basic and applied sciences. These achievements included scientific and industrial breakthroughs. This century's two World Wars had a profound impact on human society, changed people's perceptions, and upended the fundamentals of time and social order. Social science disciplines such as economics, sociology, statistics, political science, and international relations experienced significant expansion following World War I. After World War II, we saw significant advancements in the transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary fields of research, agriculture, medical science, applied science, technology, and electronics. Many books on transdisciplinary topics were written by academics. To meet the needs of readers, these published

works were added to public libraries. Libraries played a passive function in premodern society; people visited them willingly and were content with the limited selection of materials available. Libraries haven't done much to encourage people to read. In contemporary culture, public libraries have increasingly assumed a proactive role in pointing readers to library resources. Readers, as a collective social entity, shaped library collections and services to meet their demands, while libraries modified their offerings to conform to social norms. Libraries have carefully planned their programs to improve society's cultural landscape.

In addition to being places for relaxation, public libraries served as organizations carrying out social obligations by carefully choosing and acquiring resources and offering services. By creating sections for women, children, farmers, and laborers, the organization recognized the modern public library as a resource beneficial to all socioeconomic classes. Organizers bring books to neighborhood and workplaces for women and older people who have trouble accessing libraries. The organization has led campaigns for health awareness, adult education, agricultural development, mass literacy, debates, exhibitions, and labor welfare.

People viewed these public libraries as important establishments with a variety of uses. At first, they served as a place to relax and a hub for discussing the nuances of recently published books. They served as a vital educational resource for the illiterate, semiliterate, and locally educated populations. Public libraries served as hubs for social and cultural exchanges, idea sharing, and the development of a wide range of social ties. Because public libraries serve a wide range of purposes as social and cultural organizations, the library system has changed over time. Public libraries became an important tool for fostering national pride in the nation during the 20th century. Therefore, it became more than just a venue for intellectual or amusement pursuits; it became a powerful social force.

Westerners introduced the concept of public libraries to India. Although British rule in India was an exception, the literature and philosophy that the British introduced to the subcontinent at the turn of the century reflected the values of the average person. While in India, they were unable to give up their English beliefs. They were an inspiration even though they did not create public libraries in our country. The British attempted to imitate the subscription library model in Great Britain, which led to the establishment of Bengali circulation libraries.

Early public libraries, such as the Fort William College Library, the Calcutta Public Library, and circulating libraries, were founded by Europeans. It is clear how important James Long was at that time. Societies have made it much easier for public libraries to continue operating. Women and Muslims were two minority groups who made major contributions during the early stages of public library organizations.

Public libraries have played an important role in efforts to improve living circumstances and literacy rates since the early 20th century. Because of their dedication to the well-being of their patrons, public libraries gave priority to programs on adult arts and life skills. Public libraries occasionally hold magic lantern presentations on health, family planning, community cleanliness, and improved agriculture. To promote comprehensive education, we have set up adult education programs for both

sexes. The establishment of public libraries in both urban and rural areas, as well as libraries affiliated with other organizations and mobile book distribution centres, all facilitate the development of a socially and culturally diverse community.

Public libraries acted as hubs for the spread of information in areas with low literacy rates. Through literacy drives, magic lantern lectures, opera performances, study groups, exhibitions, and book and newspaper readings, libraries taught the illiterate and primitive populations. Jatra, kathakata, panchali, kabigan, kirtan and folk songs like jhumur, tusu, bhadu, and bhatialy were performed on the library grounds to encourage community involvement in healthful leisure activities. They also functioned as efficient channels for spreading Swadeshi ideas. People used to trade books with each other or their co-workers in order to obtain enough reading material. For women, who had fewer opportunities and less time to attend the library, it was especially helpful. It was an early prototype of what would eventually become the mobile library. Children, women, and the working class have always benefited most from public library services. Public libraries' humanitarian efforts were further enhanced by the relief camps they set up during times of war, religious holidays, cyclones, floods, and famines. Programs for community development saw an increase in the level of participation. During Bengal's cholera, malaria, and plague outbreaks, public libraries were essential for spreading medical knowledge.

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