Library is a social institution. It is created to form a link in the communication system that is essential to any society and culture. In fact, without communication there can be no society. There can be no lasting culture without some form of graphic record and a means for the preservation of record. Library secures the continuity of culture. The development of libraries should be surveyed as a social institution within the framework of general cultural trends. Human society has never shown uniform development. But libraries existed in all ages as a part of the social fabric. In the earliest cultural stages the goals of the library were general. In the Roman period they were open to the public. In the medieval period the outlook of the libraries was very narrow and they were not considered as an effective instrument of social education to one and all. The revival of learning during the periods of Renaissance and Reformation extended the community of scholars. It was the time when there were revolutionary changes in social, political, industrial phases of life. With the spread of the concept and spirit of democracy, libraries were looked upon as an effective instrument of social education, so essential
for the cause of democracy.

Spirit of inquiry and curiosity for learning have always been the born-gifts of Indians since ancient times. Education is no exotic in India. She has been the cradle of one of the earliest and brilliant civilizations. The greatest and wisest of her monarchs found in the promotion of learning their noblest and most beneficial achievements as they believed in the vedic dictum that the transmission of knowledge is a charity per excellence. The famous old universities of Nalanda, Vallabhi, Takshasila etc. and also their huge libraries were always the necessary appendages of learning. But however valuable as they were, the libraries then existed were not instruments of mass education and, therefore, they did not form a part of the public library structure of the country. It was for the limited few like monarchs, important landlords, eminent scholars, religious groups and the like that the libraries existed. The concept of public libraries for the use of common place hardly existed then. So the public libraries in India are neither the progeny nor the carriers of the tradition of those early days. The libraries of the early days might, at best, have helped in the development of the outlook of important individuals of later days and nothing more.
The ways of history are strange. The victory at Plassey in 1757 enabled the English to have territorial dominion over Bengal and its dependencies. The foreigners exploited the internal wars which rocked India after the decline of the Moghal Empire to their advantage for domination. The traders became the rulers. Gradually as consolidation of the Company's rule followed - Calcutta rapidly increased in extent and population. The corresponding social change, together with the increased importance of Calcutta reflected the impact of English influence. The Englishmen living in Calcutta at that time were also under the influence of eighteenth century England. It has been said," If England became literate in the fifteenth century, in the eighteenth it acquired the habit of reading : in part no doubt of reading for instruction and enlightenment ( it was the age of enlightenment ) ; in part for political purposes ( it was the age when party politics first came to the fore as a topic for everyday discussion ) ; but still more for entertainment and for the sheer delight of books in themselves. For in this century the discovery was made by thousands that books, which had previously been intended ostensibly for study and grave contemplation, could equally be designed for relaxation, as a means of passing, or even killing, time."3 So under the new social condition it was necessary for Englishmen living in Calcutta at that time that there
should be reading materials, which they could use effectively. In natural sequence appeared the public library in the shape of proprietary subscription circulating libraries as outlets for information and for recreational reading. These libraries, although mainly originating with the book trade and despite their proprietary and commercial nature, had the characteristics of public libraries. They signalled a new era of public access to libraries and had considerable influence on the growing population of Calcutta, both natives and Europeans. But one thing to be mentioned here is that these commercial libraries were the products of the period and hence were bound by the limitations of the period. Lack of participation and widespread involvement of the native population forced all the proprietary libraries to become insular. But it is true that they sowed seeds, became the pioneers. Herein lies their contribution.

Fuller public participation, however was attained with the establishment of Calcutta Public Library in 1836. For the first time in this country the name of a library not tied to the apron-strings of any other body, bore the epithet 'public'. And the epithet was not ornamental; it was avowedly functional, the organization of the library having been based on the principle of non-exclusion and non-distinction of race, nationality, caste and creed. This was
a phenomenon behind which had worked for a number of cultural forces caused by the European activities in this country. The most important of these forces were the printing press and printed books, the new Western education and the idea that the library was a social organism. It may be mentioned in this connection that with the establishment of the Company Raj, the English or Western education was introduced in this country. Indians themselves invited this education with ardour and enthusiasm. The spread of Western education gave new light to the people. The result was an unprecedented efflorescence of the Indian intellect; and a quite a galaxy of men of the highest calibre in literature and arts as well as in sciences had come to be established in India. It was so particularly in Bengal. The resulting thirst and hunger for knowledge led the establishment of public libraries, though on a small scale, all over Bengal. Just out of sheer love for literature and reading, groups of people started these public libraries which were more or less of the nature of clubs. However, it is interesting to note that after the establishment of the Calcutta Public Library in 1836 a long time passed to build up more public libraries in Bengal (now West Bengal). Only in 1851 came Rajnarayan Basu Smriti Pathagar and that was not in Calcutta but in the district of Midnapur. The reason perhaps was that while Calcutta had a public library, these places though quite
populous and enlightened because of their nearness to Calcutta, had none. So the local initiative was prompt in meeting the felt want. After Midnapur, other districts also came forward to establish libraries for the use of the local people. They were the small public libraries which were opened mainly at the initiative of benevolent social leaders who looked at the problem from a philanthropic angle and subordinate to that of education. Some of these libraries managed to procure many important documents which were published in Bengali and a few other languages in India, and in addition to that informative as well as formative works of different types which they could procure from England also.

