



Promoting Adult Education and Rural Development through Rural Libraries in Assam

Raju Kumar Das,

Department of Education, Bhawanipur Anchalik College, Assam

Abstract: Among the states that make up India's Northeast, Assam has carved out a special niche for itself in the academic world. Assam's remote education system has grown in popularity over the past decade, particularly among working adults, stay-at-home parents, and retirees who want to further their knowledge. Women and adults from far-flung, distant places and those living in other unfavourable conditions are the primary target of State Open University's education programs. Adult students have access to a wide variety of courses and pedagogical resources, such as learner-friendly Self Learning Materials (SLM), mobile apps, a host of online support systems, counselling sessions, ongoing evaluation, workshops, and seminars, thanks to a flexible learning strategy. Assam's Independence movement, which began in the middle of the twentieth century, may be credited with inspiring the establishment of the state's first rural libraries. Currently, there is no comprehensive inventory of Assam's rural libraries. Having first-hand experience with the deteriorating state of many rural Assam libraries, we regularly hear tales of their existence. The members of the student group Assam Chatra Sanmilan founded most of these rural libraries in the 1920s and 1930s, during the Independence Struggle in Assam. In addition to distributing books and giving a place to read magazines and newspapers, these rural libraries also served as hubs for political activity, helping residents of rural areas improve their literacy, cultural development, and social and political awareness. Each of Assam's districts has adopted the initiative to build a library in a developed village.

Keywords: Library, Information provider, Adult education, Rural Library, , Rural development.

Introduction:

In 1938, a group of concerned citizens led by Kumudeswar Barthakur, a retired School Inspector, Tankeswar Chutia, and Ayodhya Prasad Goswami established the Assam Library Association. Lokopriya Gopinath Bardoloi, Bishnu Duarah, Raghunath Choudhury, Benudhar Sharma, Debeswar Sharma, Harendra Nath Barua, Professor Emeritus Pandit Maheswar Neog, and many others were all involved in the founding and maintenance of the Assam Sahitya Sabha. Some students from Uzanbazar, Guwahati, set up a tea stall near the tent house of the Assam Sahitya Sabha during the 1938 First Conference in order to entice people to attend the meeting. [1] The Association had attempted to organize the rural libraries and encourage the people to read by constructing a voluntary village-based district-wise



public library system on the basis of recurring little savings by each family in the area. Many of these outlying libraries were connected to the social and cultural life of the rural people they served through regular "Namghars" and other such clubs or organizations [2]. During that time, there were roughly 30 libraries in major cities and 300–400 in outlying areas. There was an increase in the number of literate individuals in Assam as a result of the development and spread of High and Higher Secondary Schools between 1930 and 1945. As a result, groups of young boys and girls have been creating libraries in their local villages, leading to a rise in the number of rural libraries [3]. However, many rural libraries except for a select few have either disappeared or remain only in name due to lack of regular funding from any source and absence of the initial groups leaving the villages due to joining service outside.

The Congress pushed for the Mass Literacy movement after the India Act of 1935 was passed by the British Parliament and provincial autonomy was handed to Indians. When the British left India in 1947, the literacy rate was only 12%. In 1940, the Muslim League Ministry launched the Literacy Campaign in Assam with the goal of eliminating illiteracy after the Congress Government under Gopinath Bardoloi resigned in 1938 in accordance with the national resolve for non-cooperation with the British in World War II. Since then, the Mass Literacy Office within the Department of Adult Education has provided little funding to the 627(official) rural libraries that served as subcomponents of the various Block Information Centres [4]. To help the rural population get ready for the benefits of the Five-Year Plan's initiatives, beginning with the First Five-Year Plan in 1952, the Adult Education Department was renamed the Social Education Department shortly after independence. Information Centers, together with branch and mobile cycle libraries, were established in the administrative centers of Development Blocks including anything from one hundred to two hundred and fifty villages as part of the Community Development and National Extension Service Programme. An allotted sum from each Development Block will go toward building libraries in underserved areas. One Community Centre per Gaon Panchayat of one million people served as both a Deposit Centre and a Community Centre for that Gaon Panchayat's Block Headquarter Information Centre. Reading materials, evenings for audio-visual activities, and group readings were all available at the information centers, which were open for only a few hours a day.

