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Indian Libraries in the 19th Century: Promoting Nationalism and Preserving Culture

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ABSTRACT

The 19th century has been a time of stark change for the better with the establishment of public libraries and democratization of knowledge. Libraries were long perceived as vehicles accessible only to elite classes, but with the evolution of these institutions as centers of education and political consciousness, Calcutta was very much at the center. Innovators Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Maharshi Devendranath Tagore headed the way forward in ushering in extensive private libraries open to the public. But not for that reason was the new impetus lacking; the Librarianship Act, 1850 gave this a great boon, as the number of libraries and reading rooms multiplied around Bengal. A new interest in Western literature and modern ideas spread across the impressionable young Indian, influenced gradually but surely by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda among many. These libraries worked for literacy and cultural awareness; they also spread political consciousness that catapulted the Indian nationalist movement into the limelight.

Key Words: Libraries, Nationalism, Education, Cultural Preservation

1. INTRODUCTION:

Librarianship is at its best during peaceful and prosperous times, while war cannot but destroy libraries. For India, it was during the early 19th century that Western education arrived, along with an ever-growing interest in English books for education, leisure, and information, that modern libraries began to develop. It went along with a new system of education that created for itself a new socio-economic order and political awareness as in Bengal which spread all across the nation. Small subscription libraries began to be constructed by the English-educated young and the elites started opening their own private libraries which fed on the growing western-knowledge, science, literary and cultural appetite. However, these libraries remained inaccessible to the general public due to factors such as illiteracy, poverty, and social issues afflicting the masses.

The Library Movement sprouted in the UK, USA, and parts of Europe during the mid-19th century. In India, however, the inadequate political conditions, universal education, and better living conditions delayed its formation by about sixty years. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwar of Baroda became the pioneer of the library movement in India. He brought in free and compulsory education to his state in 1906 and established a public library network in 1911 (Sharma, 1981). The movement spread into Mysore, Andhra, Maharashtra, Bengal, Punjab, and the like. In Andhra it was distinctive as a grassroots people's movement that sorted libraries at the village, town, and district levels. This was very closely associated with the national awakening of the early 20th century, which advocated public contributions for the establishment and maintenance of public libraries. This, however, was to remain only on paper since illiteracy was still a major problem, coupled with poverty, reluctance from governments to promote universal primary education, high dropout rates, and people reverting back to illiteracy.

Such an important role was played, with the libraries and reading halls initiated and sustained through nationalist organisations and dedicated individualists, in educating persons who became leaders of the national movement. These libraries also hosted the circulation of newspapers and literature in regional languages outside Hindi. The adult education campaign and the subsequent establishment of several village libraries during the Congress' tenure in some provinces, spanning between 1937 and 1942, played an important role in its programme. Along with these initiatives, the first attempts at establishing children's libraries were made, which were however scrapped with the outbreak of the Second World War and the existing political environment. Still, the people of Andhra went on to do remarkable work; to them the Library Movement was an incorporation of national

awakening and cultural renaissance.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

This paper examines the development and growth of modern libraries during the colonial period, with respect to the factors that led to such growth. It also attempts to discuss the role of the colonial government in this regard.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The work will follow the descriptive analytical method of Historical enquiry. Primary and secondary sources would be subjected to both external and internal criticism. The primary source has been obtained through official reports, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, and other sources. While the secondary sources included books, journals, etc.

4. DISCUSSION:

With books now printed in vernacular languages and the stream of ideas growing ever greater, the democratization of knowledge finally became a reality. Once exclusive to the upper strata of society, libraries now stood open to the educated ordinary citizen. Intellectual, social, and economic order changes were most manifest in Calcutta. A few enlightened and educated men like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, and Raja Radhakanta Deb of Sovabazar established extensive private libraries which they opened to the learned citizens of Calcutta (Sharma,1981). The Library Act passed in England in 1850 also contributed to the library movement in India. Local citizens came forward to establish libraries and reading rooms in various districts and localities across Bengal. By 1900 quite a good number of public Libraries had been established through private and public efforts (Mukherjee, 1969).

