

Shamim Aktar Munshi*, Mehtab Alam Ansari and Sayantoni Barsha

Rural Libraries as Providers of Life-long Learning Opportunities: An Appraisal of Information Services and Facilities in West Bengal

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the services and facilities provided by rural public libraries in West Bengal, India. In addition, the study aims to evaluate the perceptions of librarians regarding the implementation of Information Communication Technology (ICT) applications in these libraries. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data. The primary method of data collection was a survey using a structured questionnaire, which was administered to a total of 102 rural libraries. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with the respective librarians to bring more objectivity to the results. The findings revealed that rural libraries possess a moderate collection of printed books, newspapers, and magazines. The results indicate that these rural libraries offer a diverse range of services and facilities that benefit their respective communities. However, findings of the study indicated an acute shortage of staff in almost all the surveyed libraries, with this factor, consequently, affecting services. One significant challenge faced by these libraries is the lack of ICT applications. Nevertheless, most librarians expressed positive attitudes towards the implementation of ICT in rural libraries, recognizing their potential to enhance library services and reach out to a wider audience. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that the government should provide the necessary ICT tools in order to provide ICT-based library services. The results of this study can contribute to the upgrading and restructuring of rural

library collections, infrastructure, services, and facilities in developing countries.

Keywords: public library system; rural libraries; information services; extension services; community information services; West Bengal

1 Introduction

West Bengal is a state located in the eastern part of India. It is the fourth most populous state in India, with a population of over 91 million people. There are 23 districts in the state. The state's literacy rate is 77.08 % (Office of the Registrar General, India 2011). The state covers a total area of 88,752 square kilometres and is bordered by Bangladesh to the east, Nepal and Bhutan to the north, and the Indian states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Sikkim, and Assam to the south, west, and northeast respectively. The capital of West Bengal is Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) which is also the largest city in the state. West Bengal is known for its rich history, cultural diversity, and natural beauty.

The development of public libraries in West Bengal has a long and rich history dating back to the colonial era. During the colonial period, many public libraries were established in Bengal (including Bangladesh) with the efforts of the Britishers and missionary organizations. Calcutta was selected by Job Charnock, an East India Company official, as the location for a British trading settlement in 1690 (Pradhan and Tripathi 2010). However, after winning the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British decided to build some prestigious academic institutions and libraries in Calcutta. Majumdar (2008) pointed out that the city of Calcutta was the first place in India where the British introduced the Western education system. The establishment of Calcutta Public Library in 1836 marked a crucial moment in the development of the public library movement in Bengal's history (Dasgupta 1989; Munshi and Ansari 2022; Nair 2004; Ohdedar 1966; Saha 1989). However, after India's independence in 1947, the government of West Bengal took on the responsibility of establishing and promoting public libraries in the state. Koner (1989, 209) highlighted that "762 government-controlled and sponsored public libraries had been set up by 1977 in West Bengal."

*Corresponding author: **Shamim Aktar Munshi**, Central Library, Ananda Chandra College, Jalpaiguri, 735101, West Bengal, India,
E-mail: munshishamim14@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9362-9435>

Mehtab Alam Ansari, Department of Library and Information Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India,
E-mail: mehtabalamansari1@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2381-984X>

Syantoni Barsha, Department of Library and Information Science, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, West Bengal, India,
E-mail: bbarsha677@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2939-271X>

The Left Front government in West Bengal played a significant role in the development of public libraries in the state. During their rule, which lasted from 1977 to 2011, the government took various measures to promote the growth of libraries and to make them more accessible to the people. One of the key initiatives taken by the Left Front government was the enactment of the West Bengal Public Library Act in 1979 (Government of West Bengal 1980). Thereafter, a significant quantitative shift in the number of government-sponsored libraries was seen (Bandyopadhyay 2008). Significantly, during the initial eight years of the Left Front government in West Bengal, the number of government-sponsored libraries saw a significant increase, and by 1985, it had more than doubled compared to the previous figure. Majumdar (2008, 176) mentions how “the Left Front Party opened a new chapter of growth and development of public libraries in West Bengal.”

As per the Department of Mass Education Extension and Library Services West Bengal, there are 2480 public libraries in West Bengal, comprising 13 government libraries, 2460 sponsored libraries, and seven government-aided libraries. Out of 2473 government and government-sponsored libraries, there is one state central library located in the capital city, besides one special library, 26 district libraries, 236 town/sub division libraries, and 2209 rural/area/primary unit libraries. Apart from these, there are 319 Community Library Cum-Information Centers that operate through the Gram Panchayat-established community-based organization. Currently, the Department of Mass Education Extension and Directorate of Library Services look after the West Bengal Public Library System. A three-tier public library system exists in every district, comprising of district libraries (DL), town/sub-division libraries (TL), and rural/primary/unit libraries (RL) (Department of Mass Education Extension and Library Services 2013).

2 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of the current study is to evaluate the services and facilities offered by rural libraries in West Bengal. Furthermore, the study will also examine the significance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) applications in rural libraries. The major objectives are mentioned below:

- To know the staff strength in rural libraries of West Bengal;
- To study the information resources available in the rural libraries;
- To explore the infrastructure of rural libraries;

- To examine the services and facilities provided by the rural libraries;
- To know the perceptions of librarians towards the implementation of ICT applications on rural library operation and services;
- To identify the constraints that librarians face in providing library services and facilities.

