

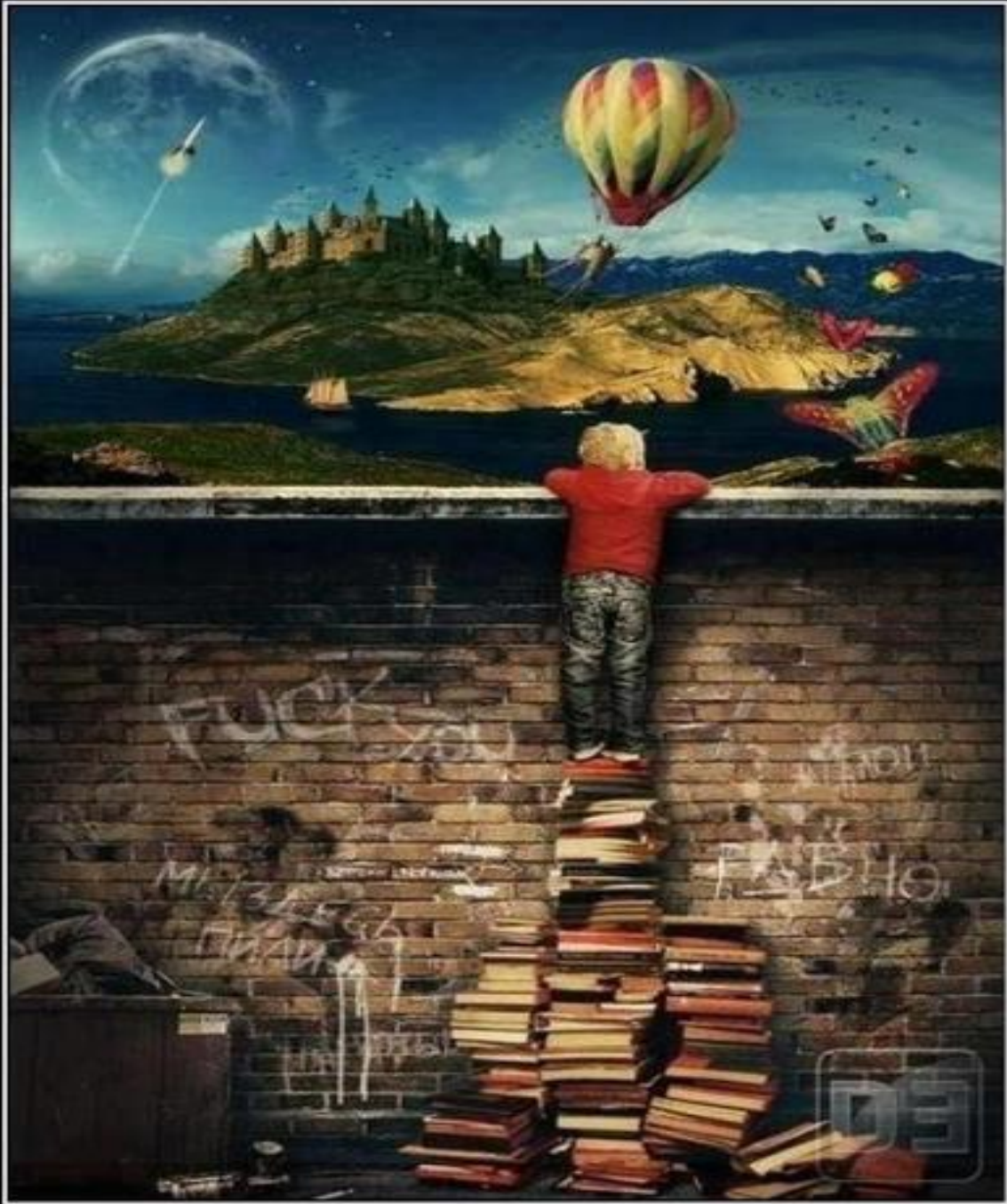
# Children's Libraries and Children's Section in Public Libraries

## Fellowship Report

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Jointly awarded by Sir Ratan Tata Trust and Tata Institute of  
Social Sciences



# Books

That is exactly how they work

## *What libraries have been...*

*"I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library."*

*- Jorge Luis Borges*

*"There are many little ways to enlarge your child's world. Love of books is the best of all."*

*- Jacqueline Kennedy*

*"There is more treasure in books than in all the pirate's loot on Treasure Island."*

*- Walt Disney*

*"People can lose their lives in a library. They ought to be warned."*

*- Saul Bellow*

*"Learning is like rowing upstream; not to advance is to drop back."*

*- Chinese proverb*

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## **Acknowledgements**

I have always wanted to work on children's reading, and have been attached to the idea of a library as a space for joyous experience and growth for children. The opportunity to work with libraries in my city on receiving this fellowship from Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT) in collaboration with Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) has been most rewarding. I am immensely grateful to SRTT and TISS for giving me this scope which has helped in shaping and reinforcing my willingness to work on children's reading and library programmes in future.