Thus, the Mass Literacy Project has provided some support to rural libraries since 1940. Because of their potential to serve as tools for rural development, rural libraries in Assam received funding and guidance from the state's Social Education Department (which existed from 1950 to 1970) throughout that time period [5]. The National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) was initiated in October 1978 by the Janata Government as a countrywide campaign. It coordinated the efforts of several organizations to improve the



functional literacy and social awareness of people mostly between the ages of 15 and 35 over the course of five years. Some project officers have been established in Assam's Adult Education Programme, reporting to the state's newly appointed Additional Director of Education. As part of the National Service Scheme, a large number of Adult Education Centres have been set up [6]. Public rural libraries played no significant role in this initiative to increase literacy rates, though. Its adoption was met with widespread criticism across the country.

The Congress Government refocused the program in 1982–1983, focusing on eliminating adult illiteracy and expanding access to elementary school for all children between the ages of 6 and 14, with a particular focus on girls. Due to the fact that rural libraries were not included in the planning stages of the Adult Education Programmes like Operation Black Board, Total Literacy Campaign (TLM), National Literacy Mission (NLM), District Primary Education Project (DPEP), and most recently Sarba Siksha Abhijan, the goal of achieving universal literacy in India was doomed from the start. And right now, the Chief Minister of Assam has announced the Samagra Gramya Unnayan Project, with a focus on creating a digital Knowledge Centre, without considering the possible role of rural libraries in this subject.

Due to the aforementioned factors, most of the voluntary rural libraries are now closed and serve solely as gathering places for young people to drink, party, and smoke pot. The Assam Rural Library Association was established in January 1985 and has since been working to activate rural libraries through the provision of advice, direction, and the organization of meetings, seminars, trainings, and conferences; however, despite undertaking a number of admirable initiatives, it has been unable to accomplish this goal in the absence of consistent financial support and legislative bindings on the procedure by which rural libraries operate [7]. The Association has been instrumental in securing periodic funding from the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation for a subset of the registered rural libraries.

Network of public libraries supported by the government:

After gaining independence, Assam's government accepted a program funded by India's central government called IMPROVEMENT OF LIBRARY SERVICE, implemented by the state's Department of Education's Directorate of Public Instruction. At the initiative of Mr. Kapoor, then Education Secretary of Assam, and Dr. Hiranya Kr., Bhuyan, D P I, Assam, in collaboration with the late Ram Goswami, the late Ramesh Ch. Phukan, and the late Abhoy charan Barkotoky from the Public Library Service, this Project was adopted during the First Five Year Plan and appears to be unique in Assam, nowhere in India. The State of Assam's Central Library was therefore founded in 1954 at Shillong, the state capital; in 1956, it



merged with the older Assam Government Public Library, which had been around since 1903. Guwahati, Nogaon, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Tezpur, Dhubri, and Silchar were the initial seven plain districts of Assam to have District Libraries created in 1955. Twenty-three district libraries and forty-four branch libraries have opened up over time. Local libraries operated by municipalities or other groups originally served as homes for state and district libraries [8]. Even though the Conference Halls shouldn't have been built like big auditoriums, district libraries are now more well-known as Auditoriums than Libraries, thanks to plans drawn up by the Assam government with help from the Central government under the Five-Year Plans for construction of the library buildings. In addition, the capital city of Guwahati is home to a Branch Library in Dispur and a separate Children's Library in Bishnu Nirmala Bhavan in Ujanbazar. Located on the banks of the Dighali pukhuri in Guwahati, the Nabin Bardoloi Library & Reading Hall has been open to the public as part of the Assam Public Library Service since 1981. The Nabin Chandra Bardoloi Reading Hall has recently been restored to its former glory as a Heritage Library and Building. The Department of Library and Information Science at G.U. and the Assam Library Association led successful campaigns to prevent the Gauhati Municipality Corporation from seizing control of the library in 1995 and the Guwahati Metropolitan Development Corporation from demolishing the heritage library building in 2015 to make way for the construction of multistore apartments.

