Creating reading environments: our initiatives in West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

The state of West Bengal in India has a well-developed library system. Major portion of it is financed by government and some are developed and run by non-government organizations. This paper discusses the activities of libraries in promoting reading habits based on the initiatives taken up in a few libraries in the district of South 24 Parganas where the author resides. It also highlights the future activities involving Bengal Library Association and Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation to cover 6 libraries in three districts as a part of the pilot project. In the final project it will cover more libraries in all districts of West Bengal.

Background

India has a population of 1130 million with literacy rate of 65% [6]. The state of West Bengal in India has a population of 87 million and literacy rate is 69.2% [4]. In West Bengal 27% of the population is below poverty line (BPL)[1] compared to 29% in whole of India[2].

Children in West Bengal

The population of children in West Bengal is about 17 million. Here the population figure is taken from age group of 5 to 13 years. The population between the age group of 5 to 8 years is 8.71 million [5]. Out-of-school children

including dropouts in this category is 0.55 million [5] i.e. 6.26%. The population of children between the age group of 9 to 13 is 8.15 million [5] and out-of-school children including dropouts is 0.75 million [5] i.e. 9.17%. The percentage of out-of-school children including school dropouts is quite high. Attention should be given to promote reading habits at the developing stage. Moreover in a developing country like India with a high proportion of its population below the poverty line, reading and education are inextricably interlinked as education is very often crucial to earning a livelihood. Keeping this in mind we have also focused our initiatives on reading and education.

Background

- India population – 1130 million
  - Area – 3.28 million sq. km.
  - Literacy rate – 65.38%
  - Below Poverty Line – 29%
- West Bengal population – 87 million
  - Area – 0.089 million sq. km.
  - Literacy rate – 69.2%
  - Below Poverty Line – 27%

Children in West Bengal

- Children (5 – 8) Population - 8.71 million
  - Out of school (including dropouts)
  - 0.55 million (6.26%)
- Children (9 – 13) Population - 8.15 million
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  - 0.75 million (9.17%)

Reading Environments

The main categories of reading environments may be represented as follows:
- Schools
- Centres developed by NGOs
- Homes
- Libraries

We discuss each of these below.

Schools play a very important role in motivating children. Teachers are considered second mothers to children. The government of West Bengal has taken up programmes for schools. These include Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) like District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). One of the thrust areas of these two programmes is to involve local communities in promoting elementary education and development of Village Education Committee (VEC) and Ward Education Committee (WEC). Substantial progress has been reported through formation of Mother Teacher Association at local levels. As part of the programme of nutritional support to primary education Mid-Day Meal Scheme has been introduced. Under the Link Library Programme each school is provided with books for children. Book fairs are also organized at district levels and local levels to promote reading habits among the school goers. To spread education among the out of school children

Alternative schooling system has been developed through Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education(AIE).
In most of the schools there are libraries. Each class has a library period to provide books to students to encourage reading habits among children. Besides, schools for primary and secondary levels there are schools for higher secondary level, colleges and universities. All of these educational institutions have good libraries with good collection of books to support reading.

Non-Government Organizations (NGO) are also playing a very important role in spreading education and in the development of reading habits. A number of NGOs have come up to identify the school drop-out children at below poverty level, to analyse their needs and are trying to solve their problems by providing free text books, free tuition. The NGO organizations have also developed libraries collecting donations from various persons at local levels.

Family background and literacy/ education level of parents are also having a great impact in promotion of reading habit. Now the children of illiterate parents in the rural areas of West Bengal have started their literacy mission at home. Students of some schools have got the subject for work education to teach their parents to read and write.

Libraries are also playing an important role in supporting education and in promoting reading habits. Story telling is a well-known popular method of motivating users mainly children to read books. Quiz programmes based on the books read by the users are also quite effective in this respect. Similarly, debates and discussions on important current events, literary discussions, question/answer sessions between authors and readers are also important. Most of the libraries celebrate important days like Independence Day, birth anniversaries of writers and national leaders and organize cultural programmes on these occasions. Involvement of users, local community is important here.

