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Historical Exploration of Public Libraries Societies in Colonial Bengal During Pre-Independence Period (1847-1947)

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries in Colonial Bengal (1847-1947) developed rapidly from the mid-19th century with the Calcutta Public Library (1836) and the Uttarpara Jaykrishna Public Library (1859), the first free public library in Asia, serving as important hubs for intellectual and cultural exchange. These libraries evolved from catering to the elite to becoming community centers, facilitating adult learning, non-formal education, and even political awareness, often supported by social reformers and institutions like the Brahmo Samaj. They were not only places for reading but also community spaces for debates, social functions, and the dissemination of news and information to broader audiences. In this article, historical exploration of public libraries societies in colonial Bengal during pre-independence period (1847-1947) has been discussed.

Keywords: Public, Libraries, Societies, Colonial, Bengal.

INTRODUCTION

Hemchandra Ghosh was a fellow rebel whom Swami Vivekananda met in Dacca in 1901. His remarks on political and social duties summarize Swamiji's stance on the matter. According to Ghosh, Swamiji wanted a public library, the abolition of untouchability, a gym, and regular church attendance. The scenario was less than ideal due to Bengal's high proportion of educated unemployment. The problem was worsened by the fact that the English government was openly hostile against Bengalis and would not appoint them to any official jobs. There would be repercussions. Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal in 1905 with the intention of reducing the Bengalis' control. (Kumar, A., 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Area: Public libraries in colonial Bengal.

Study Period: Pre-independence period (1847-1947).

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The exploration of public libraries influences the society in colonial Bengal.

Research Design: In this research, qualitative research design was used.

Secondary Data Source: In this research, secondary data source was used.



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Methodology: The research work based on the secondary data gathered from various sources, including government publications, censuses, organizational internal records, books, journal articles, websites and reports, e-resources, etc. which were enlisted in the bibliographic section. Also, qualitative research design also used for this study. The area wise historical information of public libraries in colonial Bengal during pre-independence period (1847-1947) were also chronicled.

Tools: In this research, historical research tool was used.

HISTORICAL EXPLORATION OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES SOCIETIES IN COLONIAL BENGAL DURING PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD (1847-1947)

A group known as the "Atmannati Samiti" met at Wellington Square in 1897. The Mymensingh branch of the "Suhrid Samiti" was founded in the years 1900 and 1901. The Gondalpara, Chandanagar band "Bandhav Samillani" first appeared in 1902. Located in Chinripota, 24 Parganas, "Swastha Kendra" first opened its doors in 1904. It was in 1905 that the "Mukti Sangha" came to be in Dhaka and the "Swadesh Bandhab Samiti" in Barishal. 'Shakti Samity' in Ranaghat and 'Swadesh Sevak Samity' in Ahiritola Lane were both established in 1907, after the 'Brati Samity' had been founded in 1906. Muslim groups in Rajshahi, Mymensingh, and Suhrid Sammilani are working to raise library awareness through their respective public libraries. The "Yubak Samity" was founded in Calcutta in 1908. Some associations that might be given special consideration are the "Samaj Sevak Sangha" in Rajshahi, the "Calcutta Anushilan Samity," the "Mymensingh Suhrid Samity," and the Galia Hitasadhn Samity in Barisal. (Das, A. K., 2015).

Rangpur Public Library:

The first national school in Rangpur was founded in November 1905 when local youngsters were fined by the district magistrate for participating in a Swadeshi demonstration.

Kishore Ganj Public Library:

Anushilan, Sadhana Samaj, Suhrid, and Sadhana profoundly impacted the Kishore Ganj Public Library. Radicals constituted the bulk of the attendees at the second Mymensingh District Conference that took place in Kishore Ganj in April 1908. The volunteers were supervised by Kaliprasanna Dasgupta, while the keynote presentation was presented by Aurobinda.

Dacca Rammohun Library:

The Rammohun Library was greatly impacted by the Anushilan Samity's central council in Dacca.



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Jessore Public Library:

The indigo planters' dominance prompted the locals of Jessore and the surrounding regions to take a more aggressive stance. In 1860, the Indigo Rebellion had its beginnings at Jessore. From the town hall to the public library and the New Arya Theatre, the insurgency in Jessore revolved around these three locations.

