

INFORMATION LITERACY AND PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

Ratna Bandyopadhyay

Department of Library and Information Science

University of Calcutta, India

e-mail: ratnabandyopadhyay@yahoo.co.in

ABSTRACT

Information literacy is a critical component of this information age. An informed citizen is the basis of an active democracy and information literacy is important for sustaining democratic institutions. The objective of the UN Literacy Decade (2003-2012) is to provide information literate environments. The National Literacy Mission in India has given stress on 'skill improvement to improve economic status and well being.' The National Knowledge Commission in India has also mentioned in its objectives the integration of library and information services with people's daily lives. So far the information literacy programmes, standards, skills that have been taken up, developed or that are being practiced are mainly restricted to academic institutions, higher education. But information literacy objectives aim at all types of users of the community. Librarians of the public libraries are in a crucial position as its target users comprise of all age groups with different educational background from all communities including visually and otherwise physically challenged users, indigenous community, economically backward communities, etc. The state of West Bengal, India has 2821 government and government sponsored public libraries and Community Libraries cum Information Centres (CLIC). Besides these there are 2200 non government and non sponsored libraries. Out of these 1722 public libraries and 341 CLICs are in rural areas. In some of the rural areas public libraries are the only libraries serving different user groups in the community. These public libraries are providing, to different extents, health related, job related, career related, cultural, and professional as well as general information services to make the target communities information literate in every respect and to bring a difference in people's lives. This paper evaluates the services of the public libraries in West Bengal. It was found that users prefer the following information literacy services offered by public libraries: information related to their occupations, health and family welfare, jobs and careers. These services are generally provided through TV programs, audio-visual materials, information kiosks and internet access to websites. It has been found that many sections of society have been benefited. For example participation in government schemes for women has increased and literacy rate and work participation rate of tribal people has also gone up. Emphasis is given to recommendations relevant to information literacy provided in the IFLA/UNESCO Guidelines for the Development of Public Library Services. We also give some directions to introduce innovative services to make the information literacy programmes more effective. These recommendations for public libraries include providing computer labs with internet access for training to users in internet and computer usage. Information literacy programmes should be taken out of the library for prisoners, hospital and home-bound patients. Also for communities with low literacy rates information literacy programmes should be conducted with audio-visual materials for greater effectiveness. Audio-visual materials for information literacy programmes are being prepared by about 55 government departments and 30 NGOs. Public libraries should step in to coordinate their activities to avoid duplication and share these resources to benefit more people.

Keywords: Information literacy instructions; Public libraries; Library services for the disadvantaged; National Literacy Mission; India

INTRODUCTION

Information literacy is a critical component of this information age. An informed citizen is the basis of an active democracy and information literacy is important for sustaining democratic institutions. The objective of the UN Literacy Decade (2003-2012) is to provide information literate environments. The National Literacy Mission in India has

given stress on 'skill improvement to improve economic status and well being.' The National Knowledge Commission in India has also mentioned in its objectives the integration of library and information services with people's daily lives. So far the information literacy programmes and standards that have been taken up, developed or that are being practiced are mainly restricted to academic institutions and higher education. But information literacy objectives aim at all types of users of the community.

One of the most frequently used definitions of Information Literacy was given by American Library Association (ALA) in 1989 and it states "To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. The information literate people are those who have learned how to learn (ALA 1995). This definition is also accepted by Information Literacy Guidelines 2006 (Lau 2006) and Campbell (2008).

However in implementing information literacy programmes we need to have more specific objectives and these have been described in several ways. Campbell cited Gorman (2003) who indicated that "it is better to focus on teaching people how to utilize the information they can readily and regularly access, whether it is in a printed pamphlet from a government department, a radio programme, a newspaper – whatever is locally available." (Campbell 2008, 21). Campbell says that the ALA definition should be applied so that the focus should "move away from teaching people what tool to use to locate information to other aspects of the information literacy definition specifically in the areas of critical thinking and awareness of information, decoding the packaging of information delivery and the appropriate use of information." (Campbell 2008, 23)

Information literacy challenges libraries, especially public libraries, to bring about a change in individuals' lives, to make citizens independent seekers of knowledge. Information Literacy opens the avenue to promote quests for information, to develop, to expand the information base of the individual which will finally lead towards personal empowerment and life long learning. Democracy can not be successful without active participation of informed citizens.

