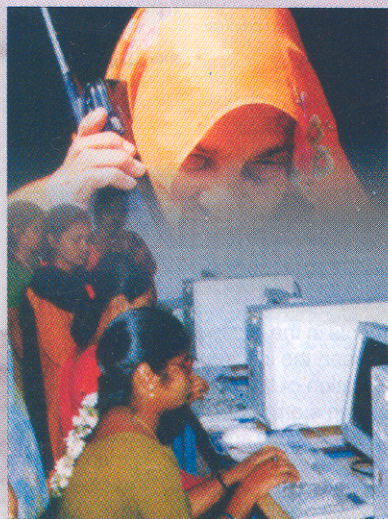


Information Technology for Participatory Development

Edited by
R. Raman Nair



Library Movement and Development Process in Kerala

P. GOVINDA PILLAI

As is now widely recognized the world over the development pattern in Kerala is unique. It is unique not only in India but also in the third world as a whole. Though according to conventional standards of development measurement Kerala is still very backward — for example, the field of per capita investment in industry, per capita savings, level of unemployment etc. — the quality of life in Kerala is regarded as better than not only in other parts of India but of most parts in the third world. Dr. Amartya Sen thinks that in certain respects the development and quality of life in Kerala compares favourably even with that in China. Kerala has the highest literacy rate in India (100 per cent), the lowest child mortality rate, highest life expectancy, high level of women's literacy and education, much better health standards, etc. This fact of the high quality of life in Kerala in India and perhaps in the third world, is acknowledged even by international bodies like UNDP and World Bank.

1. Cause and Result of Development

How this remarkable development has come about and how the remaining drawbacks could be overcome are all subjects which cannot be dealt with in the scope of this paper. But speaking about the development of library movement in Kerala we cannot avoid connecting it with the economic, social, political and educational development of the State because all these dovetail each other so

inextricably that advanced library movement in Kerala is both a cause of social and economic development and also a result of that.

Kerala has the largest number per head of the rural libraries in India. Kerala has 900 and odd villages and 160 townships and cities. If the number of the public libraries in Kerala go upto 4000 and odd then on an average Kerala has almost 4 libraries per village. This compares very favourably with other states in India.

2. Effort of the People

It is not in the number alone that Kerala libraries excel. It is in their quality of service and functioning that Kerala libraries claim their uniqueness. Though the first public library in Kerala or perhaps in India, was established way back in 1828 by an enlightened monarch of the erstwhile State of Travancore, generally speaking, Kerala library system owes less to the Government sponsorship and aid and more to voluntary effort of the people. The 4000 and odd libraries in Kerala affiliated to the Kerala Granthasala Sangham which was founded way back in 1945 as the Travancore Granthasala Sangham, were all the result of local voluntary efforts.

3. Constructive Social Work

Though the Kerala Granthasala Sangham as an organized body began only in 1945 the library movement was there for many decades before this crucial date. In Northern Kerala of the Indian National Congress; outstanding leaders of the freedom struggle likes Shri E.M.S. Namboodiripad, K.Kelappan, Mathuravanam Krishna Kurup, K.P. Kesava Menon and others were actively involved in the movement. Once when Shri E.M.S. Namboodiripad was the General Secretary of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee, he issued a circular to all Congress Committees to take up library work as part of the constructive social service programme of the Congress at the grassroots. Whenever there was a wave of repression against popular movement the hammer always fell on the libraries first. From 1940 onwards left wing groups like the Socialists and Communists and the nascent Kisan and Workers organizations also took up organization of libraries as part of their mass education programme. In the erstwhile native State of Travancore and Cochin the pioneers of the national movement were associated

with the library work. It is in this background that network of rural libraries came into existence. The present massive movement of the libraries spread out over 900 and odd villages are the successors of this movement.

4. Centres of Community Life

The rural libraries in Kerala besides collecting and distributing books and periodicals, conducted evening and night classes for the spread of literacy. They also organized groups of talented villagers for the performing arts. Many libraries have had separate corners devoted to children, women and such specialized groups. Many libraries also have sections devoted to agriculture. The libraries also conducted nursery schools; for children from weak sections of society. Since nursery schools and kindergartens are often very costly outfits to cater to the needs of the elite and upper sections of society, the library nursery schools, then called Balakairali were a boon to the poorer sections. This is yet to be strengthened and increased manifold.

5. Non-Governmental Organizations

In Southern Kerala, i.e. the erstwhile native state of Travancore, government accepted from 1945 onwards that libraries are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and it is better to keep them so. Therefore the government did not interfere in the day-to-day activities of the libraries and the government grants to the libraries were disbursed with the collaboration of the Kerala Granthasala Sangham. Needless to say that the grants were only a small part of the expenses of the individual libraries. The major chump of their expenses for day-to-day running of the library, purchase of books, payment to librarians, and the construction of buildings etc. were made by the voluntary donations collected by the activists concerned.

6. Semi-Government Organizations

In Malabar District directly under British administration, the pattern of library movement was quite different. There were, of course, libraries built, kept and run by the voluntary efforts of nationalist youth and leaders as we have mentioned earlier. There were another

set of libraries established by the semi-governmental organization called Local Library Authority (LAA), established under the Library Act of erstwhile Madras Presidency. With the help of the government, many local authority libraries had land, buildings, furniture and also books. But in the long run because of the lack of people's participation and initiative they were declining. Buildings often remained closed and books in the shelves ill arranged and getting spoiled. There was a library cess in Malabar collected for the maintenance of the libraries. More often than this cess was not collected regularly and even the amount collected were disbursed in a haphazard manner. Therefore when the Kerala State was formed in 1956 the library scene in the northern part of Kerala was a dismal one in contrast to the vibrant movement in the southern districts of erstwhile Travancore. Then Travancore Cochin Granthasala Sangham was expanded to form all Kerala Granthasala Sangham comprising the entire state of Kerala as organized by the States Reorganization Act of 1956.