The newly opened libraries gave interesting experiences and knowledge about the science and literature of the West to the young Indians educated in English. It significantly benefited India by promoting political consciousness. A tiny élite group of people who had received education in English appeared in Calcutta after the Revolt of 1857 and other similar groups appeared in other presidency towns and areas of the country. These groups participated in key official institutions and became influential in Indian political and cultural organizations (Sharma, 1981). While critical of British rule, they did not advocate for complete detachment from the government. Emerging nationalist leaders, especially the extremists, adopted 19th-century cultural and religious trends, which were less prevalent among earlier moderates. Some of them advocated for national revival through the fine arts, education, literature, historical research, and morality to give national Indianism greater breadth (Dayal, 1957).

Ramakrishna, along with his follower Swami Vivekananda, and the celebrated man of letters of the late nineteenth century, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, significantly influenced the nationalist sentiment among the nationalists. His socio-political thought fostered a growing sense of nationalism in the society that is very well depicted through the writings of Indian authors and socio-religious leaders like Bankim Chandra, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Ashwini Kumar Datta, and Aurobindo Ghose. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* published in 1890 used religious and patriotic symbolism and the song *Vande Mataram* in its first chapter later became the national anthem. Vivekananda gave emphasis to "Mens sana in corpore sano" or a healthy mind in a healthy body, which he stressed needs all-round development (Sharma, 1981). That inspired the development of gymnasia for bodily development and public libraries for mental advancement. Soon small subscription libraries began to open up throughout the country run by active local youth with support by generous patrons who donated premises for such libraries. This gave further impetus to nationalist feelings.

These libraries had merely a few books. Popular books included biographies and works of distinguished freedom fighters of the world in English and their Bangla versions. Accounts of Shivaji, Guru Gobind Singh, Napoleon, De Valera, Garibaldi, among others, were also hugely popular. Religious literature of India and books on the history and cultural movements of other nations were also available, catering to the interests of those using these libraries (Sharma, 1981). Libraries were opened in far-flung villages where literacy was scarce. Here, a literate youth would read in front of an elated gathering. Such was the popularity that many libraries started conducting free night schools for the adults. But beneath such activities were sprouting seeds for growing nationalism. For this British ruler were anxious and began targeting libraries and searched libraries as a way of repression. In Bengal, a reign of terror struck, and many gymnasiums and libraries shut down or temporarily stopped operations. Yet this too passed. This voluntary subscription library sprouting from this period left its indelible mark in the social and cultural lives of people (Mukherjee, 1969).

The three universities in the Presidency towns that was Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, were set up in 1857 to respond to the increasing demand for higher education. However, the universities did not support the spread of education that would lay the foundation for public libraries. This foundation was established before their creation. As a matter of fact, the process to set up public libraries was basically subscription-based, starting by the middle of the 19th century itself (Sharma, 1981). A glance over the years in which each public library was established helps substantiate this assertion. Public libraries were encouraged and promoted during this period by several English-educated natives, local rulers, and some European gentlemen who assisted in setting these libraries up. However, it was in these institutions where the government took repressive measures instead of encouraging their

growth. (Mukherjee 1969). Indeed, contact with Europeans did provoke a spirit of inquiry regarding Western knowledge. Printed books have a lot to do with the evolution of education in English-speaking regions and spread to the towns and suburbs over time. Such an extension primarily resulted in small subscription libraries established in the cities, districts, and towns. Such libraries included books in English, which formed a social outlet and hotbed of politics. This political consciousness era saw the birth of the Indian National Congress in 1885.

The establishment of the Calcutta Public Library had started a new era of library in Bengal. The subscribers of this library had increased to about 405 on average at the end of 1837. The gross income obtained from the library was around £14,205; however, the gross expenditure was found to be £33,666. This included, for example, £5,018 on books' purchases, £385 journals, and £5,469 for establishment. This is a good mix of about 50% reading material and staff. In 1877, the subscribers decreased to only an average of 171 per month from 405 in 1857 (Sharma, 1981). The decrease in subscribers meant both the income and expenditure decreased for the library, thus it went short of funds. A sub-committee was formed for this purpose and recommended a reduction in expenditures without compromising the supply of books. This underscores the necessity of getting the library updated reading materials (Kesvan, 1961). The library committee comprised three curators elected yearly from the proprietors and first-class subscribers with at least one year of membership. There existed two more committees besides it: the Selection Committee in charge of book and periodical selection and the House Committee that managed the house of the library and other properties owned by the library. The librarian was ex-officio secretary to all these committees and also collected subscriptions from the members. This again underlines the importance of the role assigned to the librarian in managing the library.