Public Libraries and Information Literacy

The nature of a public library is different from other libraries. Its user community is very different and varied. Their needs for information literacy do not share a common background. Each demand is different from another. So the information literacy services will have to be accordingly flexible to be effective and meet the needs of all the user groups. A representative list of the different user groups may include the following:

- Children
- Women
- Visually challenged
- Indigenous people
- Senior citizens
- Unemployed persons

The groups given above are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. However it shows that the concept of information literacy is to be conceived as context dependent. The social situation, communities to be served, objectives of the institution all play an important role. According to the IFLA/Unesco Public Library Manifesto (1994) "... library services must be adapted to the different needs of communities in rural and urban areas".

“Rather than widespread efforts directed at teaching members of the community the mechanics of how to locate information and the higher-order thinking skills of evaluating and processing information, our strongest efforts should be spent at the beginning of the information literacy continuum – promoting the concept that information can be useful in reaching decisions in daily life and that the public library is a good place to find some of that information.” (Jackson 1995, 41)

The public library service is developed to meet the need of the community. If the community need is well defined the tasks become easier for the librarian. It is the responsibility of the public library to provide information counseling and guidance to derive information from various sources to its different users with varied demands. *The Public Library Service: IFLA/UNESCO Guidelines for Development* (1994) in the chapter *Meeting the needs of the users* has suggested to identify potential users including persons with special needs like indigenous people, people with disabilities, housebound people, people in hospitals, in prison, within various organizations and people in different professions. This document has also suggested to identify non users of libraries. It mentions that public library is to support literacy, promotion of reading, to support formal and informal education including distance education, to help in the development of basic life skills, to support leisure time interests, to provide information services with the help of information technology. It has also given emphasis on user education to develop their skills that will enable them to make the most effective use of library's resources and services.

CONTEXT OF INFORMATION LITERACY SERVICES

The end objectives of information literacy programmes can only be achieved if the public library not only makes the user aware where to get his/her relevant information but also provide it if it is not going to be easily accessible otherwise. For instance in rural areas the nearest government office may be far away and practically beyond easy reach to get a particular form. Here the public library could keep the important forms or may have the infrastructure to download the forms. Internet access is even more difficult for an individual to get. So besides making the users aware of the information available there, the public library may have to provide training on its use as well as provide some internet access within its services. Without going this extra step the IL programmes will not be implemented in spirit and its practical benefits will not reach the users.

West Bengal Public Library System

West Bengal has a developed public library system. The Public Library Act was enacted in West Bengal in 1979. There are 2821 libraries and Community Libraries cum Information Centres (CLICs). These libraries form a four-level structure. State Central Library is in the top or at first level. There are seven District /Special status government Libraries and 19 government sponsored District libraries in the second level. In the Third level there are 240 Subdivisional/Town libraries (most of them government sponsored). In the fourth level there are 328 government sponsored primary unit libraries, 1885 government sponsored rural libraries and 341 Community Libraries cum Information Centres (CLICs). Apart from these libraries there are about 2200 registered libraries. Community libraries cum Information Centres are established in the gram panchayats. Gram Panchayat is the local self-government unit at rural level. There are 3362 gram panchayats in West Bengal having average area of 25.4 sq km. In each of these gram panchayats the average population is around 17,177. The government is trying to provide at least one public library in each of these gram panchayats. In 1640 gram panchayats there is no library. In

341 of these gram panchayats CLICs have been set up and in other remaining panchayats more CLICs will gradually come up. These public libraries have an important contribution in supporting educational and cultural needs of the community (Bandyopadhyay & Majumder 2006)

User population

Some of the relevant data about the break-up of the population of West Bengal is given below to indicate some of the important user groups (Bandyopadhyay 2007; 2008a; 2008b; Bandyopadhyay & Goswami 2007; Bandyopadhyay & Majumder 2006; West Bengal 2005; 2007):

- Total population is 87 million
 - Literacy rate is 69.2%.
 - 27% of people are below poverty line.
- Total rural population is 72%.
 - 32% people in rural areas are below poverty line.
- The indigenous/tribal population is about 5.5%.
 - The literacy rate of the tribal population is 43%.
- The population of children between the age group of 5 to 13 years is about 17 million.
 - Out of school children in this age group is 1.3 million.
- Visually challenged population is 0.86 million.
 - Literacy rate in this category is 56.4%.
- Women population is 38.7 million
 - Women literacy rate is 60%.