Barisal Public Library:

The Jugantar and Anushilan groups were both based out of Barisal. In 1908, Barisal Town was the site of a revolutionary uprising. The local branch of Jugantar Dal in Barishal was known as the Barisal Party. Officially outlawed in 1908 by the government was the Barisal Party.

Noakhali Public Library:

Satish Chandra and Narendra Mohan Ghosh greatly influenced the development of clandestine groups in Barisal, Noakhali, Comilla, and Chattogram. The Noakhali Public Library is involved in many things because secret groups want it to be. Some of these things include mediating legal disputes, promoting Swadeshi principles, creating national schools, helping people during religious festivals, famines, and epidemics, and organizing traditional crafts.

Public Libraries in 24 Parganas:

Even though there were no strong autonomous Samites in the four districts of the old province on the Hooghly's left bank, near Bakarganj and Faridpur, the national movement nevertheless gained a lot of traction. Companies and Anushilan Samities, which are branches of Calcutta societies, are the main volunteer groups in these areas.

The Kodalia Binapani Library was established in 1912 in what was once the drawing room of Jogendra Nath Chowdhury. It was an incredibly diverse collection, consisting of 35 volumes. While visiting the town of Kodalia in 1917, Subhas Chandra's father, Janaki Nath Basu, was overjoyed to see the young people working so hard to build a library. He did more than just build a library with one floor; he also set aside property for the ancestral home of his family. The years 1924, 1933, and 1937 saw Subhas Chandra visiting libraries as part of his community engagement activities. An anti-imperialist, Shanti Ranjan Ghatak was honored by the library for his long tenure.

In the drawing room of Tarun Nag Chowdhury, the Panihati Friends' Library was established in 1898 by the inhabitants of Panihati under the guidance of Taranath Bandopadhyay. The library contained a wide range of textbooks and general literature. It wasn't until 1946 that the teen section first appeared. The library's English name was changed to its Bengali equivalent in 1947, and two new paths, Sabuj Pathagar and Panihati Bandhab Pathagar, were formed when the Friend's Club and Tarun Sangha merged.



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In 1940, Bhatpara founded Evergreen Library, and in 1939, he founded Bani Mandir on Ghoshpara Road, both of which were libraries during World War II. They supposedly had a significant hand in launching Bhatpara's Kishore Pathagar and Rabindra Library. Nationalism in 1944 energized the inhabitants of the Sundarbans in South 24 Parganas as they eagerly anticipated their freedom. Durgapur Sadharan Pathagar was the new name given to the library in 1971 at a public assembly. (Buragohain, A., 2022).

Public Libraries in Calcutta:

Back in 1923, C.R. A group of concerned citizens from the area, led by Subas Chandra Basu, established the organization. Yes, it is. Sarat Chandra Basu, Sunil Basu, B.C. Ghosh, N.C. Chatterjee, Bidhan Chandra Roy, Dilip Kumar Roy, Urmila Debi, Rama Prasad Mukhopadhyay, Prabhudayal Himmat Singha, Basanta Kumar Basu, and Dharendra Nath Ghosh were among the notable personalities who took part in its educational and social programs. It was in 1925 when Subhas Chandra Bose founded the Dakshin Kolkata Tarun Samity Jatiya Granthagar. From its original 65 members and 260 pieces in 1947, the library's collection had grown to 380 pieces with 111 members. Subhas Chandra Bose established the Deshbandhu Pathagar in Kolkata in 1926 with the aim of spreading Chittaranjan Das's principles. There were 150 members of the Sangha in 1947. The number of volumes in the library department rose from 21 in 1947 to 650 the following year.