This contrast between the popular democratic libraries of the South and the quasi-governmental libraries under the LAAs in the North brought up many new lessons for the further development of the library movement to the newly formed united Kerala.

7. Attempts for Reform

One of the first steps taken by the first government of united Kerala under the leadership of Shri E.M.S. Namboodiripad was to reorganize the library movement in Kerala and give it a new fillip for advancement. For that the government invited famous Indian library scientist Dr. S.R. Ranganathan to visit Kerala and make a study of the library movement here and propose steps for its advance and reform. He came here and after a few months of deliberations produced a master plan for the reorganization and strengthening of the libraries in Kerala. Though Dr. Ranganathan was a great pioneer and expert in the field of library movement and science he failed to take into consideration the specific character of library movement in Kerala. His recommendations were more or less on the lines of library movement in many other states of India where the initiative for starting and funds for running the libraries came mainly from the government — more or less as it was in the northern district of Kerala, as we have seen. The library activists, the functionaries and the people in general

in Kerala strongly opposed all LAA system because in Malabar it was a standing witness of the drawbacks of making libraries government outfits. The Kerala Granthasala Sangham objected to the bureaucratization aspects of Ranganathan's recommendations.

Thus began a long drawn out struggle between the library movement in Kerala and the Kerala Government. Though the colour of the Kerala governments kept on changing from Congress to Communist, from right wing to left wing, they all seemed to be unique in their policy regarding libraries. They all wanted some sort of bureaucratization and governmental control over the libraries. They held that the money from the exchequer cannot be thrown out to non-descript organizations of volunteers and social workers, unless sufficient guarantees is there for accountability at the Government. So many bills were brought up by the successive governments and were thrown out by the assemblies due to opposition of the movement.

8. Legislation and After

In 1977 another hurdle also fell upon the library movement in the dark days of the Emergency. The government dissolved the Kerala Granthasala Sangham and the administration of 4000 and odd libraries were entrusted to a government committee with hand picked members who had little to do with the popular base of the movement. Naturally the library activists opposed this and called for redemocratising the Kerala Granthasala Sangham and reviving it on the founding principles of democracy, but at the same time they also wanted a statute to be passed by the assembly to confer legal status on the democratic structure and procedure of the libraries. Again precious time was lost and almost 12 years were taken to bring around the Government to the views of the democratic library movement. Kerala Public Library Act, 1989 though it took 3 years to be implemented, inaugurated a new chapter in the history of Kerala library movement and perhaps also in the history of library movement in the country as a whole. The unique feature of this Act is that it gives same legal status and authority of the elected library to the block library level, Taluk level, District level and finally at State level. The highest authority of the State library movement is the State Library Council consisting of a representative each of the every Taluk Council which is elected by representatives of individual libraries. There are a minority of

government representatives on the State Council and its executive. This executive of the library council which meet every month runs the organization as a whole and implement the system of the State Library Council which must meet at least once a year. The funds for its functioning are given by the Government as grant. The Government also gives grants to be distributed to every affiliated library in the State. The libraries are differentiated and graded into 7 categories and they get grants ranging from Rs.10,000 to Rs.1,000 per year. Separate grants are given for construction or development of buildings and payment of librarians. The libraries purchase books from funds collected by them and grants by the Government.

The perspective for the libraries as centres of village people's enlightenment and entertainment are spelt out in the Act. This perspective is the guiding line for the libraries but they have total freedom to chart out their own lines of activities and the libraries are not owned by the Government but by its members and leaders represented by elected committee of each library.

The 100% literacy achieved by the Kerala was with the participation and initiative of the 4000 odd libraries in the State. Now the Kerala Government has launched the celebrated decentralized planning process and development and the libraries have a great role to play in it.

Now the libraries utilize new methods of communication especially the electronic media. Many libraries have their own TV sets and some libraries have been experimenting with the use of computers. This era is called the era of Information Technology and libraries at the grassroots level are the instruments of this great endeavour in communication. The developmental effort of the society are accelerated by this information exchange through wide network of libraries in the State. Kerala's unique development is intertwined with development of libraries and system for exchange and delivery of knowledge and information.

9. Improving the System

Though the claims made above are valid there is a great weakness in the library movement in Kerala. That relates to the lack of advanced libraries that can support other libraries as with common resource of costly materials and which can be the reliable source for any

information which local libraries are not having. Many of our colleges have advanced libraries and the State has a State Central Library in Trivandrum and almost a similar type of library at Kozhikode. And many districts also have district libraries, but all these are not integrated into a cohesive system for which the library movement has to be hierarchical. Some of the major libraries have not been admitted to the library system under State Library Council and a large number of rural libraries are still at primitive level and there are school libraries and college libraries which also should somehow be connected to the village libraries and its resources made available to the people. Also a device has to be evolved for the utilization of Internet facilities and other computer and electronic facilities. The Kerala Government has already presented an information technology policy in which all these are included. It is for the library profession to come forward with the concrete proposals before people at the Government for advance of the library movement in Kerala as a whole. As I have stated, there are many unique and admirable aspects in the movement of Kerala, but at the same time there are few hurdles or weaknesses to be overcome before long.