Public libraries serve all these diverse communities. These communities also include senior citizens, job hunters, different professionals, and neo literates. A portion of these communities are also non users of libraries. Public libraries have been recognized by National Knowledge Commission as an extremely important element of the foundation of a knowledge economy. They have an important role to play in transforming this society into a well informed citizen based society by showing the avenues to access various health related, job related, career related, cultural, and professional information as well as providing general information services.

IL services for children

In the background where considerable proportion of population is below poverty line, education and reading are inter-related and education is important for earning a livelihood. Literacy becomes a pre-requisite for information literacy for children. Public libraries cannot stop at just informing where information and education is available but has to also take a pro-active role in participating in the educational process for children. In creating reading environments, to support literacy and promoting reading habits schools, centres developed by non government organizations (NGOs), homes as well as libraries play very important roles. Government of West Bengal has introduced Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) like District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shikshya Abhiyan (SSA). These two programmes involve local communities to promote primary education. To help out school children Alternative Schooling system has been introduced through Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE). To support education and promote reading habits public libraries are also organizing story telling sessions, literary discussions, quiz programmes, and discussions and debates on current events. Most of the public libraries

celebrate important days like Independence Day, birth anniversaries of important writers, national leaders and organize cultural programmes, Art and drawing competitions, career counseling, organize visits of libraries by school children and organize book fairs.

IL services for women

These public libraries are also organizing and giving space for various extension programmes and training programmes to support women in the society. They are also providing current information on vital issues, on health and family welfare, organizing current awareness programmes on health related issues for women and child, and arranging to make the various communities aware about the recent government policies. The public libraries are also arranging TV/radio programmes on women's health and related matters. Various non government organizations and District health services are also working to sensitize women about their own health and their child's health.

IL services for indigenous people/ tribes

The state of West Bengal has about 40 tribes which belong to four major linguistic divisions like Austro-Asiatic (like Santal, Munda, etc); Dravidian (Oraon, Malpaharia, etc); Tibeto-Chinese (Bhutia, Lepcha, etc) and Indo-Aryan (like Bengali, etc) (People of India, 2008). Public libraries are considering the composition of target users and are documenting the cultural activities, maintaining collection on local history in both text and non text media. In this way they are generating and recording information which is not otherwise existing in documented form. This is required so that the library can advise the target users where information is to be found. 36 village libraries under Rural Extension Centre of Institute of Rural Reconstruction (Palli Sangathan Bibhaga) of Visva Bharati are working as village community centres and supporting education of neo literates and helping in the development of socio cultural activities of these areas. These centres are working with the financial assistance from Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF) (Nandi, 2005). RRRLF was established in 1972 to help, support and extend financial assistance to develop public library services in India.

IL services for the visually challenged

The state of West Bengal has 0.86 million visually challenged population and they also form a group of library users. There is national policy for Persons with Disability (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 which focuses on education for persons with disabilities including technical and vocational education, physical and economic rehabilitation of persons with disabilities. A survey on the services provided by various libraries to the visually challenged in West Bengal shows that the State Central Library (the apex library in the public library system in West Bengal) in collaboration with an NGO Society for the Visually Handicapped is preparing audio books according to the demand of users and also providing Braille books. NGO libraries, like Voice of World, are creating and lending talking books. Some schools like R.K. Mission Blind Boys' Academy, Lighthouse for the Blind are providing vocation oriented services and personal development services. These services will help them to earn their livelihood as well as help in their development. Here other public libraries are providing information to the visually challenged about where Braille documents and audio books are available. They are also arranging voluntary readers to provide reader services for the visually challenged.