The Assam Government's portion of the State Central Library in Shillong was relocated to the District Library in Guwahati in 1974, where it is currently housed in a temporary, separate section called the "Research and Reference Section"; and its administrative block has been located on the second floor of the District Library building since Meghalaya's separation from Assam in August, 1970. Without making the necessary changes to its functional character, the Guwahati District Library was declared the State Central Library in 2002. However, the news that the Assam government has taken up a proposal to build a state central library in Guwahati's proper location comes as welcome news. As a result, the Assam Government has established a Directorate of Public Instruction, Department of Education-sponsored urban Public Library System. In 1983, a separate Directorate of Library Service was established, and it was later moved to the Department of Cultural Affairs under the Government of Assam [9].

As a result, Assam today has 161 rural libraries supported by the government, part of a larger public library system that spans from the state-level Central Library to the sub-district level Libraries. However, there are currently no statutory provisions under an Assam Public Libraries & Information Service Act for guaranteeing the financial stability or facilitating the efficient administration of the State Central, District, Sub-Divisional, and Rural libraries that make up the government-sponsored public library system. The annual budget for expenditures



is determined by the whims of the government, and neither the state nor the local governments have established a State Library Advisory Board or State Library Authority to oversee these things on their behalf. While the Government's Public Library Department is meant to serve the public, it does not allow for public input or consultation.

Assam's future for its rural libraries:

Beginning with three Mobile Vans and a partnership with the Department of Social Education, the State Central Library distributed books to 70 Deposit Centres in various rural areas. Community Programs, a division of the Social Education Department, also provided library services to rural areas back then. But after the Department of Social Education was abolished in 1970, services like these at rural libraries were put on hold. As a result, the rural libraries in Assam that were founded by locals on their own accord have never been integrated into the state's public library system.

The Directorate of Library Service, Government of Assam, established the Rural Library Complex Program in 1985–86 with the intention of gradually taking over rural libraries in all 714 Gram Panchayats (the current number of Gram Panchayats is 2210), including 9 blocks in the hills. Initially, two people were paid a small honorarium of Rs 250.00 and Rs 175.00 per month to take over 204 rural libraries. This was done under the assumption that the two people would eventually be absorbed as government employees. Even after the honoraria were raised to Rs. 900.00 and Rs. 500.00 per month, respectively, neither party received payment for years on end. Due to a lack of forethought in terms of financial resources, this situation has persisted for the better part of the last three decades. During this time span, no new rural libraries were established, and instead, five of the 204 rural libraries have closed. It has been gathered that of the approximately 5,000 rural libraries in Assam, just 156 are official members of the All-Assam Rural Library Association, which was founded in Haibargaon in January 1985. (Nagoan). The Association has been working to better the situation of rural libraries by providing them with guidance, basic training, seminars and conferences, free books, and helping some registered rural libraries secure funding for books, furniture, buildings, etc. from the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation, Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Based solely on the knowledge of the district libraries, not on reports at least from the Anchalik Panchayats, if not by physical verification, the number was determined to be 1240 only by the Rural Libraries Project, 2006 carried out in the Department of Library and Information Science at Gujarat University and directed by Dr. Narendra Lahkar.