3 Literature Review

It was ardently stated that public libraries act as community centres, serve as entryways to local knowledge, and provide a platform for lifelong learning. According to Zaid and Popoola (2010), a public library’s responsibilities include: educating rural residents about information resources and encouraging them to use the resources; addressing the educational, economic, social, cultural, and informational needs of the community; converting the uneducated, illiterate, and neo-literate into potential users; and providing information on a wide range of topics, including agriculture, finance, public health, and other topics. By offering a wide range of information resources and different services, public libraries also benefit students, jobseekers, farmers, businessmen, retired persons, and other members of society (Munshi, Ansari, and Barsha 2022; Ramasamy 2003). Lal (2018, 310) mentioned that the “Public library is the only institution that can provide [an] equal chance to the society to access information needed through the latest technology with free of cost.”

The study by Ajithakumari and Francis (2015) suggested that public libraries in Kerala state of India should implement modern technologies, build new collections regarding agriculture and health science, and appoint trained professional staff. Elsewhere, Raju and Raju (2010) discussed the role of public libraries in South Africa; this study highlighted the contribution of public libraries in the reduction of illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment in Africa and South Africa. The authors noted:

In the African continent and in South Africa specifically, the public library should be more than an institution propagating democracy – it has to be an institution of democracy itself providing information to all, in the format that is most relevant and in a language that is most preferred (Raju and Raju 2010, 11).

Munshi and Ansari (2019) and Ansari and Munshi (2018) identified that public libraries assist their users by offering them reading materials. Moreover, public libraries in West Bengal regularly organize various programs with regards to education and recreation. Elsewhere, Warraich, Malik, and Ameen (2018) investigated the current status of public

libraries in Pakistan and revealed that the majority of libraries have poor conditions with respect to their library collections, professional staff, infrastructure, and services. Researchers have also mentioned that the development of the public library system has received very little attention from political leadership and higher authorities. Sule (2003) revealed that the majority of rural public libraries in Nigeria faced different problems like an inadequate book collection, financial constraints, a shortage of staff, and a lack of modernization that were not allowing them to fulfil the desires of the rural user communities. An evaluative study was conducted by Azhikodan (2010), who critically investigated the current status of the public libraries in the Malabar district of Kerala state in India. Interestingly, no library under the study has adopted any book selection policy. Furthermore, not even one single district in the Malabar region follows the guidelines set by IFLA/UNESCO in 2001 with regard to book selection.

According to Nasir, Quaddus, and Islam (2006), a significant number of users were dissatisfied with rural library services and facilities in Bangladesh, with the majority of libraries operating without professional staff and with an obsolete collection. According to Baada et al. (2019), users of public libraries in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana expressed similar dissatisfaction due to non-availability of reading materials, both in print and electronic form. Omeluzor, Oyovwe-Tinuoye, and Emeka-Ukwu (2017) examined rural library services and facilities for rural development in Delta State, Nigeria. The findings show that the information needs of rural residents were not sufficiently met due to some obstacles, including a lack of awareness, outdated book collections, illiteracy, a language barrier, a shortage of professional staff, inadequate infrastructure, an absence of IT, etc. Another study by Salman, Mugwisi, and Mostert (2017) examined the issues that hampered access to and use of public library services in Nigeria. The authors found that unawareness of library services, inadequate reading materials, and a lack of information literacy skills were the major factors that affected library use and better services. Significantly, however, a positive response was found by Aslam and Sonkar (2018) in their study. They concluded that most of the users from public libraries in Lucknow, India were satisfied with services and facilities offered by them.

A recent study by Munshi, Ansari, and Barsha (2022) found that a very large number of job seekers and students are using rural library services to search academic and job-related information. According to the respondents, “rural libraries in West Bengal should implement modern technologies and provide ICT-based library services so that they may access resources available in different parts of the

globe” (293). Mushtaq and Arshad (2022) revealed that the majority of users frequently visit public libraries in Lahore, Pakistan, for obtaining job-related information; they also believed that public libraries are community information centers that assist individuals in lifelong learning. Urhefe-Okotie, Okafor, and Ijiekhuamhen (2022) found that there is a significant relationship between library services and job performance of librarians and paraprofessional librarians in public libraries in South Nigeria. The study also established that paraprofessional librarians play a significant role in the provision of library services in public libraries in South Nigeria. Lenstra and Roberts (2023) examined the potential for public libraries to partner with health promotion initiatives in order to provide greater access to health information and resources in South Carolina in the United States. They found that public libraries are uniquely positioned to serve as health promotion partners due to their broad reach within their communities, their commitment to providing free and open access to information, and their ability to serve as trusted sources of health information.

Kohlburn et al. (2023) highlighted that public libraries in United States played a critical role in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, providing valuable resources and services to their communities. The authors argued that public libraries demonstrated their value as essential community resources during the pandemic, and that policymakers should recognize the importance of libraries and support them accordingly. However, researchers also identified several political challenges facing public libraries, including funding cuts and debates over whether libraries are essential services. Another study by Adle et al. (2023) examined the efforts of public libraries in the United States to promote health justice during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the study revealed that public libraries in the United States made significant efforts to promote health justice during the pandemic, including providing access to reliable health information, offering virtual health programs and resources, and partnering with local health organizations to provide community-based health services. Sadra et al. (2023) revealed that Iranian public libraries face several challenges in storing and retrieving information, including a lack of funding, outdated technology, inadequate staffing, and limited access to information resources. The study also identified several opportunities for improvement, including the use of new technologies, the development of partnerships with other organizations, and the provision of training and professional development opportunities for librarians. Notably, the study suggests that public libraries in Iran can improve their services by adopting new technologies and developing partnerships with other organizations.

4 Methodology

The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to gather relevant data. Additionally, few more relevant secondary data sources were consulted, including internal annual reports (each rural library prepares an annual report in March every year), annual reports published by the Department of Mass Education Extension and Library Services, Government of West Bengal, and also various websites associated with the West Bengal Public Library System. These secondary data sources provided valuable supplementary information in conjunction with the primary data collected.

