Green shoots of renaissance in public libraries

Sudheesh Venkatesh   June 17, 2023

The Karnataka Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department (RDPR) has upgraded 5600 grampanchayat libraries and provided computers and internet connectivity in 4000 of these. Over three million children between the age group of 6-18 years have enrolled in these libraries that are free of charge. This revival of these public libraries includes adding carefully selected children's books, training librarians, orienting teachers in the neighbouring schools, and outreach efforts to enrol children. Programs, such as 'Oduva Belaku' and 'Pustaka Jolige', see children reading books to their elders anda door-to-door collection of books.

In another heartening development, the Bal Bharati Library in Pune, belonging to the Maharashtra State Textbook Production and Curriculum Research Board, which had restricted access, opened its collection of over one lakh books to the public.

A public library is a social institution and despite the sweep of digital content, will continue to exist as a social space, an antidote for the isolation of the digital world.Memories of my grandfather introducing me to books at the Institute of World Culture, Bengaluru while I was in school and of the B C Roy Memorial Library at my institute in Kolkata and its musty (pleasant vanilla!) smell have remained with me. In my travels, I have always been attracted to libraries, memorably among them, the Bodleian in Oxford, the Library of Congress in Washington DC, and a unique public library in Istanbul with a glorious view of the Mediterranean.

It is believed the first libraries were established in Mesopotamia in the 7th century BCE. That libraries have thrived for over 2700 years of human history is a testament to their usefulness to citizens.As one of the last surviving democratic spaces, public libraries need to be safeguarded at all costs. They are fundamental to the transmission of civilisational values. When during the Ferguson riots in 2014, in the United States, all public services were closed; the only place open was its public library.

Despite this, throughout history, conquest and conflict have destroyed libraries – the National Library in Sarajevo with its three million books was destroyed during the siege in 1992 and the Great Library of Alexandria was ruined in a civil war in 48 BC (said to have turned the clock back on human development by two millennia). There have been similar stories from Baghdad and Nalanda. Closer home, in Bihar last month, a mob vandalised and set fire to a 113-year-old library, leaving its collection of over 4,500 books reduced to ashes.

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) gave millions of dollars to establish more than 1,600 libraries in the United States.There have been many other examples of generous philanthropy towards libraries. The organisation I work for runs 278 libraries in towns across the country, each with approximately 2500 books; and one large library in

Bengaluru with over one lakh books.Several large collections have come from donors, including the scientist, P M Bhargava; the economist, H M Patel; and the educationist, David Horsburgh, who hope that future generations will benefit from what they have curated.

Libraries are seeing an extension beyond just a collection of books. In many places, libraries have become a haven for children who need a productive space till their parents return home, aspirants preparing for exams, or senior citizens looking for company. Recently, there is a trend of extensions to digital spaces and Exploratoriums. North Carolina's James B. Hunt Jr. Library has technology labs, media production rooms, and creativity studios making it as much a 'lab'rary. The use of technology in indexing and archiving is revolutionising libraries making them more user-friendly and accessible. Some public libraries even deliver books to where the readers are – Swiggy/Zomato style. In Mandekolu, a remote area in Dakshina Kannada, Savithri ram Kanemaradka, started 'Ammanigagi Ondu Pustaka' (one book for my mother), a unique initiative in which books from the library were issued to children who read it to their mothers, or vice versa.

Schools with a functional library report better learning among students. The National Achievement Survey 2017 reported that 91% of the schools in the 10 highest achieving states (such as Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka) have a library whereas only 62% of schools have a library in the 10 lowest achieving states (such as Arunachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab). Samagra Shiksha (and the National Educational Policy) envisions school libraries to serve students and the community as well. The recent Union Budget has provided for a National Digital Library and funds to set up physical libraries at panchayat and ward levels with infrastructure to access this National Digital Library.

Blogs by Sudheesh Venkatesh