They were, of course, not public libraries in the full sense of the term. Founded in imitation of their Western counterparts, the use of these libraries was confined to mostly a thin upper layer of the society. Besides, they were subscription libraries open to members who were agreeable to pay subscription. They were called 'public' in the sense that they were not owned by individuals or government and were used by the public. Owing to apathy and the prevailing illiteracy the common people were not prepared to take advantage of these libraries.

All these social groups, organising and looking after the maintenance of library services rendered through some
disjoint units did not very much bother about the quantity and quality of services being rendered. They could not possibly imagine any extensive and intensive involvement of public library activities covering all facets of social life. The libraries during this period mostly depended for service, on voluntary workers, and for finance, on subscriptions received from members and donations received from wealthy patrons. There was no government help to begin with. The British Government then ruling the country showed its concern by giving small and often occasional doses of assistance but never took any concrete step for solution of the problem on a practical scientific basis though it had first hand experience of a law based public library system working in Britain itself. Perhaps their experience at home made their representatives here careful and apprehensive.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the library movement in Bengal got special impetus from the freedom movement of the country. The partition of Bengal (1904-5) created a great upsurge not only in Calcutta but all through Bengal. The leaders of the movement extolled the young men to imbibe the spirit of nationalism. Hundreds of libraries were established in villages and towns, mainly at the initiative of groups of young people who wanted to serve the cause of spreading the message of nationalism. In this way the motivation of the founders was somewhat different from
that of the people who had started the public subscription libraries of the nineteenth century. These founders were mostly young idealists. Very small beginning though, these tiny libraries had often only a very small collection of books - mostly books which invoked the growth of nationalism. Some of the young people who ran these libraries belonged to secret revolutionary parties; their financial resources were extremely limited; often, they were suspects in the eyes of the police. There are instances, where, from such small beginnings the tiny public libraries have grown from strength to strength and have been playing quite a major role in the cultural, social and educational life of the present day society.

In the second decades of the twentieth century pioneers of library movement in British Bengal became increasingly aware of the potential, role and need for organized libraries of all kinds. Their development and the introduction of acceptable standards were among the felt needs. This new awareness was generated through experience gained and lessons learned from the previous library history and from the ultimate fate of those libraries in Bengal. The stories of a score of proprietary circulating, public libraries also added to their experience and understanding. The time was ripe for starting a new phase in the organized library movement in Bengal. With the experience behind them, the leaders of the library movement in British Bengal also
realized that with a view to achieving professional objectives in librarianship, a stable forum for the library movement was essential. As a sequel to this Bengal Library Association (formerly All Bengal Library Association) was formed in 1925. With the establishment of the Association the root of an organized library movement in Bengal started gaining grounds. It changed the character of the library movement by converting it from a socio-philanthropic movement with limited capacity and outlook, to a scientific socio-professional movement for all round improvement of a very important component of the society. Henceforth the struggle for establishment and development of public library services was converted, more or less, into a struggle for library law. The pioneers of the library movement in Bengal realized that an important social component like public library can not be allowed to be set up and maintained depending on the good wishes of some individuals and groups. Only a sound library law can determine on an objective basis, the structure, function, management and finance of the public library system. In fact, since early thirties, the Bengal Library Association was striving hard to enact a public library law for Bengal. Ceaseless efforts to achieve this goal were made. Some more time elapsed and finally, the State of West Bengal became the fifth state in India with library law in the year 1979. This achievement came after a long struggle.
Although the founding of the Bengal Library Association was perhaps a little belated, the Association exerted as much influence as possible through its promotional activities, but success achieved little. Although Bengal by this time had a good number of public libraries, yet the concept of organized modern librarianship was slow to evolve. A low percentage of literacy was mainly responsible for the feeble link between the people and the libraries, resulting in minimum library motivation. However, in spite of partition of Bengal in 1947, the spark of the library movement was not lost altogether. The library movement in West Bengal continued through the Bengal Library Association.

In pre-independence days, no serious attention was given to education, particularly at the grass-root level by the British Government. On 15 August 1947, when India attained independence and with the promulgation of constitution as sovereign democratic Republic on 26 January 1950, only 15 percent of the total population of India could read and write. The Rural folk constituting 88 percent of the total population and scattered over half a million villages in an area of one and quarter million square miles was devoid of literacy.