4.1 Target Population

Currently, the state of West Bengal is divided into five administrative divisions: Presidency, Medinipur, Burdwan, Malda, and Jalpaiguri. Each division consists of either four or five districts, resulting in a total of 23 districts across all divisions. Two districts were selected from each division using a lottery method. The selected districts are: Presidency division (Nadia and Howrah); Medinipur division (Bankura and Purulia); Burdwan division (Paschim Bardhaman and Birbhum); Malda division (Malda and Murshidabad); and Jalpaiguri division (Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar).

Rural libraries in these ten districts were the target population of this study. Table 1 shows the total number of government-sponsored rural libraries in ten districts, according to the Department of Mass Education Extension and Library Services (2013). It is worth mentioning that this study solely focused on assessing the services and amenities

provided by rural libraries in West Bengal and, therefore, district and town/sub-division libraries were excluded from the survey.

4.2 Sampling Technique

To select the districts, researcher adopted the lottery method of sampling. Two districts were chosen from each division, making a total of ten districts as a target population. However, considering the substantial number of rural libraries in each district, a stratified sampling method was employed to select at least 10 % of the rural libraries from each district. The stratified sampling method involves dividing the population into subgroups or strata based on specific characteristics. From each subgroup, a random sample is then selected in proportion to its size or importance in the population, ensuring that the sample represents the entire population (Busha and Harter 1980). It is important to note that this study did not involve library users and supporting library staff, as they were not the specific focus of the investigation.

4.3 Data Collection Instruments

To gather the relevant data, the researchers employed a research approach that combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies. A structured questionnaire was used to conduct a quantitative survey followed by personal interviews with the respective librarians. The questionnaire consisted of five main sections: (1) library staff; (2) collection; (3) infrastructure; (4) services and facilities; and (5) perception regarding the implementation of ICT applications. During the interviews, librarians were asked about the challenges they

Table 1: Selected districts and number of rural libraries covered.

S.N.	Division	District	No. of govt. sponsored public libraries	No. of govt. sponsored rural libraries	No. of rural libraries surveyed	Percentage
1.	Presidency	Howrah	136	123	13	10.5
		Nadia	110	99	10	10.1
2.	Medinipur	Bankura	130	122	13	10.6
		Purulia	117	111	12	10.8
3.	Burdwan	Paschim Bardhaman	61	53	6	11.3
		Birbhum	124	113	12	10.6
4.	Malda	Malda	105	95	10	10.5
		Murshidabad	159	146	15	10.2
5.	Jalpaiguri	Alipurduar	37	34	4	11.7
		Jalpaiguri	73	65	7	10.7
Total			1052	961	102	10.6

have faced in providing effective services to their users. One of the researchers used a smartphone to record the discussion.

4.4 Data Collection and Analysis

One of the researchers personally visited 102 rural libraries and distributed the questionnaires to the librarians. Rural libraries in Nadia (10), Howrah (13), Bankura (13), Purulia (12), Birbhum (12), Malda (10), and Murshidabad (15), Paschim Bardhaman (6), Jalpaiguri (7), and Alipurduar (4) were physically visited (the list of selected surveyed libraries as shown in Appendix 1). It was observed that the librarians exhibited a positive attitude and enthusiastically filled in the questionnaires within a reasonable amount of time. The data were analyzed using MS-Excel.

5 Results

5.1 Library Staff

According to the Department of Mass Education and Extension and Library Services, each rural library in West Bengal has sanctioned two positions: one professional (librarian) and one non-professional (junior library attendant). Based on the data presented in Table 2, it is evident that out of the 102 surveyed libraries, only 32 (31.3 %) have full-time librarians. Additionally, 82 (80.3 %) libraries have junior library attendants.

The minimum qualifications for librarians are Higher Secondary or its equivalents, a pass Certificate in Library and Information Science (CLIS) or a Bachelor degree in Library and Information Science (BLIS). To become a junior library attendant, candidates must pass class VIII standard from a recognized secondary school. When we asked about the qualifications of librarians/junior library attendants, it was found that 28 (24.6 %) of them obtained a Higher Secondary degree along with the CLIS, 18 (15.7 %) have a Bachelor's degree with BLIS, and only eight (7 %) have completed a Bachelor's degree with MLIS. It can be concluded from the results that the majority of the libraries are being managed by junior library attendants. Nevertheless, it was found that some of the junior library attendants had pursued a Bachelor's degree with CLIS/BLIS through distance education after securing their job. It is worth noting that in some libraries, junior library attendants are managing the library despite not having any LIS qualifications. Regarding professional experience, a majority of the librarians/junior library attendants (N = 62, 54.4 %) stated that they have more than 21 years of professional experience. Notably, some

Table 2: Staff strength in rural libraries (N = 102).

S.N.	Library staff	No. of libraries	Percentage	
1.	Staff strength	Librarian	32	31.3
		Junior Library Attendant	82	80.3
	2.	Professional qualifications	Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS)	8
		Bachelor of Library and Information Science (BLIS)	18	15.7
		Certificate course in Library and Information Science (CLIS)	28	24.6
		No LIS qualifications	60	52.6
3.	Work experiences	12–15 years	22	19.3
		16–20 years	30	26.3
		21 years and above	62	54.4

junior library attendants reported that, with the passage of time, they have been able to gain confidence in handling various sections of the library.

5.2 Library Collections

Public libraries play a crucial role in providing life-long learning opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds. They serve as community hubs for education and provide access to a wide range of resources and services including books, magazines, newspapers, etc. A discussion, in the following paragraphs, will be made regarding availability of different types of materials in surveyed libraries.

