

Public Library Services in Assam

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Gives background about the state. Describes the developments leading to the present state of public libraries. Enumerates the existing structure. Discusses the finance, manpower, book purchase policy, services and readership. Points out that low literacy state and some economic factors have contributed to unsatisfactory state of public libraries.

0 INTRODUCTION

In the most ancient time, Assam was known as Pragijiyotish and later as Kamrup. Both names are mentioned in the Ramayana and the Mahabharat. From the medieval period, it is known as Assam.

Assam was ruled by the Ahoms since the 13th century to the beginning of the 19th century. Assam came under the British rule by the terms of the treaty of Yandaboo (24th February, 1826) and became free from the British rule alongwith other states of India in 1947.

Now, Assam is a state of the Indian Republic and is situated between 20°19' and 28°16' N and 89°42' and 97°12' E. The state falls into three major natural divisions viz

- 1 The Brahmaputra Valley;
- 2 The Hill area; and
- 3 The Surma or Barak Valley

Assam has an area of 78,523 km with a total population of 2,22,94,562 out of which males are 51.9% and females 48.1%. Total percentage of literate

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people in Assam is 43.20% out of which 50.62% are males and 35.18% females.

1 DEVELOPMENT IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

At about the 6th century, Kumar Bhaskar Barman ruled in Kamrup. He had innate love for books and libraries. In Harsha Charit, reference has been made that King Kumar Bhaskar Barman presented a collection of books to his friend Harsha Vardhan Siladitya, King of Thaneswar. At that time the Bark of Agaru tree was used as writing material. Locally, these were called 'Sanchipat'. Kautilya's Arthasastra has also made reference to this.

History says that in 15-16th centuries, Dimapur, the then capital of Kachari kingdom, and Koch Behar, the then capital of the famous Koch kingdom, were the cultural centres of learned people and scholars. Shridhar Kandali, Purusattam Vidya Vagish, Srimanta Sankardev, Madhabdeva etc were the famous scholars of that time. Their contributions really gave a new shape to the society. Assam witnessed the vaisnava renaissance during the period 1449-1558 AD. It was initiated by Sankardeva with his disciple Madhabdeva and was followed by the enlightened King Naranarayan. He appointed Ram Saraswati to render Mahabharat into Assamese language. The neo-vaisnavism was responsible for the establishment of Satra and Namghar. These Satras and Namghars were the repositories of manuscripts written on Sanchipat.

Ahom entered Assam at about the 13th century. They ruled Assam for about six hundred years. They were also fond of books and libraries. They called their libraries as Gandhiya Bharal. The Librarian was called Gandhiya Barua. But the libraries were not treated as used today. Their uses were restricted among the courtiers only. Actual development of Public Library in Assam began after independence only.

The British Government established a Government Public Library in Shillong in 1903. After independence, the Government of Assam accepted the scheme entitled "Improvement of Library Service" sponsored by the Government of India under the First Five Year Plan. Under this scheme in 1954, the State Central Library was established in Shillong. In 1956, the Government Public Library was amalgamated with the newly established State Central Library. In addition to it, the Government took necessary steps to expand services to district and sub-divisional levels covering all blocks/villages in phases since 1955.

2 THE EXISTING STRUCTURE

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The growth of Public Libraries is shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1

Growth of Public Libraries since 1954

Year	State Central Library	Branch Library of State Central Library	District Library	Sub-Divisional Library	Children Library	Total
1954	1					1
1955			7			7
1965			4	5		9
1975			3			3
1985			1	5		6
1986		1	1	2		4
1989-90			2	3	1	6
Total	1	1	18	15	1	36

Table 1 reveals that the total number of libraries upto subdivisional level is 36, out of which State Central Library is 1, Branch Library and Children Library are 1 each, District Libraries 18, and Sub-divisional libraries 15. On the other hand, the total number of districts and sub-divisions are 23 and 43, respectively. This means that only 75% of the total districts and about 40% of the total sub-divisions have been covered.