Other IL Services

The public library system of West Bengal including CLICs has to cater to a diversity of user communities. They are actively involved in providing reference services, career counseling services, current information on vital issues, disseminating professional and occupational information, community information services, promoting literacy and reading habits, organizing visits of public libraries by school children, training programmes to support women in the community, organizing various programmes, events, discussions as part of awareness programmes for all categories of users, disseminating information relating to activities of local bodies. Some of the information dissemination services are being provided with audio-visual materials. Some of the Public Libraries in West Bengal have started to provide digitized services also. State Central Library's Information Kiosk is giving information partly in Bengali language on local history, tourist spots, government departments, educational facility etc. More information kiosks are coming up in different government and government sponsored district libraries. Official websites of different government departments are also throwing light on various activities of government departments.

EVALUATION

India has a vision of transforming its 600,000 villages (including about 41,000 villages in West Bengal) into village knowledge centres with broadband and internet connectivity. National Literacy Mission of the government of India was launched in 1988 to eradicate adult illiteracy. As part of the programme this Mission is imparting functional literacy, Universalization of Elementary Education, non-formal education. Low literacy rate among women caused by gender inequality, economic exploitation, low rate of school enrolment, high rate of school dropouts are all being taken care by the strategies adopted by government to increase female literacy. Public libraries are an important element in the foundation of a knowledge economy and they have an important role to play in this regard. They are also giving space to organize training and awareness programmes. Two surveys were conducted in two blocks of South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal (viz. Joynagar block and Bishnupur block). The result of the survey revealed that only 15% women used the public library. The major reasons were that they are not aware of the existence of public libraries, they are not literate, they are busy with the family work, they are the only earning member of the family, or the library is situated at a very long distance etc. This survey itself achieved the aims of information literacy by telling the women about the presence and importance of library services and community information services. The women realized that these community information services may help to establish gender equality, their rights in the society and to fight against poverty (Bandyopadhyay & Goswami 2007).

It has also been found that launching of various policies of government for indigenous people as well as the spread of its proper awareness with the help of public libraries and others among the target beneficiaries has had a beneficial effect. The literacy rate of tribal people has increased from 27.8% in 1991 to 43.4% in 2001. In the same way the work participation rate has also gone up from 47.7% in 1991 to 48.8% in 2001 (West Bengal 2001).

SUGGESTIONS

One of the major problems is to make people aware of the consequences that are associated with information illiteracy. The need for information literacy should be rooted

in peoples' mind. A number of government departments and non government organizations are also working in this direction. Public libraries should cooperate with various government departments and NGOs to spread the awareness regarding information literacy, to develop in each individual's mind a sense of responsibility of acquiring information, the knowledge of related technologies on how to access different information, analyse, interpret, evaluate and use it.

Librarians also need proper training to play the role of information consultants. Bengal Library Association (BLA) was established in 1925, with Rabindranath Tagore as its first President, for organizing the library movement in the state and it is also helping the Directorate of Library Services of the Government of West Bengal in "evolving policies on management and development of public libraries"(West Bengal, 2004). Bengal Library Association is regularly organizing refresher courses for the librarians of the public libraries to make them acquainted with the new improved skills. More in service training programmes for the librarians can be organized under the guidance of BLA. To provide proper support to the community it is necessary to introduce special training courses for the librarians.

To tackle the problem at the root it is necessary to include the programmes based on searching of resources into the school curricula. To develop the awareness among children and teachers the librarian should collaborate with the schools/colleges and take part in planning project works and training the teachers in searching information from various sources including electronic media. Public library can take part in teaching information seeking methodology to users, accessing techniques and assisting in the use of electronic resources, and thus improving users competency in accessing, evaluating and using information.

Public libraries should provide learning infrastructure for adult education. It should arrange for workshops and more awareness programmes for improving individuals' competence in acquisition of information and its proper use by providing professional support, by offering user orientation programmes in handling information according to the needs of special readers.