Initially, open access was implemented for several years, but it was changed to closed access due to the loss of a significant number of books and journals. Later, a requisition slip system was introduced for requesting books from the library's stock (Sharma, 1981). Books were organized in fixed locations, identified by their placement in a bookcase, shelf, and sequence. For example, "VI-A-5" indicated a book located in the sixth bookcase, on shelf A, at position five. In 1953, it was decided to classify the books according to 28 main subjects; however, the fixed location system continued, with periodic modifications. Since there was no standard library classification scheme available at that time, the adoption of such a system was convenient, especially for closed access (Kesvan, 1961). This would have been particularly helpful for the literate and semi-literate attendants employed there.

The newspaper room was open to the public on all working days from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Proprietors and subscribers were allowed free access to library books within set hours. Access was also granted to poor students and others subject to permission from the Committee. The librarian assisted members in selecting proper books and attended to their reference inquiries, which meant that the librarian offered reference services within limited means. Since facilities for study in the library were not adequate, even reference books were issued to the users, although this practice was stopped later (Kesvan, 1961).

Apart from this as Calcutta was the capital of India in the 19th century, housing most government departments and offices. Many of these departments had well-stocked libraries with relevant books and records. Among these, the library of the Home Department was particularly significant as it contained the remnants of the Fort William College Library and the library of the East India Board in London.

In 1891, the Imperial Library was established by consolidating the collections of several departmental libraries within the Secretariat. It was managed by an Officer-in-Charge of Records and was located in the Civil Secretariat building (Sharma, 1981). This library was primarily open for use by officials of the Government of India and the Government of Bengal. Others could access it and borrow books only after obtaining permission from a head of department within the government. Lord Curzon visited the Imperial Library upon his assumption of the office of the Governor-General of India. He saw the rich collections that were not accessible to scholars and students owing to a lack of necessary facilities. He also visited the Calcutta Public Library at Metcalfe Hall in 1899. There he was impressed by its value collections but shocked by the institution's condition (Kesvan,1961). These visits inspired Curzon to the idea of putting together a public library as a fusion of both these rich collections: Imperial Library and Calcutta Public Library. The collection of books and journals, amounting to 40,000 volumes purchased by the Calcutta Public Library at the expense of ₹250,000 formed part of the new institution (Sharma, 1981).

The Imperial Library Act (X of 1902) was passed that transferred the books from Esplanade to Metcalfe Hall. It took almost a year to put all the books in order and get ready the catalogue (Kesavan, 1961). It was declared open to the public on 30 January 1903. Aims and Objectives for the new Public Institution of the library was published in Gazette of India, whereby the existing Imperial Library shall form the nucleus of this new establishment. The reading rooms, which shall both public and private, just as in British Museum and Bodleian Libraries are going to be created. It was to be a library of reference, a workshop for students, and an archive of materials for future historians of India, to enable access to every work written on India at any time. Thus, Curzon rescued the ailing Calcutta Public Library and founded the Imperial Library of India. Metcalfe Hall housed the Imperial Library between 1903 and 1923, but quite a number of old library books were left behind on account of inadequate accommodation for them there (Sharma, 1981). When Delhi became the capital, various government office spaces that vacated from there were scrutinized with the aim of finding some space for a library there. The

then librarian, Chapman, noted that the smoke of the factories and steam boats surrounding Metcalfe Hall was causing deterioration in paper used in books and newspapers. In 1923, the library was provided with a part of the Foreign and Military Secretariat buildings at 5 Esplanade East, and it was gradually shifted there. However, in 1942, the library was shifted again to a private accommodation in the Jabakusum House at 24 Chittaranjan Avenue mainly on account of security considerations during the Second World War (Sharma, 1981).

