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Rural Libraries as Providers of Life-long Learning Opportunities: An Appraisal of Information Services and Facilities in West Bengal

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the services and facilities provided by rural public libraries in West Bengal, India. In addition, the study aims to evaluate the perceptions of librarians regarding the implementation of Information Communication Technology (ICT) applications in these libraries. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data. The primary method of data collection was a survey using a structured questionnaire, which was administered to a total of 102 rural libraries. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with the respective librarians to bring more objectivity to the results. The findings revealed that rural libraries possess a moderate collection of printed books, newspapers, and magazines. The results indicate that these rural libraries offer a diverse range of services and facilities that benefit their respective communities. However, findings of the study indicated an acute shortage of staff in almost all the surveyed libraries, with this factor, consequently, affecting services. One significant challenge faced by these libraries is the lack of ICT applications. Nevertheless, most librarians expressed positive attitudes towards the implementation of ICT in rural libraries, recognizing their potential to enhance library services and reach out to a wider audience. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that the government should provide the necessary ICT tools in order to provide ICT-based library services. The results of this study can contribute to the upgrading and restructuring of rural library collections, infrastructure, services, and facilities in developing countries.

1 Introduction

West Bengal is a state located in the eastern part of India. It is the fourth most populous state in India, with a population of over 91 million people. There are 23 districts in the state. The state's literacy rate is 77.08 % (Office of the Registrar General, India 2011). The state covers a total area of 88,752 square kilometres and is bordered by Bangladesh to the east, Nepal and Bhutan to the north, and the Indian states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Sikkim, and Assam to the south, west, and northeast respectively. The capital of West Bengal is Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) which is also the largest city in the state. West Bengal is known for its rich history, cultural diversity, and natural beauty.

The development of public libraries in West Bengal has a long and rich history dating back to the colonial era. During the colonial period, many public libraries were established in Bengal (including Bangladesh) with the efforts of the Britishers and missionary organizations. Calcutta was selected by Job Charnock, an East India Company official, as the location for a British trading settlement in 1690 (Pradhan and Tripathi 2010). However, after winning the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British decided to build some prestigious academic institutions and libraries in Calcutta. Majumdar (2008) pointed out that the city of Calcutta was the first place in India where the British introduced the Western education system. The establishment of Calcutta Public Library in 1836 marked a crucial moment in the development of the public library movement in Bengal's history (Dasgupta 1989; Munshi and Ansari 2022; Nair 2004; Ohdedar 1966; Saha 1989). However, after India's independence in 1947, the government of West Bengal took on the responsibility of establishing and promoting public libraries in the state. Koner (1989, 209) highlighted that "762 government-controlled and sponsored public libraries had been set up by 1977 in West Bengal."

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