Public Libraries in Hooghly:

The district of Chinsura was active in the anti-partition movement of 1905, which led to the creation of a workers' library and night school and a "National High Court." In 1903, it was also involved in the boycott of foreign goods and the Swadeshi movement, which resulted in the formation of a group in Baidyabati. The charitable group known as the "Shreerampur Hitakarini Sabha" was founded after the Danish left India in 1845. Usually, it stays out of sight. Established in 1891 as the Sripur Kalyan Samity, the current Sripur student library has a rich history. In 1914, the Radharaman Sammilan Samity was established in Dumurdaha, Hooghly, as a result of the selfless efforts of Swami Dhrubanandagiri Maharaj. The library and organization were founded by the esteemed Sisir Kumar Bandopadhyay, a philanthropist and politician. The years 1915–1917 were formative for Sisir Kumar's library. Sisir Kumar was kind enough to donate a large number of books written in English to the library. He and his colleagues conducted door-to-door searches for rare books and manuscripts, ultimately amassing a substantial collection. It was changed from 'Guptipara Sadharan Pathagar' to 'Sisir Bani Mandir Pathagar' in 1933 to commemorate Sisir Kumar's journey. With the passionate support of Madhusudan Seal, Sambhupada Sen, Narendra Nath De, Shibchandra Roy Chowdhury, and Pankajlal Guin, an exercise club was founded in Hooghly in 1918. Kartik De's official librarianship career began in 1930. With the goal of fostering cultural and educational enlightenment and national consciousness, the New Reading Club was founded in Bengal in 1355 under the name



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'Hooghly Sahitya Mandir.' In 1923, during the independence fight, they continued this tradition by establishing a library and club. The library was a common place for them to work out. Founded in 1944, the Baidyabati Club is well-known in Hooghly for its charitable work. In 1860, the club was founded. In 1945, in the drawing room of a small landowner named Anil Mallick in Hooghly, Khalisani Pathagar was created. (Mandal, S., 2021).

Public Libraries in Burdwan:

Ramakanta Roy founded a Swadeshi Bhandar in Raniganj, an industrial town, in March 1906. A six-page pamphlet called Dharmaghat (Strike) was supposedly released by the local Swadeshi Sabha during the EIR workers' fight. Beginning in 1906, Burdwan became the epicenter of revolutionary movements. The Burdwan uprising was started by Jatindra and Pulin Behari Bandopadhyay. Burdwan railway workers initiated strikes in 1906. Jugantar Party activity peaked in 1913. Binoy Krishna Chowdhury and Saroj Mukherjee were revolutionary fighters. The revolutionary group accepted Bhimacharan's aunt as a member. She was harshly sentenced to three years in prison for her revolutionary activity (1915–18).

Public Libraries in Howrah:

Around 1910, a clandestine organization called the "Friend's Association" met in Bainan, Howrah District. Through its public library branch, this organization aimed to promote the cultural and intellectual development of its member towns. In 1916, the Bainan Public Library was founded by Asi Ranjan Chattapadhyay, Bagala Charan Niyogi, Dinabandhu Biswas, and Arabinda Chattapadhyay. Twelve ladies and three hundred and seventy-four books made up its charter. Several notable individuals made substantial contributions to the library, including Bhagabati Roy, Kalyani Roy, Ashalata Debi, and Hiramati Debi. Political turmoil led to the disbandment of "Bandhab Samity" in 1906. People in charge were worried about the children who frequently visited the library. The Santragachi Public Library was left the books and furniture of the 'Bandhab Samiti,' also known as 'Bani Niketan,' in 1916.

In response to the authorities' concerns about the original plan, the organizers changed the name and settled on constructing a library. Naren Ganguly bestowed the name "Adhyan Sammilani" upon the complete building in 1925. It was in 1928 that Shailen Mukherjee's home became the site of the library. The library organized patriotic musical performances. After being rechristened Atul Pathagar in 1942, the "Bandhab Samity" in Howrah was founded on land provided by Jitendra Nath Pal. Health literacy and awareness were the goals of the library's programs. Responding to British concerns over 'Bandhab Samity,' members of 'Tarun Sangha' established the group in 1944 to promote nationalism via mainstream education.



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Public Libraries in Bankura:

With funds donated by Harihar Mukhopadhyay, a library was established in Kalitala, Bankura town, by the Jugantar Party in 1909. In 1910, Pramatha Nath Chattapadhyay, who had been inspired by the illustrious journalist Ramananda Chattapadhyay, founded the Pathagar library at Bishinda, Gangajalghati.