The study revealed that the majority of the libraries (N = 45, 44.1 %) have book collections ranging from 8001 to 10,000 followed by 18 (17.7 %) libraries with more than 10,000 books. Notably, only 16 libraries (15.7 %) have a collection of less than 6000 books (see Table 3).

The librarians were further questioned about the number of newspapers regularly received in their libraries. Analyzed data in Table 3 showed that most of the libraries (N = 74, 72.6 %) were subscribing to one newspaper regularly. Only 20 (19.6 %) libraries were subscribing to two newspapers. These subscribed newspapers are available in the Bengali language. The most commonly subscribed newspapers in the libraries are *Bartaman* and *Ajkal*. Further, as shown in Table 3, 76.5 % of libraries (N = 78) subscribe to 6 to 10 magazines every year, while 23.5 % of libraries (N = 23) subscribe to 11 to 20 magazines. The majority of these magazines are in the Bengali language, with a few magazines

Table 3: Library collections of rural libraries of West Bengal (N = 102).

S.N.	Information resources	Collections	No. of libraries	Percentage
1.	Printed books (Title)	1,000–6,000	16	15.7
		6,001–8,000	23	22.5
		8,001–10,000	45	44.1
		More than 10,000	18	17.7
2.	Number of daily newspapers subscribed	1	74	72.6
		2	20	19.6
		More than 2	8	7.8
3.	Number of magazines subscribed	1–5	–	–
		6–10	78	76.5
		11–20	24	23.5
4.	Availability of non-books materials	Maps and atlas	102	100
		CDs/DVDs	102	100
		Photographs	54	52.9

also available in the English language. It is also worth pointing out that not a single library has an e-book collection or subscriptions to any e-magazines. When asked about the availability of non-book materials in their libraries, each surveyed library had three to five maps and atlases, while 54 libraries had old photograph collections.

5.3 Library Infrastructure

Some interesting information such as the total area, the number of reading rooms, and their seating capacity is given in Table 4. This table also shows whether surveyed libraries have separate rooms for children and senior citizens, space for parking vehicles, etc.

As shown in Table 4, 11 libraries (10.8 %) cover an area of above 1500 square feet, followed by 24 libraries (23.5 %) which cover an area between 1000 to 1500 sq. ft., and 67 libraries (65.7 %) which cover 600 to 1000 sq. ft. The seating capacity of libraries varies depending on their size. The study found that 69 libraries (67.7 %) had a capacity of between 41 to 80 seats in their reading areas while 20.6 % of libraries (N = 21) had a capacity of up to 40 seats. Only 11.7 % (N = 12) of libraries had more than 80 seats in their reading areas (see Table 4). In total, 72 libraries (70.7 %) had two reading rooms for their users, while the rest (N = 24, 22.5 %) had only one room.

Out of 102 libraries, only 25.4 % libraries (N = 26) have a separated section for children. The remaining libraries reported that, due to the shortage of library space, they could not create a separate section; however, they do maintain

Table 4: Rural libraries infrastructure (N = 102).

S.N.	Library infrastructure	No. of libraries	Percentage	
1.	Total area covered by the libraries	600–1,000 sq. ft.	67	65.7
		1000–1500 sq. ft.	24	23.5
		Above 1500 sq. ft.	11	10.8
2.	Availability of reading room	1	24	22.5
		2	72	70.7
3.	Seating capacity in reading room	More than 2	6	6.8
		1–40	21	20.6
		41–80	69	67.7
4.	Separate children's section	More than 80	12	11.7
		Yes	26	25.4
5.	Separate seminar hall	No	76	74.6
		Yes	28	27.4
6.	Separate section for senior citizens	No	74	72.6
		Yes	12	11.8
7.	Parking area	No	90	88.2
		Yes	68	66.6
		No	34	33.4

children's collections on separate bookshelves. Notably, only 27.4 % (N = 28) of the surveyed libraries possess separate rooms for the purpose of organizing cultural programs, holding important meetings, and conducting seminars, etc. It is noted that out of 102 libraries, only 12 (11.8 %) provide separate sections where senior citizens read newspapers and spend their leisure time. Significantly, the majority of libraries (N = 68, 66.6 %) have parking areas.

5.4 Services and Facilities

A public library has a responsibility to provide a wide range of services and various activities to their user communities in order to satisfy their information needs. This section examines different services and facilities available in surveyed libraries.

5.4.1 Access to the Library Services

IFLA's guidelines (Koontz and Gubbin 2010) state that "Physical accessibility is one of the major keys to the successful delivery of public library services. Services of high quality are of no value to those who are unable to access them. Access to these services should be structured in a way that it maximizes convenience to users" (57). Accessibility of the library services includes library opening hours, mode of access to the collection, duration of book loan, etc. as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Access to the rural library services (N = 102).

S.N.	Access to the library services	No. of libraries	Percentage	
1.	Library working hours	11 a.m. to 6 p.m.	58	56.8
		12 p.m. to 7 p.m.	29	28.5
		1 p.m. to 8 p.m.	15	14.7
2.	Mode of access	Open access	18	17.7
		Closed access	22	21.5
		Both	62	60.8
3.	Number of books lent per registered member at one time	One book	23	22.6
		Two books	68	66.6
		More than two books	11	10.8
4.	Duration of book loan	Seven days	–	–
		Fifteen days	81	79.4
		More than fifteen days	21	20.6
5.	Fine for overdue books	Yes	25	25.5
		No	77	75.5
6.	Average books issued per day	1–30	19	18.6
		30–60	74	72.6
		More than 60	9	8.8

During the library visit, it was observed that the opening and closing times of rural libraries were different, however, total working time in all the libraries is seven hours. Fifty-eight of the studied libraries open at 11 a.m. IST time with the closing time of 6 p.m. IST. Twenty-nine libraries open at 12 p.m. IST with the closing time of 7 p.m. IST. Fifteen libraries open at 1 p.m. IST, with the closing time of 8 p.m. IST. These libraries are open six days a week except on state and national holidays.