The Library of the East India Company was established at the East India House on Leadenhall Street, London in 1802 AD. The objective behind its establishment was to safely preserve the Oriental books and manuscripts deposited by its servants in India and elsewhere. A museum was also evolved along with the library comprising objects of Indian art, antiquities, social history, and natural history (Sharma, 1981). The governors of the Company evolved a systematic policy of developing the library and also the museum. When, in 1858, Company powers were transferred to the British Crown, these came into the purview of a newly established Department of State called the India Office. The India Office was relocated to a new building on King Charles Street, which also accommodated the library; it was subsequently known as the India Office Library (Sutton, 1967). Museum objects were eventually distributed between several institutions in London. From the very start, these collections were kept open mainly to scholars who were mostly Europeans, because, at that time, no Indian scholar would ever have dreamed of going to England to make use of these resources. The Company's officials kept adding fresh acquisitions to the library collection either through their own initiative or as presents from men returning to India. The policy of further expanding the library was not abandoned even when power was transferred in 1858. Printed books were added and formed the core of this growing repository of Indian culture. It functioned both as a library for official references and as a learned repository for Oriental scholars. Thus, by design and historical accident, the Company's library evolved into a specialist learned library serving the needs of Indologists all over the world and became the official reference library of a Government Department (Sutton, 1967).

The library contains a good number of printed books and manuscripts from Oriental and European countries, drawings and prints, photographs, coins, lantern slides, and textile samples. These have been developed through purchases, presentations, and exchanges made with other libraries. The library further enlarged its collection through an exercise of the provision of Act XXV of 1867, Press and Registration Act, by claiming a copy of every work printed or lithographed published in the country (Sharma, 1981). The right expired in 1948, and the library started purchasing important current publications in India and Pakistan. At the time of gaining independence in 1947, the British Government which was leaving did not assume any obligation to transfer the activities of the India Office Library to India and Pakistan. During the British ownership, the library was vested under the Crown under the Government of India Act of 1935 and fell within the British Imperial Archives. According to the British, since the library had records about their rule in India, it belonged to them by rights (Kesvan, 1961). This claim, however, is not justified because the library's records have comprised not only the British period but also periods prior to that and Indian history and culture. More importantly, the expenditure for building up its collections and their maintenance was funded from the revenue of undivided India. In short, therefore the undivided India people have a stake in this library as an heirloom. It articulates a broader narrative of India's history rather than British colonial experience.

The Export of Oriental Manuscripts

This period is peculiar, there is an awareness by part of the native scholars with regard to their manuscripts made in India being exported all over the distant places. Of course, one could not really attribute a period when it began. One would guess, however; out of curiosity on their part to know what probably existed inside those manuscripts that probably started during the early centuries. Since the arrival of European missionaries and traders in India, they collected manuscripts and brought them to their countries (Sharma, 1981) . They placed these works in libraries of their own countries. Many Europeans read Sanskrit and Other Oriental languages to understand the contents of those manuscripts. They established and published grammars for their converts, which allowed them to understand texts better. As Indians began to realize the treasure trove of Indian manuscripts, the export of such works became an organized and regular affair. It would not only preserve and popularize Indian literary and philosophical thought but also kindle growing interest in Oriental studies among the West. The effect of this exchange would echo for generations influencing the discourse of academia and appreciation of culture worldwide.

The 'Loot of Manuscripts' took place following the Mutiny of 1857 when thousands of manuscripts either fetched their way into foreign libraries to make shelves even more beautiful, or destroyed at the behest of the soldiers through their own hand (Ranade,1931). Neither was this solely the misfortune of the military: it is because the later generations, belonging to a learned class, in majority, had left their legacy unguarded. Once the European powers began to influence India, they began looking at value in manuscripts as treasures that needed to be collected and preserved in western institutions. This process would systematically take away valuable artifacts from their original contexts often without the consideration of tradition and history. This looting had deep consequences in that heritage and knowledge were irreversibly lost, which would have otherwise contributed to the understanding of India's rich intellectual and literary history. It marked a critical moment in the history of cultural exchange and appropriation, raising questions of ownership, preservation, and the ethical responsibilities

of both colonizers and the colonized in the preservation of cultural artifacts (Sharma, 1981).

The loss of India's cultural heritage, particularly its manuscripts, deeply shocked learned scholars both native and European. The apathy of the government, combined with the lack of organized public effort, resulted in a significant depletion of the manuscript wealth. In response to this crisis, it became essential to make serious attempts to consolidate and organize the remaining manuscripts. An earlier effort was made by Baptist Mission Press at Calcutta, who in 1859 issued an index to the bibliography of Indian philosophical systems (Ranade,1931). Thereafter a circular issued in 1868 by Sir Whitely Stocks, then Secretary to the Indian Council urged preparation of catalogue of the manuscripts collected from different parts of India (Sharma, 1981).

