

## **Books, readership and libraries \***

**M S Sridhar**

During last four decades, the percentage of American population having public library cards has increased almost three fold from about 25 to 72. On the contrary, in a progressive state like Karnataka, after 40 years of enacting a comprehensive Public Libraries Act and establishing 5000 libraries, we have not been able to reach more than 2% of the population. A poor market penetration of public libraries over half a century of National Library Movement! A disgrace on the part of 98% of the public supposed to be enjoying 'right to read' and also contribute 6 Ps. as library cess out of every Rupee of tax paid. Adding salt on the wound, city corporations and town municipalities are not transferring crores of rupees collected as library cess and hence not fully spent for the purpose for which it is collected. Increasing library membership depends much on how far educational system and literacy programmes turn out literates with good reading habit.

One may even say that people need not have to use public libraries to read books as they could easily buy and read the required books. Yes, it is certainly possible. An interesting fact is that 95% of books sold in America are bought directly by individuals and remaining 5% by libraries. A library member in America, on an average, borrows two books per year and astonishingly this borrowed use of books of American libraries is almost equal to 95% of books directly bought and read by individuals. In contrast, in India, despite having second largest literate population and large middle class literates almost equal to US population, individual purchases of books account for less than 25% of total sales of books. The individual purchase in New Zealand is also as high as 75%. The number of books sold in India is just as much as the sale size in New Zealand with four million people. Hence, per capita purchase of books in New Zealand is more than 75 times that in India.

It is generally believed that poor and middle class citizens neither have enough money to buy books nor willingness to give priority for books while spending their meager savings. It looks apparently true when someone says that books are costly and we do not have enough time to read books in our present day busy life. But interestingly, to buy a book, a century ago, an average person had to spend 4 hours of his wages, but today the same requires just 20 minutes wages. During twentieth century (in America), expenditure on entertainment has increased from 1.9 to 5.6% of income and buying reading material has decreased from 25.5 to 15.8% of entertainment expenditure. At the same time, total leisure hours has also substantially increased all over world.

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One survey about how university academicians spent their UGC arrears revealed that purchase of books or journals did not appear in their top ten priorities. As disposable income increases citizens are more attracted to other pleasure goods and leisure services than books. Thus, in the language of economics, books have become “inferior” goods of leisure (or entertainment) industry. It is difficult to equate buying (or possessing or borrowing) books with reading of books. For example, an average American possesses four books on Bible with more than 20 million new Bibles sold every year in America. Yet only less than 1% of Americans are believed to have read Bible end to end and their biblical knowledge is abysmal. In this context of negligible public library membership and very few people buying books, it is also possible to argue that one can use libraries other than public libraries to borrow and read books. But a recent survey in one university revealed that not even 5% of the teachers take books from the university library!

It is very unfortunate that the publishing industry and public libraries in India still hesitate to identify themselves as part of leisure and service industries and do least to promote their products and services. They are immensely preoccupied in the game of bulk purchase of books swindling resources mobilized through library less. The scheme is running like a government ‘subsidy’ for publishers and authors of regional language books. Majority of publishers and author cum publishers print 1000 copies of Kannada books to dump 600 to 800 copies to public libraries and education department at once under single window bulk purchase scheme without any marketing and distribution worth the name. Hence no wonder that individual purchases of books are so low and Karnataka having over 10% of publishers in the country produce only 2.6% books. Yet, neither public library department nor book industry has bothered to create a comprehensive catalogue of (about 1 lakh) Kannada books published so far. A library with all Kannada books under one roof has remained a distant dream. Even today, one can instantly access from anywhere details of a large number of Kannada books (over 15000) from online catalogues of US Library of Congress, British Library or ‘WorldCat’ of OCLC (US) on the net and not from web sites of any of local libraries including the national library.

Amusingly, it was claimed recently by a minister that the public libraries in Karnataka are better used than those in other states. It could be true that the plight of public libraries elsewhere in the country may be worse than that in Karnataka. The above statement is supposed to have been based on the statistics that 3100 readers (out of 15570 members) visit one of the 17 public libraries in the central region of Bangalore and borrow 600 books per day from a collection of 3 lakh books. Probably, it would have been more appropriate to compare above figures with that

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of a small/ compact British library located in the same part of Bangalore with just 22000 books, 7500 paid members and less than a dozen staff. Interestingly, this single British library records visit of 600 members and issue of 1000 books a day!

In nutshell, our education system and literacy programme do not effectively take nascent literates to reading habit, publishing industry is indifferent to market books to individuals and public libraries appears to be more interested in expensive digitization and Braille book projects than reaching the public at large. The debate on reading habit is full of opinions and judgments with diversity and contradictions about prevailing reading habit. While some optimistically believe that reading habit has not declined, if not increased, the others fascinated by digital libraries and the Internet go to the extent of predicting the end of printed books and libraries, as if there was a high readership in the pre-internet era. Hopefully, periodic national survey of reading habit as part of National Sample Survey recommended by the National Knowledge Commission, if completed, may help us to have a better picture. Incidentally, the results of Harris Poll, conducted once in three years in America since 1995, continue to hold 'reading' at the top (29%) of leisure activities of Americans.

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\* *Deccan Herald*, 61 (24) 24 January 2008, DH Education, p II.

### **About the Author**

Dr. M. S. Sridhar is a post graduate in Mathematics and Business Management and a Doctorate in Library and Information Science. He is in the profession for last 36 years. Since 1978, he is heading the Library and Documentation Division of ISRO Satellite Centre, Bangalore. Earlier he has worked in the libraries of National Aeronautical Laboratory (Bangalore), Indian Institute of Management (Bangalore) and University of Mysore. Dr.



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