

Public Library Development in Kerala : A Historical Perspective

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Introduction

Public library is an institution which collects organizes, and disseminates information free of cost to all people who require it. The term public library was commonly used from the beginning of nineteenth century. The wide popularity and growth in numbers of such institutions were also the features that they acquired at the beginning of nineteenth century. Various social and cultural forces directly and indirectly contributed to the establishment of a large number of public libraries and their development in Kerala at the beginning of nineteenth century.

It was the alarming increase of illiteracy that led to the intervention of the state in the sphere of education and the formulation of a positive educational policy. In Kerala the direct activity of the state in the field of education began when Her Highness Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai, with the assistance of Col. Munro introduced a system of free and compulsory education under state control in 1817 A.D.¹ Maharaja Swati Tirunal (1829-1847) a versatile genius and great man of high accomplishments continued these educational reforms. He is considered to be the ruler of Kerala who laid the foundation of modern system

of education in Kerala. In 1830's English education was recognized as a civilizing agency and government started patronising the spread of English schools. Swati Tirunal started in 1836 the first English public school in Travancore.² District schools were also started in the same year.

Trivandrum Public Library, 1829

At the beginning of nineteenth century, in Kerala also there was no institution with the name public library. The first public library and the oldest of its kind in India came into existence during Swati Tirunal's reign. The then British resident of Travancore was Col. Edward Cadogan. Cadogan was the grandson of Sir Hans Sloans, the founder of the British Museum and he could very easily make the Maharaja and high officials aware of the need and importance of libraries in a modern educational system. Swati Tirunal was also a great scholar in many languages, a poet, a musician, and a musical composer of very high order. He was easily impressed by the idea of an institution like British Museum. Joining together they established in 1829 the Trivandrum Public Library.³ The king took active interest in the affairs of the public library throughout his reign. The library was first managed by an association called

Trivandrum Public Library Committee, of which the British Resident was the president.

In 1889 the Trivandrum Public Library Committee entered into an agreement with the government according to which their entire assets were handed over to the latter.⁴ The condition was that the Government would erect a suitable building for a new library for the benefit of the public and to that end provide a well stocked, furnished reference library and should undertake the maintenance of the same in a suitable manner under such regulations as may be best calculated to carry out the end in view. Accordingly Government took over the management of Trivandrum Public Library and was treated as one of the minor departments of the state.⁵ The British Resident continued to serve as the president of the committee.

Education and Libraries in Cochin

In Cochin, the Government undertook the responsibility of educating the people in 1818 when the first state owned schools were started there.⁶ District schools were started in 1877. Christian Missionaries also established many educational institutions in different parts of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar area. In the latter half of the nineteenth century Governments of Travancore and Cochin began to patronise English education at higher levels and so opened a lot of English schools and colleges. The first college was started in 1875. In all these educational institutions very efficient library services were also organized on the pattern of library service available in Britain. The teachers and library staff were usually Britishers at the beginning. The products of these educational institutions realized the value of libraries. They took initiative in influencing the rulers to establish libraries in different parts of the country, so that

libraries will be accessible to them in their public life also.

Government-supported public libraries were established at Ernakulam in 1869, Trichur in 1873, Kottayam in 1881, Tellichery in 1901, Calicut in 1924 and Cannanore in 1927.⁷ These libraries continuously maintained good collections and services upto 1950's.

Library Awareness

Social and political activists who used the services of libraries established by Government became aware of the wide possibilities of such institutions. Spread of education and the birth of a large number of newspapers and journals in the state and the revolutions that were going on in the social and political spheres of life kindled in the people a desire to have such public libraries very near to them so that they could also get the daily news and discuss on them. All these contributed to the birth of a peoples library movement in Kerala in the end of the nineteenth century.

Government supported and nourished the people's movement. But at the same time Government continued its own independent projects of library development resulting in two parallel movements in the region's library field. Government's contributions strictly adhered to some generally accepted library principles.

Initiation of Modern Library Legislation

State Government was continuously active in library affairs. It was aware of its responsibility to establish and maintain library and information service for the people. During the reign of Sri Moolam Tirunal Maharaja of Travancore, rules were framed to give grant-in-aid to libraries for the first time. The rules were published in Travancore Gazette in 1918.

