

Local History Collection in the Government Sponsored Public Libraries in 24 Parganas (South): A Critical Review

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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The ‘Public Library’ as defined by the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994) is “the local gateway to knowledge provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups”. It is also stated in the Manifesto that “promoting awareness of cultural heritage”, “favouring cultural diversity” and “supporting the oral tradition” are some of the key missions of the public library. Public libraries work as the ‘cultural hub’ for every community where the common people can have instant access to any information related to their locality. It is one of the major goals of public libraries to become successful vectors and repositories of the indigenous or local cultural history of respective regions or localities. This local cultural storage may contain pictures, paintings, photographs, artworks, audio-visual materials, and also documentary sources. Collective

memories which pass orally through generations after generations needed to be stored and preserved. In studying the history of a nation, or a community, or a local place, these local history materials have an immensely crucial role to play. In this regard, a thorough investigation is essential to investigate the present scenario of local history collections in public libraries to assess how far they are successfully doing their duties as conservators and propagators of local cultural heritage in the community.

The statement of the problem is ‘**Local History Collection in the Government Sponsored Public Libraries in 24 Parganas (South): A Critical Review.**’

The research problem gave rise to some research questions which were resolved during the study. The research questions are as follows:

- I. Do Government sponsored public libraries in the district of 24 Parganas (South) have sufficient collections of Local history materials?
- II. Do they play a crucial role in helping community people to find out their cultural roots and identity?
- III. What is the real scenario of the existing local history collections in Government sponsored public libraries of 24 Parganas (South)?
- IV. What are the administrative shortfalls to develop the same?
- V. What are the major problems faced by these public libraries of the district to develop new Local history collections, or to maintain an existing one?
- VI. What are the attitudes of local community users as well as library personnel towards the significance of local history (LH)?

- VII. How far the users are satisfied with the existing Local history collections of these public libraries? What are their specific demands and personal opinions in developing new collections of Local history materials?

The primary objective of the present study is to review critically the Local history collections in the district of 24 Parganas (South) in West Bengal. However, the other objectives of the study are:

- I. To find out the actual scenario of local history information resources present in the Government sponsored public libraries of the district.
- II. To compare the existing collections of the public libraries on local historical facts of their respective locations.
- III. To find out the present situation of public libraries' Local history collections in terms of their existing resources, diversity, organization, infrastructure, and physical facilities, services, manpower, automation, difficulties, user's demand for local history, publicity for local history, awareness of library staff and users, and such other pertinent and significant parameters.
- IV. To assess users' interest and need for local history information and how far they are satisfied with the existing collections and services of public libraries of the district.
- V. To evaluate the effectiveness of the findings crucial for formulating a sustainable blueprint for local history collection development in public libraries of the district.
- VI. To identify the key issues from the findings which are the major causing factors for the creation of the gap between ideal and reality.

VII. To propose a generalized model appropriate for developing an effective local history collection in public libraries of the district.

The present study is primarily confined to the Government sponsored public libraries of the district of 24 Parganas (South) of West Bengal. There are a total of one hundred and fifty-six Government sponsored public libraries in the district (data obtained from the official website of West Bengal PL Network, Department of Mass Education Extension & Library Services, Government of West Bengal), among which a total of twenty-six libraries have been selected keeping in view the time constraint of the investigation. The sphere of the present study includes one district library (DL), ten subdivisional libraries (SDLs), nine town libraries (TLs), and six century-old rural libraries (RLs). The ten SDLs consist of four upgraded TLs which are century-old in age and six upgraded TLs which do not cross century according to their year of establishment. Among the nine TLs four are century-old. The remaining six libraries are simply 'rural' libraries that crossed centuries by their respective years of establishment. For the analysis of users' perspectives, a total of 228 users were approached randomly for the responses. Among them, 26 users refused to respond and 202 users ultimately responded. General information about the users was collected from them. Among them, a total of 127 were found to have interest, inclination, and basic awareness about local history. So, local history related specific data has been collected from these 127 users. Two sets of structured questionnaires have been designed to collect data from the Librarians or Library-in-Charges and library users.