The good news is that on August 10, 2020, the Assam government's Cabinet decided to increase the salaries of the 150 assistants who work in government-funded rural libraries



from Rs.500.00 to Rs.9000.00, and the salaries of the 161 librarians who work in those libraries from Rs.900.00 to Rs.12000.00. These previously independent libraries appear to have joined the Government Public Library System. However, it is now being questioned whether or not these government-funded rural libraries will be successful in meeting their goals, or if they will end up being as ineffective as government-funded rural schools in meeting the educational needs of rural residents. Certainly, a pay raise for the two rural library employees will make them happy, but would these libraries really be able to guarantee the meaningful lifelong perpetual informal learning of the rural people, thereby raising the cultural and economic standard of the villages they serve? In reality, the public library is a Peoples' University run by various representative committees elected by the general population. The rural library should serve as the community hub for the region's educational, cultural, and economic activities. It needs to evolve into a hybrid library, housing both traditional print materials (on a wide range of topics) and digital resources (documents, databases, etc.). The hunger for knowledge will be quenched, and printed books will prove to be the cure for the ills plaguing the minds of both young and old. The Chief Ministers Samagra Gramya Unnayan Jujana project in Assam, for example, can benefit from a rural library by having it function as the relevant data/knowledge center with facilities for online communication system by computer or mobile. Students in remote locations without access to the internet may be permitted to use the rural libraries' online communication services for online learning, especially during pandemic-like times. Rural public libraries should be accessible to all people regardless of race, religion, gender, age, economic status, or education level. However, this cannot happen unless the Assam State Public Libraries & Information Service Draft Bill, 2008 and the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994, along with the State Library Policy, are enacted.

Second, there are currently 2210 Gram Panchayats operating under 185 Anchalik Panchayats, with the prospect of expanding this number in the future. Each of these aims to provide a mobile library service to a community with a population cluster of 5,000 to 25,000 people. There are currently 199 rural libraries receiving government funding, however the cases of 38 librarians and 49 assistants have not yet been resolved. Unless aided by respective provisions of separate Acts, it is unclear if the Directorate of Library Service would be able to shoulder the task of creating and maintaining all of these rural libraries, added more in the future. However, the Assam Government is responsible for paying the salaries of librarians and assistants up to the Anchalic Panchayat level. The remaining funds could come from elsewhere.

Assam panchayat act, 1994: The provision of Library Service is now legally required thanks to a change made to the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 as a result of the 73rd



constitutional amendment in 1992. The state government of Assam has decentralized library services along with 28 other topics to local Panchayats. Therefore, the State and Central Governments should allocate 2.5% of the total budget given to the Zilla Parishads, for the rural libraries. Existing rural libraries may want these amenities and find them useful.

The proposed legislation for Assam's library and information system, 2008:

Specifically, the Assam Libraries and the Information Service Draft Bill, 2008 proposes to establish District Rural Library Councils as well as District Rural Library Funds within the purview of the various Zilla Parishads. Each Anchalik, Gram Panchayat, Branch, or Deposit Centre would have a library identified and established by the District Rural Library Council, which would also be responsible for managing the libraries' operations and finances. There will be a State Advisory Library Council as well as a State Library Authority leading the Public Library System. Public libraries in both urban and rural regions can apply for matching and non-matching funds from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs' Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation to fund the purchase of materials like books, furniture, computers, buildings, training, seminars, conferences, etc. The Assam government continues to receive grants on a 10:90 basis, with the state contributing Rs 10 and the federal government contributing Rs 90. Assam's unique status was revoked by the Modi government; hence its current status is uncertain. Contributions from philanthropists and Public Sector Undertakings, in addition to those from MLAs and M Ps' Area Development Fund, may be used in the building of rural libraries, although Government offices are unable to accept such donations. It is our sincere wish that the government of Assam, a state whose economy is predominately based on agriculture and small-scale enterprises, recognize the importance of rural libraries and take the necessary steps to create and staff them. A knowledge-based society dominates the 21st century. Information, knowledge, and data are now at the forefront of civilization. The people of Assam's rural areas deserve the same consideration as the rest of the state.

Conclusion:

Adult enrolment is expected to rise as a result of this new approach to education reform. As the number of people taking courses as adults rises, online classes have become a popular option for educators. Adult students who waited too long to enrol at libraries often arrived having forgotten how to study effectively. Adult learners desire to make a positive impression in the educational environment, but they are also afraid of failing and being mocked because of their higher social position and years of experience in the workforce. Adult students' enrolment at libraries is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic variables.



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