Bona fide members are allowed to borrow one book and two books at a time for 15 days in 68 and 23 libraries respectively. Although renewal facility is also available in all libraries, these libraries do not impose any fine to their members up to 10 days of a delay. When librarians were asked how many books were issued on average each day, 74 libraries (72.6 %) mentioned that 30 to 60 books were issued. On the other hand, 19 libraries (18.6 %) said they were issuing up to 30 books every day.

5.4.2 Library Services and Facilities

The present study revealed that all the surveyed rural libraries in West Bengal provide a wide range of services and facilities to their users, thus assisting their users in getting the right information without any loss of time.

5.4.2.1 Reference Service

Among all the services provided by libraries, the reference service is one of the most vital. The present study found that

all the libraries provide reference services to their users. Notably, 54 libraries (52.9 %) have reference collections ranging from 1001 to 2000 while 24 libraries (23.6 %) have more than 2000 as shown in Table 6.

5.4.2.2 Children's Services

Children's interest in reading has been greatly influenced by public libraries. Typically, there is a separate children's area with a variety of books, magazines, toys, etc. in every public library. IFLA's guidelines state that the "public library has a special responsibility to meet the needs of children" (Koontz and Gubbin 2010, 19). The survey found that all libraries offer children's services; however, very few libraries have a separate children's section. The remaining librarians have reported that, due to the inadequate infrastructure, they are unable to create a separate section. Nevertheless, the collection with regard to children is kept in separate shelves exclusively for children. As shown in Table 6, 57 libraries (55.8 %) had children's collections ranging from 501 to 1000; only 24 libraries (23.6 %) had up to 500 books for children. The collection includes children's books (like *Birbal Story*, *Alif Laila*, *Veem Story Series*, *Gopal Bar*, short stories, biographies, children encyclopaedias, etc.), children's magazines, toys, maps, a globe, etc. When asked how many children used the children's collections every day, more than 50 % (N = 58, 56.8 %) of libraries indicated that there were typically 21 to 30 visits by children (Annual Report of the District Library Officers 2019–2020).

5.4.2.3 Extension Services

One of the important services, especially in a public library, is the extension service. The fundamental objective of the extension service "is to convert a library into a cultural and intellectual centre which provides an insight into the stream of knowledge. The library can be an effective facilitator of self-learning through its extension services" (Venkateswara 1974, 65). Interestingly, the study found that all surveyed rural libraries organize different types of extension services to encourage both library members and non-members. As shown in Table 6, 89.2 % of libraries organize various cultural programs every year on different occasions like Saraswati Puja, Rabindra Jayanti, Independence Day, International Mother Language Day, etc. Libraries also host a variety of events during the program, including musical performance plays, documentaries, readings of poetry and stories, mime shows, kid-friendly dance performances, drawing competitions, etc. (see Figure 1). Moreover, these cultural and re-creational activities provide members of society the chance to advance their social, physical, and intellectual well-being. Notably, an average of

Table 6: Services and facilities offered by the rural libraries.

S.N.	Library services and facilities	No. of libraries	Percentage			
1.	Mode of access to the reference collections	Open access	11	10.8		
		Closed access	77	75.5		
		Both	14	13.7		
2.	Number of reference collections	1–1000	22	21.6		
		1001–2000	54	52.9		
		More than 2000	26	25.5		
3.	Number of children collections	1–500	24	23.6		
		501–1000	57	55.8		
		More than 1000	21	20.6		
4.	Daily children visitors	1–20	32	31.4		
		21–30	58	56.8		
		Above 31	12	11.8		
5.	Extension activities	Cultural programs	92	89.2		
		Seminars	34	33.3		
		User orientation program	67	65.6		
		Career counselling programs	32	31.3		
		Other activities	26	25.4		
		6.	Community information service	Agricultural information	65	63.7
				Health information	48	47
Transport information	36			35.2		
	Local and political news	66	64.7			
	Displaying job-related advertisements	78	76.4			
	Miscellaneous	46	45			

100–150 members and non-members participate in cultural programs (Annual Report of the District Library Officers 2019–2020).

In addition to the cultural program, 34 rural libraries (33.3 %) occasionally organize various seminars/workshops on diverse topics. According to the previous Annual Reports (2011–2012), these libraries organized seminars/workshops on the “Role of Public Libraries in Developing Society,” “Contribution of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar,” “Preparation for Civil Service examinations,” “Strategies for cracking government jobs,” etc. A significant number of people actively participate in these seminars/workshops reported by the librarians.

Results in Table 6 show that 67 libraries (65.6 %) organize user education programs every year to increase awareness among the user communities about the use of library resources and services. These programs are also extremely beneficial to young users who are preparing for



Figure 1: Cultural programme organized by Madanpur Sadharon Pathagar on the occasion of International Mother Language Day, February 21, 2019.

competitive examinations. A little less than a third of libraries (N = 32, 31.3 %) occasionally organize career counselling programs, and experts from different fields were invited to deliver talks for the potential jobseekers. Besides these extension services, some of the libraries also organize adult education programs covering different topics.