After independence great strides were, therefore, made to understand and to grapple with the complex,
difficult but significant problems of education. But to embark upon a programme of education without assigning due place to the library in the educational set up sounded like staging Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. Therefore alongwith reformation of education, the library also started attracting attention both by the Central and the State Government. The public libraries in the State, which so long received only hindrance rather than help from the government, were given assistance. During the first and second Five Year Plans, the State Central Library and a District Library in every district of West Bengal were established by the initiative of the government. On a selective basis the government also started some subscription libraries to the sponsored category and went on giving them financial assistance for contingent expenditure and appointed librarians to look after such libraries. But all these were non-integrated independent units trying to maintain their unenviable existence, mostly as subscription libraries. There was no scientific plan for the expansion of the State's public library system. During the past three decades after independence the public libraries in West Bengal were functioning in a disjointed manner having no co-ordination and integration among them.

A real change was brought about with the situation when the Left Front Government came into power in the
State in 1977. It viewed the development of library services as a part of its programme for extension of mass education. Fulfilling one of the pledges of the election manifesto, it enacted the West Bengal Public Libraries Act in 1979 which was amended in 1982 and 1985. Consequent upon implementation of the Act a massive change was noticed with respect to the development of public libraries in West Bengal. Among the various activities of the government, mention may be made of: establishment of government sponsored public libraries in different districts, enhancement of budgetary allocation for library services, enhancement of maintenance grants to public libraries, organising book fairs at the state and district levels, special allocation for purchase of books for children, better pay and status for library personnel, etc. As a result, people at every corner of the State became at least aware of the existence of public library in their locality, running mostly from public ex-chequr.

In the ultimate analysis it may be stated that public library movement in West Bengal has had a chequered history and has shown appreciable strength in the face of heavy odds. The survey of the important events during the past two centuries is intended to bring out tremendous and continued efforts made by the lovers of books and libraries as a result of which progress has been made in the development
of the public library services in West Bengal. For further improvement and expansion of public library services in the State, the following suggestions deserve consideration:

1) The main objective of public library system is to provide free services to the people. The UNESCO declaration of Human Rights states that it is the birth right to every individual in the society to have free access to the results of human ingenuity exercise in the arts or sciences. Free access to accumulated and recorded knowledge not only helps the individual but also communities of the nation. If fundamental education is an essential pre-requisite of democracy, there is no reason to deny the same pride of place to public libraries. Therefore it is suggested that necessary steps should be taken by the Government to introduce free public library services in the State in fulfilment of the objectives of the public library system.

2) Public library service in a developing country like India should play a vital role in adult education programme. The public library can feed everybody intellectually throughout his life. This is equally true for educated and highly educated and perhaps more true for neo-literates. Public library service, adult education programme and
programmes for social and non-formal education should be brought under one umbrella with a view to initiating comprehensive programme for mass education. These interlinked functions are now carried out in the State in disjointed manner, resulting in wastage of money and manpower. This should be avoided.

3) The public libraries in the State are till now restricted to only lending and reading room services and the services are mostly confined to a section of the upper and middle classes of the society. It is unfortunate that even today there are a number of people living in the rural areas of West Bengal who do not use the public library. Library is a social organisation. It should reach all the people in the society. So efforts should be made to bring more and more people within the purview of public library services. The missionary zeal was evident in the early years of public library movement in the State and it has occasionally appeared during the past few years. If the libraries of the State are to become really public, in fact as well as in name, then they have to recapture the missionary spirit and engage in extension activity and the preaching of which can take libraries a long way towards their goal.

4) Modern times have witnessed an enormous increase in the media of mass communication like the radio, the television and the films. They have an easy access to the
eyes and ears of men. They serve as useful purpose in stimulating interest in a number of topics that add fulness and variety to individual life. The public libraries in West Bengal are yet to acquire audio-visual materials. Significantly, whatever meagre amount is allocated to public libraries in the State a big chunk of it is swallowed up by purchase of books and stationeries, leaving no amount for provision of acquisition of minimal educational equipment. Therefore, adequate attention has to be given to acquire such materials like the films, the radio, the television which may be particularly useful for non-formal education.

5) It is very much unfortunate that till date no public library in the State is declared to be under the provision of the West Bengal Public Libraries Act for want of Gazette Notification. It is of urgent need that Gazette Notification be made of the names of the sponsored public libraries to bring them under the purview of the West Bengal Public Libraries Act.