Also for communities with low literacy rates information literacy programmes should be conducted with audio-visual materials for greater effectiveness. Audio-visual materials for information literacy programmes are being prepared by about 55 government departments and 30 NGOs. Public libraries should step in to coordinate their activities to avoid duplication and share these resources to benefit more people.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we can say that to deliver information to all the user communities is not the focus of information literacy. However, where the literacy rate is so low and availability of information resources also quite poor, public libraries cannot stop at just informing where information is available but has to also take a pro-active role in making some important information resources available to the users. Now the librarians need to sometimes teach the users the basic skills so that they can educate and re-educate themselves to survive and be the lifelong learners. These libraries are also providing current awareness programmes to make them acquainted with the sources of information, their utility and use. Also they are playing the pro-active role of supporting the learning processes by storing materials and providing facilities for developing healthy atmosphere of quality education. The public libraries in West Bengal are contributing

quite significantly to the information literacy programmes now. However more can be done. To translate the basic concept of information literacy into reality for the entire population public libraries can also participate in the areas suggested above of retraining themselves, collaborating with government departments, NGOs and schools in specific information literacy programmes and projects for children, women, adults, indigenous people and visually challenged.

“The Public library is acting as an agency for social and personal development and can be a positive agency for change in the community.” “It contributes to the creation and maintenance of a well- informed and democratic society and helps to empower people in the enrichment and development of their lives and that of the community in which they live” (The Public Library Service 2001). If the information literacy gives us the training to survive then the public library should play the key role.

REFERENCES

- American Library Association. 1995. Information literacy: Presidential Committee final report. In *Information for a new age: redefining the librarian*. Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, pp. 89-90.
- Bandyopadhyay, Ratna. 2007. Development oriented library services for the visually challenged in West Bengal, India (*World Library and Information Congress: 73rd IFLA General Conference and Council, Durban, South Africa, 19-23 August, 2007*) <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla73/index.htm>
- Bandyopadhyay, Ratna. 2008a. Creating reading environments: our initiatives in West Bengal, India (*World Library and Information Congress: 74th IFLA General Conference and Council, Quebec, Canada, 10-14 August, 2008*) <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>
- Bandyopadhyay, Ratna. 2008b. Sharing traditional knowledge and cultures of different tribes of West Bengal, India (*World Library and Information Congress: 74th IFLA General Conference and Council, Quebec, Canada, 10-14 August, 2008*) <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>
- Bandyopadhyay, Ratna and Goswami, Sarbani. 2007. Health related services for women through public libraries in West Bengal, India (*World Library and Information Congress: 73rd IFLA General Conference and Council, Durban, South Africa, 19-23 August, 2007*) <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla73/index.htm>
- Bandyopadhyay, Ratna and Majumder, K.P. 2006. Some directions for digitized services with visual content for the public libraries of West Bengal, India (*World Library and Information Congress: 72nd IFLA General Conference and Council, Seoul, Korea, 20-24 August, 2006*) <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla72/index.htm>
- Campbell, Sandy. 2008. *Defining information literacy in the 21st century*. In *Information literacy: international perspectives*; edited by Jesus Lau. Munchen: K.G.Saur pp. 17.
- Jackson, Susan. 1995. Information literacy and public libraries: a community-based approach. In *Information for a new age: redefining the librarian*. Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited.
- Lau, Jesus. 2006. *Guidelines on information literacy for lifelong learning*. Final draft.
- Nandi, S.G. 2005. Rural development, library and Rabindranath. In *Information Support for rural development, Proceedings of 21 National Seminar of IASLIC, 2004-5, Jadavpur University, Kolkata*; 79-83.
- People of India: West Bengal*. 2008. Edited by K.S.Singh. Calcutta: ASI.
- The public library service: IFLA/UNESCO guidelines for development*. 2001. Munchen, K.G.Saur.
- West Bengal. Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics. 2005. *Statistical Handbook 2004*.
- West Bengal. Department of School Education. 2007. *Annual report 2005-2006*.
- West Bengal. Directorate of Library Services. 2004. *Annual report 2003-2004*.
- West Bengal. District Primary Education Programme and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. 2007. *Annual report 2006-2007*.
- West Bengal. 2001. *Primary census abstract*.