

# Opportunity to raise people's mind

## BANGALORE MATTERS

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“I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library,” said Jorge Luis Borges. If that were true, imagine how many of our people would not be able to enjoy the fruits of paradise because they cannot read and have never been to a library.

I have not met any Indian who has not returned from the US, glowing with praise for the public library system there. I myself think most of my real education happened rather late in my life, in the early eighties, when, for seven years we led a nomadic existence in the US, with little opportunity for entertainment except for the free libraries in every city we lived in. I will always be grateful for the warm welcome, the quality and the variety of books and the frequent events and discussions held there. And the hushed silence. A library, it is said, is a place where people lower their voices and raise their minds.

I passionately believe that we need a public library system that is on par with the best in the

world, and is accessible to all. It can become a great leveler and also a laboratory or a propellant for the great Indian experiment with democracy.

As it happens, Karnataka has one of the most well developed public library systems in the country. In Bangalore, there is one state central library, 5 city central libraries, 76 branch libraries and 3 mobile libraries. The Bangalore system has more than 20 lakh books, and a membership of around 11,00,000 and

many more who only drop in to read the periodicals). And when I first came to Bangalore in '84, one of the earliest things I did was to enroll as a member in the public library in Jayanagar 9th Block.

Thanks to the energies of enlightened bureaucrats such as the Director, Department of Public Libraries (DPL), Rajendra Kumar, the public library system in the city is being upgraded. The five city central libraries have been developed as model

libraries and are equipped with computers, Internet access, reference books, good seating and lighting. I remember Rajendra Kumar telling me, he was deeply influenced by the Singapore library system when he attended a conference there, and decided that our libraries could do with a facelift.

Luckily for him, the DPL is rather well funded. And the money comes from the city's property tax payers (If more people/institutions paid their taxes,

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the DPL would have even more money. Maybe they should take an interest in 100% compliance on property tax!)

Thanks to the Karnataka Public Libraries Act, a 6% cess is levied on the property tax collected by the BMP and remitted to the Library Fund account. Last year, the BMP's tax collection was around Rs 220 crore. That means Rs 13.2 crore was to be remitted to the Library Fund. In reality, unfortunately, the money does not always find its way there.

There are huge arrears of more than Rs 35 crore that has built up over the years. Still, almost Rs 6 crore did come into the kitty last year. In the interest of equity, some of this money moves into the general state library system, because obviously other cities cannot generate as much as Bangalore. Yet, there is enough money to drive a best in class library network.

We at Akshara Foundation, have been working with the DPL to create a sharper focus on younger clients - school age children. Although two of the libraries do have adequate children's sections, most public libraries do not attract children at all. Even the budgets (there is a ten percent provision for children's books) do not reflect the new demographic reality.

The DPL has been very responsive to the Akshara initiative. We have engaged volunteers to help complete book cataloguing and review children's content in five city libraries. Our volunteers are also proactively reaching out to bring children into the libraries and create a warm reading-learning environment for them. At one of the libraries, our volunteer Nusrat has managed to create an enthusiastic pool of 150 regulars, up from the three kids she earlier had to bring in herself.

We have also been asked to help turn the children's library in Cubbon Park into a state-of-the-art centre

This is a small beginning, but with immense potential. At Pratham Books, a non-profit publishing unit, also a part of the Akshara network, we have printed one million children's books in eight languages in the past two years and yet the children are way ahead of us and need more books. In Bangalore, Akshara runs about 100 libraries in slum communities and schools with 100,000 members who are hungry to read, in spite of the general cynicism of people who believe that children are not reading any more because of the pernicious effect of television.

The DPL itself is now planning to open children's libraries in the slums, which is a good move and we would be delighted to partner with them in that as well.

Imagine Bangalore, with libraries for children in every neighbourhood and a public library system that equals the best in the world. We have the people, the resources and a vision. Much easier to achieve than all the other mega city visions the city has been fed.

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