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## **National Mission on Libraries and the Status of Public Library Network in West Bengal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Public libraries play a vital role in the development of a society. It is a place where people from every section of the society can access without any boundness. Though it should get utmost care and emphasis, but truly speaking it is one of the less emphasized institutions of the society. After so many years of implementing library legislation very little progress can be found especially in the field of public libraries. In West Bengal most of the public libraries are facing stern challenges to keep their existence and provide proper service to its users. The government in 2014 launched the programme of National Mission on Libraries (NML) to provide a world-class library system by way of implementing an array of modern facilities for the public libraries in India in due course of time. This paper emphasizes on the current scenario of public libraries in West Bengal and the measures to be taken to match the standards of NML so that an amicable environment can be created to provide better services to the users.

Keywords: National Mission on Libraries, NML, Public Library, Public Libraries in West Bengal, Public Library Act

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### **1. Introduction:**

Public libraries can be accessed by all irrespective of age, caste, creed, sex, nationality or language. It is the gateway of knowledge and information for the society which provide basic condition for lifelong learning. It plays an important role for the development of society by providing valuable information to its users from early childhood till the time they live in the society. As the time is changing very fast from traditional to technology-oriented environment, it is important to change the services of libraries from basic to advanced one to keep pace with time. Public libraries started functioning in India from 19<sup>th</sup> century and gradually increased in numbers with time. Many libraries are still serving the people of this country from its inception. Though population of this country increased many folds but the number of libraries and fund required to serve this population has not increased at par. The Government of India launched the programme of National Mission on Libraries (NML) on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2014 to provide latest technology-oriented facilities to its public library users (Gohain, 2014). The aim of this mission is to provide its users world class library system by following recommendation of The National Knowledge Commission. Its primary focus is to improve library system, services and infrastructure of the states which are lagging behind in this field ("National Mission on", 2014).

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### **2. Objectives of the study**

Objectives of this study are:

- To find out the status of public libraries in West Bengal in comparison to the provision of NML.
- To identify about the initiative taken to provide technology-oriented services to the users.
- To find out what measures have been taken to improve skills of library professionals to provide technology-oriented service to users.

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### **3. Scope of the study**

Public libraries of West Bengal are taken into consideration for this paper. Personal interview of the librarian of Asansol District Library and input from the website of West Bengal Public Library Network has taken into consideration to collect required data for the study.

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#### 4. Public Library Act in West Bengal:

In West Bengal public library services started way back in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Calcutta School Book Society, established in 1817 had an indirect but important role in the establishment of libraries. Calcutta Public Library was opened in 1836 for all as a 'public library of reference and circulation'. On the other hand, few public libraries had also started their function in the society during this period. Before implementation of Public Library Act the development of libraries were very slow but in states which passed the Act, libraries in those states are in better condition comparing to other states. In India public Libraries Act was enacted during different times to provide better service to the masses. At present out of 28 states and 9 union territories only 19 states have enacted public library act in India. The Bengal Library Association organized a State Conference in the year 1930 at Nabadwip, where Dr Ranganathan drafted the Library Bill and appended it to his presidential address but due to some unknown reason, the Bill could not be put on the statute book at that time. The Left Front government came to power in West Bengal in 1977. They had assured in the election manifesto that the public library system would be developed through library legislation. The Bengal Library Association gave a draft of the Bill to the new Government. Shri Partha De, who later became the First Minister for Library Services of the State, personally took initiative in enacting the law. The Bengal Public Libraries Act was passed in the Assembly on 12th September 1979. Presently this State has a State Central Library at the apex, District Libraries and other libraries at a lower level. It has a Directorate of Libraries to manage the system. In India only four states enacted Public Library Act before West Bengal ("Library scenario in India", n.d.).

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#### 5. National Mission on Libraries (NML):

Hon'ble President of India on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2014 launched the National Mission on Libraries (NML) following the recommendation of National Knowledge Commission. Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Culture is the central agency for the National Mission on Libraries for administrative, logistics, planning and budgeting purposes. Speaking on the occasion, Hon'ble President said, libraries are social institutions which are repositories of knowledge and information. Libraries provide easy access of knowledge to all. A public library is often called "the people's university" because it is available to all sections of society- regardless of age, gender or skill levels. Thus, through democratization of access to knowledge, libraries contribute in promoting inclusive and sustained development of the people. He extended his best wishes for the effective implementation of the project as also of the new scheme of "Up gradation of libraries providing services to the public."

This mission is launched to modernize and digitally link public libraries across the country. The objective of this is to create a world class library system, to foster reading habits, facilitate research work and provide universal and equitable information to people in a timely and convenient manner. The aim of it is a total revamp of the Library and Information Service sector to serve the changing needs and expectations of the users and give a fillip to the library movement in the country. NML will initiate need-based training programmes to develop managerial skills and IT competencies of their personnel in tune with demands of the Internet era ("National Mission on", 2014). It will create a National Virtual Library of India to facilitate a comprehensive database on digital resources with information generated in the country. Under the scheme, 6 libraries under the ministry of culture, government of India, 35 central libraries in states and 35 district libraries will be developed as model libraries, with emphasis on economically backward districts. In addition, 629 district libraries across the states would be provided network connectivity, facilitating their transformation from physical to virtual. The basic idea behind digital libraries is to provide speedy access to information and bridge barriers of time and space. This mission will also conduct quantitative and qualitative survey of 5000 libraries to prepare a baseline data of libraries in India ("National mission on libraries", 2014).