Reading Environments

- Schools
- Centres developed by NGOs
- Home
- Libraries

Initiatives for promotion of reading

These initiatives generally include
- Story-telling
- Quiz, Debates, Discussions
- Literary Circle
- Cultural programmes
- Art and drawing programmes
- Career counseling
- Textbook distribution

Story-telling is a traditional custom in India. Grandparents tell stories of *Ramayana, Mahabharata, Panchatantra* , folk tales, fairy tales, historical legends and other stories to children. Different renowned book-shops like Oxford in Calcutta organize story-telling sessions for children. Some libraries organize story telling sessions. Quiz, debates, extempore lectures, discussions are other attempts organized by libraries, local clubs to make use of the libraries. Literary discussions based on a renowned author or remarkable book are also organized by public libraries. Cultural programmes like music, dance, recitation involving the children and others from the local community are also organized by some old libraries. Sit and drawing competitions are organized by local clubs and some libraries. Career counseling is also organized by libraries inviting eminent professionals from various subject fields. NGOs have developed some libraries for free text book distribution among children of poor families. They keep the

book for one year and return it after their final examinations. For students of higher classes they lend books from the libraries for a short time.
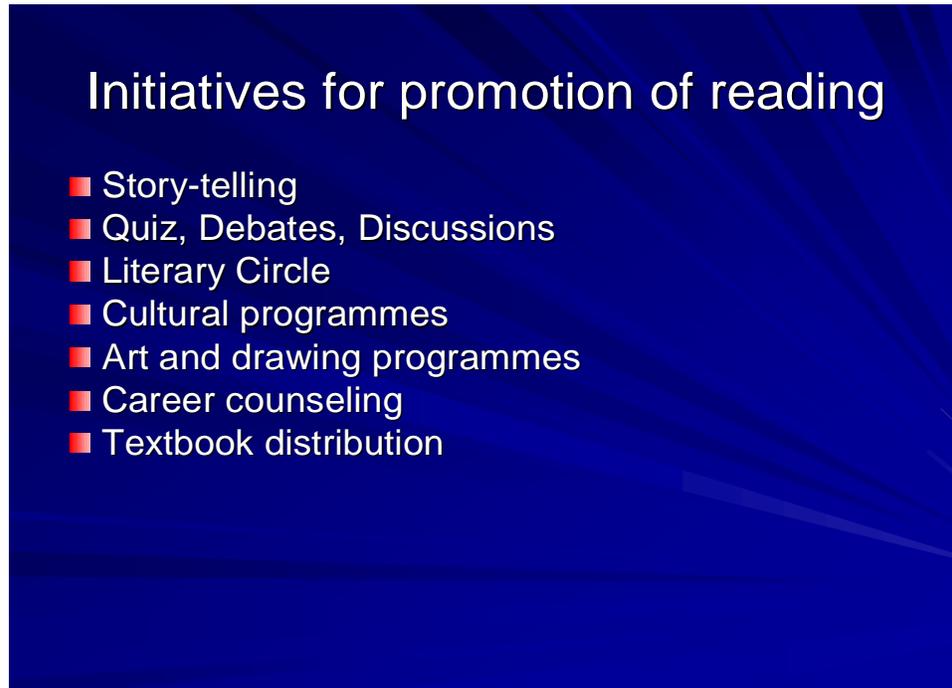
Initiatives for promotion of reading

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- Cultural programmes
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Our further Initiatives

Our further initiative will be to organize plays involving children and other users of the libraries on a regular basis. We are also trying to get TV and radio for the libraries so that the educational programmes telecast/broadcast on TV and radio at scheduled times can be viewed and heard by the students. All India Radio, Calcutta broadcasts audio scripts on different subjects for school children as part of their Distance Education Programme. Audio books will have a greater impact on the community. Creation of audio books and their distribution with the required equipment is another initiative taken up by us. Quiz, debates, story-telling are also going to have a great impact on reading habit promotion. Recording of these live programmes are also needed to make these sessions repeatable easily and hence make the initiative sustainable.

Our Further Initiatives

- Plays
- Audio books
- Educational programmes on TV, Radio
- Recording of live programmes
- Extend current promotional activities

Coverage

Our initiatives are being carried out in Behala, South 24 Parganas district, WB in three libraries

- Barisha Pathagar
- Adhyayan, situated on Rai Bahadur Road
- Adhyayan, situated on Becharam Chatterjee Street

Barisha Pathagar , a public library was started in 1904. Now the Library has got the recognition of a town library. With the help of the neighbourhood it organizes story-telling, quiz, debates, discussions and cultural programmes once a month on a holiday.

"Adhyayan", which means study, is a textbook library for poor students run by an NGO, started in 1963. It also provides coaching on subjects from the school curricula to students coming from families below poverty line (BPL). It has also started providing story books to its members. It collects donations from local people to run the library and support its activities. This organization has also opened a branch in 1988. These organizations identify school dropouts and needy students by making door to door surveys and try to bring back the dropouts to normal school life. One of the members of Adhyayan named Susanta Das is the eldest son of a rickshaw-puller and a part-time maid. After completion of class IX he was forced to take up a job in a local manufacturing company to help his family . He earns Rs. 50.00 per day and works for 24days in a month.

On Sundays he works for Adhyayan on a voluntary basis—collects donations, visits slum areas to find out school dropouts and needy children, organizes street plays, takes part in plays. We are motivating him to complete his school leaving examination privately.