5.4.2.4 Community Information Services

Public libraries also serve as community information centers in our society by providing various types of information, such as local and national news, information regarding agriculture, health, transportation, consumer issues, travel, etc. IFLA guidelines as quoted in Koontz and Gubbin (2010, 23) state: “Public libraries are locally based services for the benefit of the local community and should provide community information services.”

Notably, findings of the study suggest that rural libraries offer a variety of community information services to rural communities, as shown in Table 6. More than 60 % of libraries (N = 65, 63.7 %) provide agriculture-related information. Librarians at these libraries reported that they frequently receive magazines from the Department of Agriculture, Government of West Bengal, with articles related to the cultivation of different crops, etc. Further, rural libraries also provide health information such as information about doctors and hospitals (N = 48, 47 %), transport information (N = 36, 35.2 %) (summer and winter vacation travel plans, travel guides, etc.), and display job-related advertisements from several newspapers on the notice board (N = 78, 76.4 %). The majority of the librarians reported that many rural residents find these services very beneficial.

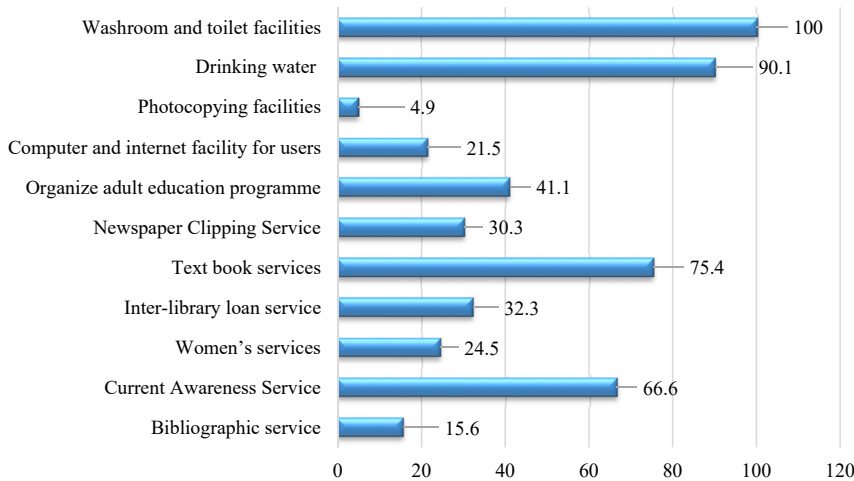


Figure 2: Other services and facilities provided by the libraries.

5.4.3 Other Services and Facilities

A bibliographic service denotes a list of documents provided by the library. As shown in Figure 2, out of 102 surveyed libraries, only 16 of them provide a bibliographic service. However, the rest of the libraries reported that due to a shortage of library staff, they are unable to provide a bibliographic service. Significantly, 68 (66.6 %) rural libraries display information regarding the new arrivals of books, journals, magazines, and other resources. However, a few libraries ($N = 25$, 24.5 %) provide women's services. Librarians at these libraries reported that they organize International Women's Day and awareness programs on several diseases, etc. (see Figure 3). It is important to note here that the majority of libraries ($N = 77$, 75.4 %) provide textbooks from eighth grade up to graduation level to needy students. Some non-government organizations (NGOs), members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), and philanthropists have donated these textbooks to the libraries.



Figure 3: Celebration of International Women's Day by the Abdul Halim Smriti Rural Granthagar, Birbhum District, March 8, 2017.

Photocopying services were discovered to be less common, with only five rural libraries (4.9 %) providing the service. When librarians were asked about the computer and internet facilities, only 22 libraries (21.5 %) provided such facilities. The rest of the libraries mentioned that they had not yet received computers and other necessary ICT tools from the state government. During the survey, the researchers found that around 100 % of rural libraries offer drinking water, washrooms facilities, and other public utilities.

5.5 Perception About the Implementation of ICT Applications

It was found that out of the 102 surveyed libraries, only 22 libraries have ICT equipment such as computers and printers. The librarians of these libraries reported that they have received only one computer and printer from the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation through special grants. The Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation is an autonomous organization under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Its objectives are the establishment and development of public libraries, the promotion of library services, and the training of library personnel. The foundation also provides financial assistance to public libraries for the purchase of books, ICT equipment, and other necessary materials. However, the remaining librarians informed that they did not receive any ICT equipment from the government. Despite the era of digitization and modern ICT facilities, these libraries lack the essential equipment needed to provide ICT-based services. In light of this, the management of these 102 rural libraries were asked about their opinion on the necessity of adopting ICT in rural libraries. The responses are presented in Table 7, where each row

represents a specific statement and each column represents a level of agreement ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.”

Table 7: Librarians’ perceptions regarding implementation of ICT applications in rural libraries (N = 102).

S.N.	Necessity of ICT adoption in the rural libraries	SA	A	D	SD
1.	I believe it is necessary that ICT applications are adopted by each rural library in West Bengal.	68 (66.7 %)	26 (25.5 %)	8 (7.8 %)	-
2.	I believe that ICT applications will improve the speed of technical processing and make documents available faster to users.	62 (60.8 %)	28 (27.4 %)	12 (11.8 %)	-
3.	I believe that ICT applications will provide numerous access points as well as a comprehensive subject catalogue.	55 (53.9 %)	34 (33.3 %)	13 (12.8 %)	-
4.	I believe that ICT applications will improve circulation activities in terms of speed and accuracy.	25 (24.6 %)	57 (55.8 %)	20 (19.6 %)	-
5.	I believe that ICT applications will reduce the workload of library professionals.	19 (18.6 %)	24 (23.5 %)	42 (41.2 %)	17 (16.7 %)
6.	I believe that ICT applications will enable users to access library resources and services faster.	48 (47 %)	31 (30.4 %)	13 (12.8 %)	10 (9.8 %)
7.	I believe that ICT applications will save the time of users.	34 (33.3 %)	58 (56.9 %)	10 (9.8 %)	-
8.	I believe that ICT applications will provide users with wider access to electronic resources.	26 (25.5 %)	67 (65.7 %)	9 (8.8 %)	-
9.	I believe that ICT applications will solve the problem of the needy and poor rural inhabitants applying for various online applications for jobs and other competitive examinations.	60 (58.9 %)	28 (27.4 %)	14 (13.7 %)	-
10.	I believe that ICT applications will enhance the overall library quality of rural library services and facilities.	77 (75.5 %)	12 (11.8 %)	9 (8.8 %)	4 (3.9 %)