Public Libraries in Nadia:

Local volunteers from Santipur made two European missionaries famous at the train station on June 30, 1906. Three Swadeshi dacoits were purportedly committed in Nadia in 1908 and 1909 by the "Krishnanagar gang," a group of revolutionaries hailing from Krishnagar, Shantipur, and Kusthia. The legendary revolutionary uprising leader Jatindranath Mukherji, often known as "Bagha Jatin," is said to have been born in the Kushtia area town of Koya in 1901. This region was often visited by Kanailal Pal, a local independence fighter.

Public Libraries in Purulia:

There has been little change in the political climates of Odisha and Bihar. Of the eighty Bengali periodicals published that year, nine were in Oriya, ten in Hindi, and one in Assamese. Public libraries in Purulia passionately supported militant nationalism because of the province's historical links to Bihar, even if the region was politically inactive in comparison to Bengal. In 1947, Asmanandji Saraswati established Ramchandrapur Netaji Granthagar in the Indian state of Purulia. (Bhatt, R. K. & Kandhasamy, K., 2020).

Public Libraries in Jalpaiguri:

The revolutionary movement in Jalpaiguri was seen as "dormant" and in need of a Swadeshi by March 1907 due to its low activity and leaders' few visits from Calcutta. Originally established in 1918 as a library, JMYA is now under the supervision of the Jalpaiguri Institute. The Jalpaiguri Club was home to a thriving library and a tea industry run by government agents from Europe. The zeal for liberty led to the establishment of Subhas Pathagar in Falakata and Netaji Pathagar in Lataguri in 1945. The important foundation stone of Azad Hind Pathagar was laid at Jalpaiguri on January 26, 1946. In his inaugural year, Satish Chandra Lahiri was named president.

Public Libraries in Murshidabad:

In the year 1908, Nimtita in the region of Murshidabad organized a band of volunteers. In Beldanga, a part of the Murshidabad region, lived two bright and ambitious siblings named Aswini Kumar and Bankim Chattapadhyay. As a community literacy program and a memorial to their father, the Prasanna Kumar Memorial Library was established in 1920.



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Public Libraries in Midnapore:

From what we can tell from official sources, the agitation had subsided significantly by January 1906 and had all but "died out" by January 1907 (with the exception of Tamluk), making Midnapore stand apart. The district convention that took place in December 1907 proved that it had been a radical stronghold by then. In addition, two of the first four martyrs of the Bengali revolution, Satyendranath and Kshudiram, were born there in 1908.

Libraries in the Midnapore District decide to incorporate a secret group's activities into their public engagement efforts. The British intended to partition Bengal in 1905. 'The Contai Club' was decided upon at a meeting with three main goals in mind: to provide circulating libraries, to encourage social engagement among local gentlemen, and to provide gymnasiums and sports facilities for a secret society. (Maity, D., 2018).

On April 12, 1938, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose spoke to a group of educated Jararnagar residents assembled by Iswar Chandra Pramanik, a famous teacher from modern-day Midnapore. To commemorate Netaji's much-heralded arrival, Mr. Pramanik set up a charitable organization in Jararnagar, which is part of the Contai subdivision. At the moment, they go by the name "Subhas Shilpa Bharati."

This nonprofit organization has been around since 1947, and among its many affiliates is Subhas Smriti Pathagar. The Sayla people of the Ghatal area established the Jagriti Public Rural Library in 1945 with an eye toward revolutionary causes. Mr. Bibhuti Bhusan Bardhan from Udaygang and Dr. Byomkesh Chakraborty from Gopinathpur established Midnapore's Kharar Sitaram Memorial Public Library in 1945.

From the above findings and discussion, it can be stated that the "Hypothesis 1 (H₁): The exploration of public libraries influences the society in colonial Bengal" has been accepted.

CONCLUSION

During colonial Bengal (1847–1947), public libraries, largely established by social reformers, philanthropists, and zamindars, evolved from community spaces for educated youth to hubs for disseminating nationalist ideas and adult education. The period saw the rise of free libraries like the Uttarpara Jaykrishna Public Library (1859) and, influenced by the Swadeshi movement, the development of libraries within nationalist secret societies, which played a significant role in promoting self-sufficiency and resistance against British rule. In essence, public libraries in colonial Bengal were not just repositories of knowledge but also vital institutions that fostered social change, adult education, and, importantly, the nationalist movement, leaving a lasting legacy on the state's library system today.



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