Barisha Pathagar

- 'Pathagar' means Reading Room
- Started in 1904
- Story-telling
- Quiz, debates, discussions
- Literary Circle
- Cultural programmes

Adhyayan

- 'Adhyayan' (means study)
- Started in 1963 (branch in 1988)
- Free textbook library for poor students
- Free coaching centre
- Organizing socio-cultural activities
- Funded by donations from local people

Impact

We have found that our initiatives have had a beneficial effect:
- More children are enrolling
- Increase in library use by children
- Youngsters are participating in voluntary work

We see that children involved in these programmes are considering the libraries as their own and taking part in their development. They find the library a place of their own; a place to study, a place for individual and social development. They also take part to motivate the community to donate money, to identify other needy, school dropouts. Parents of these children who are busy in earning money are also encouraging their children to come to the library.

Impact

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- Increase in library use by children
- Youngsters are participating in voluntary work
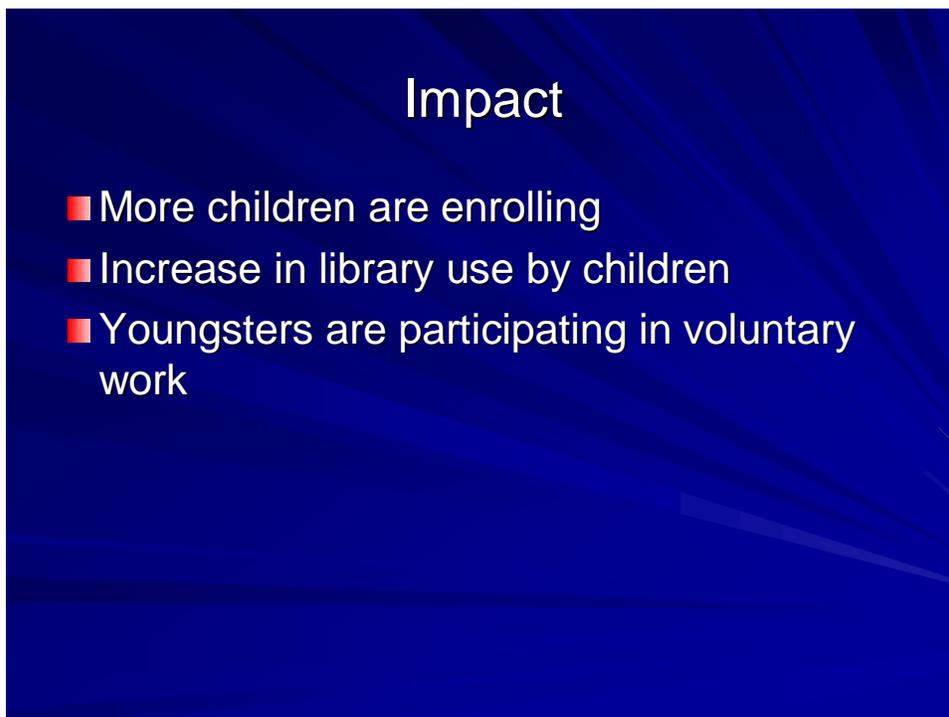
Further plans.

Encouraged by the response to our initiatives and based on these experiences we have submitted an Action Plan of a pilot project for further programmes to Bengal Library Association (BLA) for forwarding to Raja Rammohun Roy Libray Foundation (RRRLF) for financial assistance. This programme will include story-telling, plays, quiz, debates, discussions as well as production of audio books, CDs, DVDs for spreading of reading to children below 5 and people with low literacy level, visually impaired users.

Bengal Library Association (BLA) was established in 1925 with Rabindranath Tagore as its first President, to organise the library movement in the state and even today it is helping the Directorate of Library Services of the Government of West Bengal in "evolving policies on management and development of public libraries" [3].

The Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF) was established in 1972 by the Government of India to support public library services in India. It provides assistance to support library services and also promotes public library movement in the country.

In the pilot project 6 public libraries will be selected from 3 districts;
- Calcutta
- Howrah
- South 24 Parganas

In the next phase stage-wise projects will be taken up to cover about 100 public libraries spread over all the districts of West Bengal.

Further Plans

- Involve Bengal Library Association and RRRLF
- Pilot project – 6 public libraries in 3 districts
- Stage-wise projects to cover about 100 public libraries all over West Bengal

Conclusion

In conclusion we may state that the effect of previous programmes is quite overwhelming. Originally Adhyayan,the library organized by an NGO was started in the 1963 but it had to open its branch in 1988 in response to the local demands. If the public libraries can be involved in carrying out these programmes the result will be more effective. Public libraries will be able to reach all the communities of the society by taking up active programmes in response to their needs. Thus it can act as a social agent for spreading education.

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