Regarding Branch Libraries, only one Branch Library has been opened at Dispur. Other three Branch Libraries at Noonmati, Maligoan and North Guwahati had been proposed during the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90). However, they have not been established.

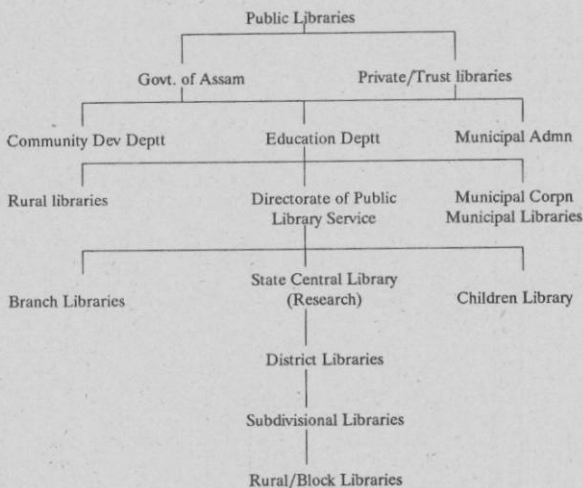
As regards Children Libraries, one Children Library has been set up in Guwahati and there are proposals to extend this service to each Branch and District Library during the Eight Five Year Plan.

In case of rural libraries, it has been proposed to provide rural library services to each Goanpanchayat of Assam. There are 714 Goanpanchayats in Assam.

However, only 200 rural libraries are functioning upto the Seventh Five Year Plan period. Before introducing this rural library scheme, mobile library services with 100 book deposit centres were provided in Assam, but now this scheme has been merged into the rural library scheme.

Apart from these libraries, there are libraries set up by Community

Development Department, Private Institutions, Trusts and Municipal Corporations. The hierarchical structure of the Public Libraries in Assam can, therefore, be drawn as follows:



The Directorate of Public Library service was created in 1984.

3 FINANCE

Government grants are the main sources of the Public Library Service in Assam. Other sources are fees, fines and grants from the Raja Ram Mohan Roy Library Foundation.

During the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), the total budget was 169.50 lakhs. The expenditure incurred under different heads is shown in *Table 2*.

Taking the figures of 1989-90 into consideration, and assuming the population at 2,11,00,000 in 1990, it can be safely derived that per capita expenditure on Public Library Services in Assam is 0.25 paise only.

Table 2

Expenditure under different heads (Rs in lakhs)

Year	Staff Salary	Book Purchase	Others	Total
1985-86				14.00
1986-87	4.38	9.83	5.79	20.00
1987-88		3.05		29.05
1988-89	10.89	13.56	14.44	38.00
1989-90	20.00	20.50	12.50	53.00

4 MANPOWER

Total manpower in Public Library Services is 292, out of which only 27 are professionally qualified. Thus, only 9.2% are professionally qualified while the others are non-professional, unskilled and other categories of employees. Besides this, about 1,428 part-time non-professional voluntary workers have been employed to man the Goanpanchayat Libraries.

5 BOOK PURCHASE POLICY

The purchase of books is made centrally every year by the Directorate through a purchase board constituted by the Government. In addition to the purchase board, there are two book selection boards in the Directorate:

- (1) Book Selection Board for Plains; and
- (2) Book Selection Board for Hills

6 SERVICES

Most of the libraries are performing lending functions except State Central Library where research section is open to the readers. Other important services like bibliography and documentation and services to the aged, patients and inmates in the prison are missing altogether. Public libraries in the state have not come up so far as community centres. Information technology is still a stranger to the libraries of Assam.

7 READERS

The total number of readers is very limited. Only 20 persons for every 1,000 population are registered borrowers while 28 volumes are issued per 1,000 people. So, it is apparent that the position is far from satisfactory. No doubt, literacy backwardness and some other economic factors are the causes of such low results.

8 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the main reason of slow progress is that the development of public libraries has not been put on sound footings. It has been provided by executive order instead of a proper library act. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that public library law is put on the statute book of Assam, so that adequate and standard Public Library Services flow to the people of Assam.