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The Contributions of Public Libraries to Satisfy Intellectual Curiosity of Rural Inhabitants in West Bengal: An Indian Case Study

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the contributions of public libraries to the satisfaction of the intellectual needs of rural inhabitants in West Bengal, India. The study applied a quantitative survey method with the help of a well-structured questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed among to the users (students, officers/professionals, self-employed individuals, businessmen, job-seekers, retired persons, and housewives) of 45 rural public libraries in five selected districts of West Bengal. The study found that the largest group of respondents belonged to the students and jobseekers categories, who visit the rural public libraries for seeking academic and job-related information. Many students from humble backgrounds were solely dependent on public libraries because they have procured some textbooks from middle school up to graduation level. Jobseekers were mostly consulting the *Career Guidance Section* of the library to prepare for various competitive exams. The study also revealed that public libraries have been trying to satisfy the intellectual and informational needs of the rural inhabitants by providing various services and facilities. Respondents have further reported that public libraries should adopt modern technologies and provide ICT-based library services as well. The outcome of this study would help to develop and upgrade the public library collection, services, and facilities in developing countries in a way that reflects patrons' stated needs.

1 Introduction

India is one of the largest countries and most populous democracies in the world, featuring diverse peoples and rich cultural heritage. The last provisional census data in the year 2011 shows that the country is home to more than 1.2 billion people, spread over 29 states and seven union territories with 74% literacy rate. Notably, 70% of India's population lives in villages. West Bengal, located in the eastern region of India, is the fourth most populous state, with more than 91 million residents. The state consists of 23 districts. The literacy rate of the state is 77.08%. Approximately 68% of the population in West Bengal live in rural areas (Office of the Registrar General 2011). Kolkata is the capital of the state historically known as Calcutta.

West Bengal is the only state of India which has the Himalayas as well as a coastline. West Bengal is surrounded by the three international frontiers namely Bangladesh in the east, Bhutan, and Nepal in the north. West Bengal has a rich history of its own. The name Bengal or Bangla is believed to be derived from an ancient Kingdom named Vanga or Banga, references of which can be found in early Sanskrit literature. The Britishers set foot on Bengal in 1757 by defeating the rulers of Bengal in the Plassey battle. Warren Hastings was the first British Governor-General of Bengal. Calcutta became the headquarters of the British government. Eventually, the Governor-General of Bengal became the chief executive of British India. As a result, the Bengal Presidency gained the patronage over other British provinces, namely Bombay (now Mumbai) and Madras (now Chennai). In 1773, Calcutta became the capital of British-held India (Chakraborty and Pattrea 2020). The Partition of Bengal in 1947, part of the Partition of India, divided the British Indian province of Bengal based on the Radcliffe Line between the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. The Hindu-majority West Bengal became a state of India, and the Muslim-majority East Bengal (now Bangladesh) became a province of Pakistan.

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