The investigation is divided into two major sections covering library personnel's organizational points of view and users' points of view towards local history. In the first phase, a literature review has been done by consulting various literatures at the national and international levels with special emphasis on local history collection development in public libraries. In the second phase, a pilot survey was conducted in the district library, two subdivisional libraries, two town

libraries, and four rural libraries to take an idea about the basic awareness and knowledge of public libraries for local history, the existing collections, if any, and the future plans. In the third phase, all the collected data were gathered and analyzed critically.

The Survey method is adopted to obtain data in structured questionnaire formats from the chosen samples. Interview and observation methods are used as tools and techniques.

Collected data have been tabulated and analyzed keeping in view the objectives of the study. Data are represented with the help of tables and charts with apposite interpretations. Some recommendations have been suggested after careful analysis of data so that sustainable developments can be achieved by libraries.

The significant role of public libraries in protecting the community's history and traditional culture is acknowledged since long back. Public libraries always play a pivotal role in the collection, preservation, maintenance, and propagation of the traditional culture of local communities having historical values, for the sake of posterity. Every PL should carry an exhaustive representation of the local historical and cultural inheritance of the locality or area or region in where it is situated. Collection and management of local historical information sources which represent various communities' evolutionary course, require special methods, equipment, and dedicated attitude of the library staff. In the proposed research work, the researcher tries to find out the present scenario of Local history collections in Government sponsored public libraries of the district of 24 Parganas (South); their development, related services, users' attitudes, etc. have also been incorporated under the study. Several recommendations have been given as suggestive measures for improvement after investigation and minute observations. The researcher also tried to propose a model of how a well-organized local history section can be created in a PL with minimal effective changes in available infrastructure. This proposed model

has been prepared based on research outcomes and can be adopted as a generalized model for the public libraries of the district.

The study leads to following Observations and findings:

- I. Most of the public libraries, particularly the DL and SDLs have some LH collections related to their respective localities. Some TLs and very few century-old RLs and PULs have appropriate LH collections.
- II. LH collections mostly include books; very few libraries have such other materials as local magazines, local newsprints, letters, photographs, sculptures, maps, paintings, etc.
- III. Except for the DL, LH materials are unorganized, without proper display area and very poorly kept without any preservation means.
- IV. Large numbers of library personnel are unaware of the importance of LH collections in public libraries. That is why LH related services mostly include only ‘lending’ of LH books.
- V. None of the public libraries has enough resources viz. adequate manpower, funding, staff training, infrastructural supports, preservation and restoration facilities to build proper LH collections or maintain existing ones. It creates long term unwillingness and reluctance among library personnel.
- VI. The majority of the libraries reported the indifference of local people towards LH of their localities. Very few libraries adopt basic publicity measures to make local people aware of their LH collections

- VII. Though a good number of users showed interest in LH of their respective own localities, they are not aptly satisfied with related services in public libraries.
- VIII. Most of them demanded more varieties in LH materials, separate LH section in library with sufficient illumination, dedicated computers with Internet connection etc.
- IX. Many users showed interest in the oral history of respective localities, but none of the public libraries has such a significant oral history resource.
- X. Ignorance and reluctance of library personnel create in general, apathy among users to come with LH information need.
- XI. Users require improved extension services in public libraries.
- XII. The majority of the users think proper publicity can make libraries' LH collections more popular among local people.
- XIII. Users also think local people should be included in the LH collection development drive in local public libraries.
- XIV. A huge gap was found in library personnel's and users' perspectives towards LH collection and services in public libraries of the district.
- XV. A generalized model has been developed regarding the collection, organization, dissemination, and preservation of LH materials involving local community people. This proposed model has been prepared based on research outcomes and can be adopted as a generalized model for the public libraries of the district.