Libraries for the Spread of Education

The Government encouraged libraries as part of its programme for the expansion of educational facilities in the state. Before 1928 the Government had established a number of libraries especially for the use of women.⁸ The Travancore Educational Reform Committee under the chairmanship of RM. Statham, in 1932 made certain recommendations regarding the development of public libraries in order to advance education and to provide facilities for adult education. Immediate action followed. The Director of Public Instruction was asked to prepare a scheme and accordingly he prepared a scheme for the establishment of a central circulating library and a large number of rural libraries.

In Cochin also parallel development was going on during this period. The Government of Cochin began to establish experimental village libraries since 1926 in various parts of the state to support its programme of adult education.⁹ In 1946 there were three types of libraries; seventeen public libraries five major rural libraries and about five hundred village libraries. The annual expenditure for library development in the state during 1947-48 was Rs. 50,000.00.

State Central Library

The Trivandrum Public Library managed directly by the Government from 1888 was transferred to the control of the University of Travancore in 1938.¹⁰ A new committee was constituted by Government with Pro-vice-chancellor as the president and the university librarian as secretary. The committee had full powers to manage the affairs of the institution and to approve all expenditure. But this transfer of institution met with resentments and protests from the library conscious public, and newspapers

published editorials and a number of articles against this order.

Owing to this forceful public opinion, a resolution was unanimously passed by the legislature in 1948. It resolved that Government should take over the institution from the university and manage it as a separate department as was done upto 1938.¹¹ Accordingly the Government resumed the control of the institution in 1949. A committee was also reconstituted with the Minister for Education as president and the Librarian as the convener of the committee. The committee continued to be in charge of the management of the library. In 1956 Government included this library in the planning scheme and sanctioned about seven lakhs rupees for converting the library into State Central Library and the District Distributing Library for Trivandrum. A state librarian was also appointed. To increase the library's usefulness and to extend its services half a dozen libraries from the northern border to the southern border of the state were affiliated to it within two years.

Local Library Authorities

Malabar region which formed part of the Madras State and which came to Kerala with the re-organization of states, had in 1956 about 500 libraries excluding those run by Local Library Authority, under the provisions of Madras Library Act. Local Library Authority was constituted in 1951 for the whole of Malabar. The Calicut Municipal Library with a large collection of books was converted into District Central Library under the Local Authority. The Government later divided Malabar into revenue districts namely Calicut, Cannanore and Palghat. So three Local Library Authorities started functioning in 1959 according to the provisions of Madras Public Library Act. Recently Kasaragod and Malappuram Districts were

formed dividing Cannanore and Calicut. In each district, Local Library Authority has a district central library at district headquarters and branch libraries under it.

In 1959 the Government issued an order constituting a State Library Advisory Board.¹² The Board consisted of fifteen members with Minister for Education as Chairman, Director of Public Instruction as Secretary and State Librarian ex-officio member. The functions of the Board were to formulate rules related to libraries and advise the Government on the affairs of the libraries and the Kerala Granthasala Sangham. Through an order issued in 1958 the Government channelised the disbursement of grants to rural libraries through District Education Officers.¹³ Another order concerning the grant for construction of library buildings and purchase of equipments made the libraries strictly adhere to the approved designs published with that order for building and equipments.¹⁴ In 1966 Government decided to continue a system of grant in aid to libraries until a Library Act could be passed. The various rules and orders relating to the payment of grant to libraries were consolidated by a Government Order.¹⁵ This order made provisions for annual grant to libraries, building and furniture grant to libraries, annual grant to Granthasala Sangham and allowances to librarians. In 1971 the Government constituted a gradation commit-

tee which was to tour throughout the state and review and report about the libraries receiving grant.¹⁶ In 1976 and 1981 the Government issued orders classifying the libraries into six grades and fixing the different rates of their annual grants.¹⁷

Conclusion

Such a long, continuous and live involvement of state in library affairs is a rare phenomena. The concept followed by the state in library development was establishing and maintaining public libraries in all places as independent self sufficient units. State also fully supported peoples move for establishing and maintaining such units almost independent of state control. When the modern concept of each public library as service outlet of a Library and Information Dissemination System for the people took birth state tried to establish such a system. But interests of other groups involved in this activity clashed with the new ideals and delayed State's Act. Even-while trying unsuccessfully for this modernization, state continued the development according to the earlier concept and maintained its existing library service in tact and continued the developments in accordance with earlier methods. These library systems that existed from the beginning of last century contributed immensely to the social and cultural development of Kerala.

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