



Evolution of Public Libraries in West Bengal, India: Role of the Britishers, Library Associations and Contemporary Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

This study traces the genesis of public libraries during the British period; the birth of National Library in India; the growth of public libraries in different districts of West Bengal; contributions of different movements in the evolution of West Bengal Public Library System and the role of Left Front government in the enactment of the West Bengal Public Library Act. The purpose of this paper is to review the significant contributions of the Britishers, European missionaries, social reformers and political parties particularly parties having left ideology in the development of public libraries in the West Bengal province of India. The paper investigates the evolution of public libraries for which authors have consulted literature published in different sources. Some of the important documents collected for this study are Annual Reports being published from the Department of Mass Education Extension and Library Services, Government of West Bengal; Census of India, etc. Apart from these sources, some other primary sources have also been used for this paper. This study contributes to have an insight knowledge in order to understand the gradual development of Public Library System in West Bengal.

KEYWORDS

Bengal Library Association; British colonial rulers; India; Left Front government; public libraries; West Bengal

Introduction

The Britishers played a pivotal role in inculcating interest and awareness about public libraries in Bengal. The development of libraries in Bengal started with the efforts of some European educationalists who settled in Calcutta as well as some of the magnificent personalities of Bengal. Initially, they established some circulating libraries for their own interest in Calcutta. In most cases, the circulating library was run by an individual owner at that time. The establishment of Calcutta Public Library is considered as a remarkable landmark in the history of the public library movement in India. Significantly, the Brahmo Samaj movement and Ramkrishna Mission movement developed many public libraries to attract the people to use public libraries for the acquirement of religious knowledge. The birth of the Bengal Library Association in undivided Bengal was the glorious phase of the real development of emerging libraries. It carried a long history of its noble achievements in the field

of organized library movement in Bengal. To speak the truth, it has been an eternal source of inspiration for the movement of libraries in Bengal. This article aim to review the notable contributions of the Britishers, European missionaries, social reformers and political parties in the development of public libraries in one of the Indian states named West Bengal. The Left Front ruled the state for more than three decades precisely during 1977–2011. In the course of this long tenure, the left government has done a commendable job in the development of public libraries which will also be highlighted in this article in “Role of the Left Front (1977–2011).”

However, in the beginning, the developments during the British period will be reviewed. Notably, British missionaries had taken an interest in introducing the modern education system for the British and Indian natives in the city of Calcutta which is now known as Kolkata (Pradhan & Tripathi, 2010). Several evidences have been found that testifies the fact that it was