Note: SA = strongly agree; A = agree; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

The results show that a majority of librarians (N = 95, 93.1 %) are of the opinion that ICT applications must be adopted by rural libraries in West Bengal. The results in Table 6 indicated that a large number of librarians agree that ICT applications will improve the speed of technical processing and make bibliographic information faster for the users for providing numerous access points. Through ICT, libraries can provide a range of the services for their users. On contrary, the results also show that most of the librarians (N = 59, 57.8 %) disagree and strongly disagree with the statement that ICT applications will reduce the workload of library professionals.

5.6 Problems Faced by the Librarians

One of the researchers approached each librarian/person-in-charge for a face-to-face interview at the end of the survey. During the interview, only two questions were asked: (1) what are the problems they encountered in managing and providing services to their patrons?; and (2) based on their experiences, what recommendations do they have for addressing these issues? After analyzing the recorded conversations, the researchers identified five major critical challenges that were reported by the librarians.

5.6.1 Shortage of Staff

According to the Directorate of Library Services, West Bengal, there are two sanctioned posts for each rural library, one professional and one non-professional. The study found that more than 80 % of libraries (N = 86) are functioning with a single staff member. Librarians reported that many public libraries are facing serious problems and libraries might be closed due to acute shortage of staff. The researchers investigated the reasons for the large number of vacant positions in these libraries and discovered that no recruitment drive had been held since 2010. Therefore, all the librarians have recommended that the government of West Bengal should start recruitment immediately in order to fill the vacant posts.

5.6.2 Absence of ICT Tools

Lack of modernization is such a major issue that 78 % (N = 80) of librarians have raised it. They reported that they have still not received computers and other equipment for automation from the authority. The majority of librarians indicated that they are unable to offer computerised services due to the absence of computers in their library. It is noteworthy to mention here that many of them believed that “this is one of

the major reasons that the number of users is decreasing day by day.” Furthermore, they have also suggested that the government should provide an adequate number of computers and other ICT tools so that the library services can be made up in accordance with contemporary technology.

5.6.3 Inadequate Library Collection

Around 60 % of librarians indicated that due to the limited number of books, they are unable to provide information to jobseekers. Furthermore, more than 70 % of librarians reported that they subscribe to only one newspaper due to a limited annual budget. Notably, almost all the librarians believed that the annual budget should be increased by the government to cater to the informational needs of their users.

5.6.4 Lack of Infrastructure

More than 70 % of librarians claimed that due to the shortage of library infrastructure, they are unable to offer separate children’s and women’s sections. Most of the libraries are functioning without a separate seminar hall. However, some of the librarians also reported that their libraries are running in ramshackle buildings that need urgent repair to make these buildings fully functional.

5.6.5 Lack of Financial Support

Most of the public librarians suffer from a lack of adequate funding, which limits their ability to maintain their collections, services, and infrastructure. Besides the above challenges, many librarians also reported that issues like lack of support from the higher authority, unawareness regarding library services, outdated reference collections, a lack of cooperation among the librarians, etc. are critical challenges for providing effective services and facilities.

6 Conclusion

Rural libraries in West Bengal offer a wide range of services and facilities to cater to the information needs of their users. However, due to an acute shortage of staff, the services are hampered. Many librarians believed the vacant staff positions had a detrimental impact on routine services provided by them; having an adequate number of staff members would greatly enhance the quality of services offered to library users. A lack of ICT tools have further compounded already existing problems. In terms of library collections, all rural libraries possess modest-sized print collections.

However, there is a lack of emphasis on developing e-book collections and subscribing to e-magazines.

The findings suggested that the Directorate of Library Services in West Bengal should provide rural libraries with essential ICT applications and skilled personnel to facilitate the provision of ICT-based services. Therefore, it is highly recommended that such measures be taken to improve the quality of services offered by rural libraries in the region. So far, it can be inferred from the literature reviewed that this is one of the studies that pays attention to the services provided by the rural libraries in West Bengal. However, the study’s findings can be instrumental in enhancing and revamping the collections, infrastructure, services, and facilities of rural libraries in developing nations.

The survey responses indicate a strong consensus among librarians regarding the necessity of ICT adoption in rural libraries and the potential benefits it can bring. However, there are also reservations and concerns expressed by some respondents regarding the practicality and effectiveness of implementing ICT applications in certain areas. Several serious challenges were highlighted by the librarians in managing and delivering services to patrons. These challenges include staff shortages, absence of ICT tools, inadequate library collections, insufficient infrastructure, evolving user needs and demands, and limited financial support. The librarians also mentioned other issues, such as a lack of support from higher authorities, outdated reference collections, and a lack of cooperation among librarians. Undoubtedly, despite all these constraints, rural libraries have been serving inhabitants in a remarkable way.