In the same year, the Government of Madras, on behalf of the Government of India, called upon Packford to compile a catalogue of manuscripts at the Tanjore Library. This work was finally completed in 1873 by Jusha Benell. At the same time, cataloguing of Sanskrit manuscripts in private libraries in Gujarat, Kathiawad, Cochin, and Sindh was begun under the auspices of G. Bunlor. In 1860, the Government of India took an interest in the ancient Granth Bhandars that had become significant depositories of knowledge. Both European and Indian Oriental scholars, such as DE Bunlor, Patkar, and Bhandarkar, visited these libraries (Ranade, 1931). Cataloguing efforts of these collections began in the following years, and detailed reports of their research were submitted to the government. It can be seen in the detail of documentation of these efforts in Kastoor Chand Kasliwal's dissertation on the Jalna Granth Bhandar of Rajasthan. These collective endeavors aimed at safe guarding and documenting India's manuscript heritage, thereby bringing to focus a crucial need for preservation and scholarship in the face of catastrophic losses (Sharma, 1981).

5. CONCLUSION:

The prime factors in the development of modern libraries in India are the introduction of Western education and the availability of printed books, first in European languages and later in vernacular languages. Foundations for modern libraries were laid in the first half of the 19th century, and they started taking more defined forms in the latter half. First of all, Europeans were actively engaged in establishing these libraries. However, after the Mutiny of 1857, they began to disengage themselves from Indian society. Still, the few progressive British officials and scholars continued their efforts at founding public libraries in India. This new educational pattern was an innovation in the newly introduced socio-economic order. Knowledge in the area of Western science, literature, and culture was demanded by educated youths through books, which subsequently led them to acquire knowledge of political awareness and instigation of nationalism (Sharma, 1981). They managed to form small subscription libraries where they could sit around and discuss contemporary political issues. It started from Bengal and soon spread all over the nation. Some local rulers and European officials also considered opening public libraries. Public libraries were normally small and operated on voluntary subscription.

Although the government of the period did not support the library movement, through local efforts, small libraries mushroomed and played an important role in shaping social, educational, political, and cultural life of society. A few enlightened and rich English-educated people also started private libraries, which were out of the reach of common people due to prevailing illiteracy and poverty.

The establishment of the first free public library funded by the government is credited to Lord Curzon. The librarians at the Imperial Library not only held significant status but also received high salaries. The organization of the library was modelled after the British Museum. Its collections were primarily enhanced through donations from local chiefs, affluent individuals, and prominent scholars, as well as through exchanges with other institutions. However, it was denied the privilege of becoming one of the copyright libraries under the provisions of the Press and Registration of Books Act of 1867.The first librarian built a substantial reference collection, but the lack of Indian access to reference services meant that it was rarely utilized by the public. Most visitors came to use newspapers and journals. Books could be consulted in the reading rooms upon submitting a requisition slip, but borrowing books required a deposit. Additionally, books from other libraries were available through inter-library loans.

When power transferred from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858, the library in England became part of the newly formed India Office. It contained valuable Oriental manuscripts, books, and records that had been deposited by the company's employees and acquired through a systematic policy of collection. This library became known as the India Office Library. Along with the British Museum, the India Office Library also enjoyed copyright privileges for Indian publications under the Press and Registration of Books Act of 1867. It served as a library for official references and housed a wealth of manuscripts, books, and records related to Indian history and culture.The date of the start of export of Oriental manuscripts cannot be marked down accurately. Initially, the European travelers and scholars gathered these manuscripts out of curiosity to discover the knowledge contained within them. Later on, systematic efforts were organized by employees of the East India Company and later government officials. This Oriental manuscript was deposited in the libraries of England for preservation and use because retaining these manuscripts in India would adversely affect the British interest of patronizing the English language, literature, and culture.

Though Oriental scholars from India and Europe had a large-scale export of manuscripts to Western countries, destruction of most during the Mutiny alarmingly posed a problem both amongst Indian and European Oriental

scholars. This motivated the collection and systematic ordering of many manuscripts, an activity the government had to recognize sentiments and public anxieties surrounding. This prompted the gathering of many manuscripts and placement in safe custody at the important centers of India. This effort led to the establishment of several great manuscript libraries during this time, where a large number of manuscripts were collected and organized and made available in key centers of Oriental learning. Both European and Indian scholars were involved in this collection and indexing of such manuscript collections.

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