

LIBRARIES

The noted Latin American writer, Jorge Luis Borges spent most of his life working in libraries. He was a man in love with the written word. When he was appointed the Director of the National Library in Buenos Aires, he remarked , "I speak of God's splendid irony in granting me at once 800 000 book and darkness," alluding to his now almost complete blindness. And yet, his love affair with books and libraries continued till his death almost 40 years later.

Public libraries have a huge role to play in promoting literacy, inculcating the habit of reading amongst citizens as well as providing information. We don't know whether the famous library of Alexandria was ever really a public library but its role in promoting scholarship and a spirit of enquiry was immense. The Public Library system of New York City was and continues to remain of very high quality.

In our own country, there have been attempts at setting up public libraries which have not been very successful or lasting. A whole generation of Delhiites would remember fondly the Delhi Public Library system which was the only place to find books. The library had many branches and even a mobile unit. Sadly, the system exists only in name now, though one is sure that the "budget head" for Delhi Public Library still exists! Similarly, one is told that there was in the fifties, a huge network of public libraries in Bihar which were very well run. These disappeared in the sixties and seventies.

I remember distinctly when the district library was started in the small town where I grew up. The library was all of 4 rooms, with steel and glass book shelves and a large reading room. There was a very strange and eclectic collection of books and a whole range of newspapers in English and Hindi. The Library staff was not very knowledgeable or helpful but the access to books more than made up for their indifference. This library, I believe still exists, though I am not sure if it has kept up with the times.

It is in this context that the proposal by the National Knowledge Commission to set up a National Commission on Libraries is important. The Knowledge Commission, recognizing that "public libraries play a pivotal role in dissemination of knowledge and are an extremely important element of the foundation of a knowledge economy" has put forward many recommendations in its report. Setting up of a Central Library Fund with Rs. 1000 crores, encouraging greater community participation in library management and promoting information technology applications are among its most important recommendations.

No one can have any dispute about the need to pump in enormous resources to kick start such an important initiative. However, and this is important, before huge amounts of resources are spent on setting up new libraries or revamping old ones, there ought to be some attempt to understand why previous attempts have failed. After all, the Delhi Public Library, though not as well stocked or well managed as its New York counterpart, was still operational for a long time before becoming defunct. Why is it that this and similar initiatives did not succeed? Was it only a paucity of funds, or bad management or maybe a dinosaurian attitude to changing tastes of the citizens? An honest assessment of these failures should precede any attempt to start new libraries.

Libraries need to become centers of not just reading, but a host of other educational and informational activities as has been underlined by the Knowledge Commission. A modest, yet innovative example of this is what an NGO, Ajit Foundation has been doing in Bikaner. The Foundation has been running a public library which also has mobile units. The mobile units take books and toys on a *tonga* to slums and would operate an open library and playground in some public space. The foundation now plans to have small *mohalla* libraries which will also have space for creative activities like wooden toy making (Bikaner has some very skilled craftsmen who work with wood), learning science with locally available material etc. Thus the library attempts to be a truly organic enterprise and a nucleus for learning with fun.

Many years ago, a bureaucrat friend of mine was posted as the Collector in one of the districts in a BIMARU state. On his occasional trips to Delhi, he would enquire from me about the latest books which I had come across. He would buy them for the public library in his town, of course making sure that they stay with him till he finishes reading them! Setting up a network of well stocked, open public libraries is not just a matter of pumping in more money but requires innovation and ingenuity with active participation of the community. Otherwise we will have the situation of the small mofussil town in North India which has a public library with dusty, never-read volumes of the complete works of Borges, Llosa and Marquez, reflecting the taste of previous "Collectors"!