Appendix 1

S.N.	Name of the library	District	Year of establishment
1.	Prodyot Smriti Pathagar	Nadia	1943
2.	Palsunda Sadharan Granthagar		1971
3.	Bankim Smriti Gramin Pathagar		1973
4.	Biplabi Kabi Sukanta Pathagar		1978
5.	Sukanta Smriti Gana Pathagar		1979
6.	Radhanagar Jagarani Sad- haran Pathagar		1954
7.	Maliapota Juban Jagarani Samity & Pallisri Library.		1961
8.	Natidanga Tarun Samity Pathagar		1959
9.	Karimpur Public Library		1967
10.	Dnarermath Public Library		1970
11.	Howrah Seva Sangha	Howrah	1942
12.	Sanskriti Rural Library		1959

(continued)

S.N.	Name of the library	District	Year of establishment
13.	Rabindra Pathagar Parbakshi		1951
14.	Joypur Arya Samity		1896
15.	Manasri Sadharan Pathagar		1967
16.	Sridurga Sadharan Pathagar		1955
17.	Sukanta Smriti Pathagar		1963
18.	Maju Public Library		1902
19.	South Jhapordah Public Library		1928
20.	Dafarpur Ramkrishna Library		1918
21.	Jaynagar Deshbandhu Pathagar		1945
22.	Bainan Public Library		1919
23.	Rabindra Pathagar, Bangalpur		1943
24.	Gobindapur Public Library	Purulia	1957
25.	Ladhurka Palli Pathagar		1956
26.	Vivekananda Pathagar		1947
27.	Najrul Smriti Sahitya Pathagar		1978
28.	Adhar Smriti Bani Mandir		1946
29.	Barabhum Public Library		1958
30.	Amal Smriti Pathagar		1968
31.	Janata Library		1960
32.	Debiprashed Memorial Library		1968
33.	Netaji Subhas Library		1982
34.	Universal Club & General Library		1956
35.	Burda Tarun Sanga Library		1945
36.	Jhanti Pahari Rural Library	Bankura	1957
37.	Kharbona Adibashi Gramin Granthagar		1987
38.	Rajgram Milani Sangha Library		1963
39.	Pourabarta Library		1980
40.	Barajora Bandhab Samiti Library		1958
41.	Bibarda Jagriti Sangha Pathagar		1975
42.	Radhanagar Agradut Club Pathagar		1975
43.	Punisolet Ajimia Gramin Granthagar		1979
44.	Kakra Dara Milani Sangha Library		1960
45.	Raipur Rural Library		1941
46.	Tilaboni Udayan Club Pathagar		1981
47.	Tiluri Rural Library		1959
48.	Saltora Rural Library		1951
49.	Illambazar Rural Library	Birbhum	1958
50.	Samssuzzoha Zakia Public Library		1938
51.	Sidhu Kanu Smriti Pathagar		1983
52.	Rupaspur Sailajananda Smriti Pathagar		1982
53.	Lokpur Agrani Rural Library		1958
54.	Najrul Sukanta Pathagar, Chinpai		1980
55.	Balijuri Rural Library		1957

(continued)

S.N.	Name of the library	District	Year of establishment
56.	Hetampur Ramranjan Sadharan Pathagar		1947
57.	Udaynagar Gramin Granthagar		1981
58.	Bhabanipur Rural Library		1981
59.	Mohurapur Public Library		1960
60.	Abdul Halim Smriti Granthagar		1995
61.	Subhas Library	Paschim	1947
62.	Kandeswar Tarun Sangha Library	Burdwan	1961
63.	North Zone Community Centre Library		1970
64.	Progati Granthagar		1976
65.	Andal Gram Progati Pathchakra Gramin Granthagar		1954
66.	Panagarhgram Chatra Samity Rural Library		1972
67.	Sahid Subodh Sukhit Pathagar	Malda	1971
68.	Matoil Nabarun Sangha Rural Library		1964
69.	Basanti Gramin Pathagar		1979
70.	Kumar Shibapada Memorial Institute		1937
71.	Baidyanathpur Sanskriti Pathagar		1978
72.	Raigram Library		1953
73.	Sukanta Pathagar		1979
74.	Bachamari Kabi Bharati Bhanwan Sadharan Pathagar		1947
75.	Anneswa Granthagar		1990
76.	Norhatta Club & Library		1954
77.	Trimohini Progressive Union Rural Library	Murshidabad	1969
78.	Sarbodaya Sangha Rural Library		1967
79.	Netajee Pathagar		1948
80.	Kalitala Shridurga Library		1951
81.	Sargachhi Ramkrishna Mission Library		1897
82.	Kazisaha Nazrul Library		1967
83.	Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandi Shahar Granthagar		1998
84.	Bankim Chandra library		1905
85.	Raghunath Club Govt. Sponsored. Rural Library		1971
86.	Raghunathpur Deshbandhu Pathagar		1961
87.	Benadaha Siraj Smriti Pathagar		1978
88.	Jitpur Public Library		1978
89.	Pashla B.K.M. Library		1960
90.	Saraswati Library		1910
91.	Mangal Jan Rural Library		1976
92.	Tarun Pathagar	Alipurduar	1948

(continued)

S.N.	Name of the library	District	Year of establishment
93.	Newtown Library		1958
94.	Vivekananda Club & Library		1981
95.	Sonapur Club-cum Library		1957
96.	Milan Sangha Library	Jalpaiguri	1971
97.	Young Star Cultural Club Library		1982
98.	Gourgram Palli mangal Pathagar		1981
99.	Sri Sri Nigamananda Pathaga		1961
100.	Tarun Sangha O Granthagar		1978
101.	Belakoba Public Library		1953
102.	Jalpesh Mahikanta Pathagar		1955

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