6) Though the amount of grant to each category of public library in the State has been increased after legislation, but in view of spiralling prices of the reading materials it is not sufficient enough at the present perspective. So further increase in the grant needs to be considered
Further it is suggested that quantum of assistance to be given to each public library in the State be decided after considering services rendered and actual requirements. Grants for purchase of books, periodicals, furniture etc. be increased every year considering the price hike, increase in number of documents, increasing population and demand of service. A non-recurring grant should also be provided for new library building, extension of existing building, purchase of equipment which are expensive and cannot be provided from the recurring budget, furniture and bookshelves and such other expensive items. Grants be released regularly at the beginning of the year and not at the fag end of the year.

7) Most of the public libraries in West Bengal have been running with extreme shortage of staff. For the last few years since legislation, hardly any noticeable increase in the staff has occurred. But, by this time number of documents, number of borrowers have increased noticeably. For getting the right service with optimum efficiency the necessity of more trained staff in the public libraries of the State requires immediate consideration. Staff requirement in each public library be decided depending on various factors such as the nature and pressure of work, number of daily issues/returns, membership strength, number of documents, rate of annual acquisition etc.
The human resource is the prime factor in a library. The financial, mechanical and operational aspects are important but all these resources will not be much productive if human resource is not properly organised and administered.

8) An individual public library has limited resources. But the collective resources of all the public libraries in the State is not altogether bad, rather impressive. Interlibrary co-operation programmes at the state and district levels should be undertaken for resource sharing among libraries.

Some of the old libraries in the State possess rare volumes which were not reprinted. These books should be collected and preserved in a central pool and may be circulated on demand.

9) The State being known for its tolerance, many linguistic groups coming from neighbouring states like Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh etc. have settled here and made West Bengal multi-lingual. Along with catering to the needs of the Bengali speaking people the public libraries in West Bengal should cater to the demands of other language groups also.

10) The West Bengal Public Libraries Act be immediately amended to ensure - a) more power to State Library Council, b) integrated network of libraries with full co-operation
among each other, c) clear mention of the functions of the State Central Library, keeping it at the apex of the public library system, d) declaring the post of Director of Library Services as strictly professional, e) more autonomy to Local Library Authority, f) specifying the duties and responsibilities of different category of public libraries and relations among them.

11) All the public libraries in the State must be kept open for 12 hours a day, if possible in both morning and afternoon sessions. No public library be kept closed on Sundays and on other public holidays.

12) In each public library in the State, children's section should be organised.

13) For binding and preservation of documents there must be separate units at district and state central library from which other public libraries in the State may get necessary help.

14) For improvement of quality of public library services, there is an urgent need to introduce in-service training programme for public library personnel for updating their knowledge and expertise in modern library techniques and also for improving their attitude towards library services.
15) A programme should be taken to produce literature for neo-literates and for persons educated upto school level. These books to be related to life and living of the common people. The State Central Library and the West Bengal Book Board should jointly look into the matter.

16) Selection of books for public libraries in the State must be related to such factors as the educational levels and the interests of the population served as well as the proportion of professionals, artisans, students and leisured class comprising library users.

17) In West Bengal most of the Secondary schools have no libraries. Recently the government has been initiating establishment of libraries in all such schools with more than 750 students. But the target has not yet been fulfilled. Until all the schools are provided with libraries, an arrangement of book distribution centre or book bank may be made through the nearest government sponsored library.

18) Standard of public library service of different categories of libraries should be formulated, keeping in view the present situation of the public libraries and achievable goals.
19) Library associations are essential to the development of library movement. Library associations tend to discharge their functions by holding conferences, seminars and meetings, by publishing journals, by holding lectures and conducting study circles, by publicity, by organizing short courses in librarianship and bringing out books on various aspects of library science. The government should encourage development of strong library associations in the State for further improvement and expansion of public libraries in the State.

20) Application of Information Technology in the organisation and services of libraries has brought a sea-change in the functioning of libraries in the last two decades. It has given us - a) new ways to store information compactly and cheaply, b) new mechanism to manipulate, scan and search records, and c) new facilities for cheap and rapid transmission for information over long distances.

Govt. of India has already made arrangement of INDOINET/NICNET for providing nodes in each and every district headquarter for processing of all government information. District Libraries are mostly situated in the district headquarters. The facility may be extended to each and every district library at a very little extra cost or no cost.
Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation should initiate a scheme for funding the public libraries going to install computers. Taking into account all the aforesaid suggestions, an integrated, balanced, far-sighted, flexible, comprehensive public library planning is an imperative necessary to improve the present situation.

The public library scene in West Bengal has changed considerably since legislation and is bound to change with the passage of time in response to the demands of the emerging situation. Let us hope that future movement would bring the desired change towards that direction.
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5. Subodh Kumar Mookerjee, Development of Libraries and Library Science in India, op. cit., p. 29.