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#### 6. Present scenario of public libraries in West Bengal:

West Bengal has a strong network of public library system, comprising of 13 government libraries, 2460 government sponsored libraries and 7 government aided libraries having State Central Library at the apex. To provide technology-oriented services to its users Directorate of Library Services under the Mass Education Extension and Library Services Department, Government of West Bengal, has implemented the computerized networking programme of the libraries. State Central Library along with 7 other Government Libraries and 19 Government Sponsored District Libraries are now connected through intranet. The work to prepare bibliographical database of these libraries in the form of Union Catalogue is in process and will be available online through the portal along with various other services. The basic idea behind this is to share the bibliographical database among all public libraries of West Bengal. An initiative has also been taken to prepare a digital archive of rare books to cater the scholars and interested people of our society so that further research work can be done in this field ("Activities", n.d.).

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#### 7. Services provided by public libraries in West Bengal and NML: a case study

The Asansol District Library situated in Asansol provide different services like- Reading room service, lending service, service for children, reference service, career guidance service etc. for the users. But if we compare it with the programmes of NML we found the following:

- Though initiative is taken by the Govt. to connect all the district libraries and State Central Library through public library network but the project is not completed yet and the Asansol District Library is not connected to this network till date.
- This library is not being selected as a model library by NML.

- NML has taken initiative to conduct representative survey of number of libraries to understand users and improve services for them. But in case of Asansol District Library users' opinion is limited to requisition for purchase of books.
- When it comes to attending workshop/seminar for library professionals to upgrade themselves with latest technology, staff of the district library attends various programmes organised by the government or other professional bodies.

When we match the technology-oriented service as per NML the district library is not in a very good position as the internet service is not provided for users and the work to link the library to public library network is not finished yet.

### 8. Initiative of NML and the public libraries of West Bengal:

Programmes	NML	Status of West Bengal
Creation of National Virtual Library	Initiative has been taken to create National Virtual Library in India. The target is to connect 629 district libraries across the states through network connectivity.	Initiative has been taken to connect The State Central Library and 26 District Library through Public Library Network and prepare a Digital Archive of rare books.
NML Model Libraries	It has decided to develop 35 State Central Libraries, One District Library in each state and 6 libraries under Ministry of Culture as model libraries in the first phase.	Though initiative is taken to improve the overall library services but no emphasis is given to one or more libraries as model libraries.
Qualitative & Quantitative Survey of Libraries	Initiative is taken to conduct a representative survey of 5000 libraries to understand users and their need to provide better services.	No such initiative is taken on such a broad sense to understand users but different libraries individually take feedback from users.
Capacity Building	It has decided to initiate need-based training programmes for library professionals to develop IT competencies and provide advanced technology-oriented services to users.	Workshop and seminar are organised from time to time for library professionals for their development.

Library movement is not picking up pace in states due to various reasons. Though 19 states have already enacted Public Library Act but in many states very little are done to provide latest technology-oriented service to the users. One of the main hindrances is the non-allocation of adequate funds. The NML is focusing on improving the public library system emphasizing those states which are lagging behind. In West Bengal though a number of initiatives is taken like- Bibliographic Control, Creation of Database regarding Library Services, Computerization of Libraries, Community Library cum Information Centers, National Mission on Manuscripts etc. to provide better service by The Directorate of Library Services but the progress in these fields is not up-to-mark. The District Libraries which are connected through public library network are also unable to increase the number of users because of lack of awareness programme regarding facilities available in these libraries.

### 9. Recommendation to improve public libraries in West Bengal:

Government of West Bengal has taken few measures to improve Public Libraries in West Bengal but the effort to implement and execute those programmes is not satisfying. The following measures can be implemented in the libraries to serve the users in a better manner:

- All public libraries in West Bengal should be linked through public library network as early as possible so that users can access it from anywhere and better service can be provided.
- Regular training programme should be arranged through workshops, seminars etc. for library staff so that they can upgrade themselves according to the latest technological changes.
- A survey should be conducted covering as many libraries as possible to know what users want from the library by professionals related to this field.
- A high-level committee should be formed so that proper monitoring and periodic review of the work can be done.
- Target oriented goal should be set and if it is not achieved within specified time special care should be taken to complete it.

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## 10. Conclusion:

Public libraries are accessible by all section of people. Right information to the right person at the right time should be the motto of every library professional to make information more accessible. Many libraries are more than a century old and equipped with rare and valuable information but this need to be available in digital format so that speedy access can be done without wasting time and space. Plenty of information are digitized under several projects by government and other agencies and is available on the web, but these are not properly organized. The importance of this information can be measured if it is presented to the users in an organized and user-friendly manner. Public libraries of West Bengal are also facing similar kind of problem like lack of fund, skilled manpower to use latest technology, lack of initiative among library professionals to inform users, lack of co-ordination among networked libraries etc. to match the standard to provide world-class library facilities to its users. NML on the recommendation of National Knowledge Commission has taken the initiative to overcome this problem and provide technology-oriented service to the users but the success of the programme can be measured in due course of time as the project is now in its preliminary phase. We library professionals must come forward and take initiative by supporting the government and make the NML programme a successful one so that present and future generation can be served on a better manner.

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