My sincere gratitude to Amrita Patwardhan and Swaha Sahoo for helping me, at every juncture of the study, by answering queries and with feedback. The final work would not have been possible if not for their patience and constant support.

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Lastly, I must take this opportunity to thank the strangers across Kolkata who helped me locate the libraries by giving instant directions. I am very obliged by their kindness.

## INTRODUCTION

The study on 'Children's Libraries and Children's Section in Public Libraries' has been undertaken to understand the situation of children's libraries in a specific geographical location. This report focuses on Kolkata. The aim was to consolidate information related to the present condition of libraries – infrastructure, books, role of the librarian, role of the library, members, and children's reading habits. In order to draft a policy plan for libraries in the country, the present situation needs to be closely studied. For this reason, Sir Ratan Tata Trust in collaboration with Tata Institute of Social Sciences have initiated this study in a few places across the country.

Libraries have always been associated with reading; reading books, newspapers, magazines and more. Although very similar, the role it plays in a child's life is also very different from that of the adults'. Ideally, a library acts as a body that exposes children to a larger world through books and activities, and in its efforts also supplements their education. However, this study reveals that most libraries evade their holistic role of contributing to a child's education, participatory reading, imagination, socialization and joyful experiences at large; instead they operate as a storehouse of books with occasional lending, and largely for preservation of old texts. Contrary to this are a few libraries, of which three have been considered as sample for this study, which attempt to deconstruct the conventional notion of a library by drafting a flexible or no policy, situating reading within an interactive framework, treating reading as a means to an end.

It emerged from this study that till a few decades ago, perhaps till early 1990s, libraries in Kolkata and also West Bengal at large played a far active role in shaping children's reading habits and their written language, much more than the present time. An agenda then was not only reading, but also to promote literacy and spread literature. In Bengal, a large section of children were familiar with the then Bengali writers and poets. The culture of purchasing books was much more compared to today, so was the trend of library membership.

While visiting the diverse sample of libraries, I noticed that groups of people who previously did not have access to the print world now have the opportunity. This is because of two reasons mainly – a) the civil society has taken an initiative to include marginalized sections in popular and ‘mainstream’ culture, and b) with the implementation of the Right to Education Act, 2009, which states library as a mandate in every school, the idea of reading and access to books is in the process of dissemination. Reading has been a practice of the elite. With high rate of illiteracy dominating the country, only a few had the privilege to read for leisure and also the means for access to books. But it was interesting to find through some libraries that the underprivileged groups, who are mostly first generation school goers, are being instrumental in the shift taking place in the approach to reading and the materials read. Ngo libraries have dedicated their time to include and spread reading to a larger social group. Their attempt to mitigate the gap between children who have access to reading materials and educational activities, and those who do not, is being successfully carried out. Saying this, there is also a large number of children who continue to remain away from this. In families where both parents go out to earn their daily wages, unless the library is in a near locality, it is difficult for them to be a part of the library regularly.

The libraries who are working towards changes in literacy and reading habits, with a very specific focus, tend to design programmes based on a general requirement for language learning and connecting reading with their daily experiences, and also consider the need of the children who are members. It has been seen while identifying libraries for the study and through interactions with librarians, that such library are much lesser in number as compared to public libraries.

## METHODOLOGY

For studying children's libraries and children's section in public libraries, I adopted two methods – a) library observation and b) interviews. Prior to this, developing the research questions was most essential. It was important to segregate quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study in order to articulate and focus on these distinct areas during field work. I chose to understand the libraries through perceptions of three groups of people – librarian, children and parents. As a tool, 3 different questionnaires were prepared for each group respectively. In addition to this, a framework for library observation was also designed.

### **a) Library Observation**

I allotted time before, in between and after interviews to observe the library. The focus of observation was to see the books and the overall library space, the number of children who came to the library, who brought them, the ways in which they utilized the library space, manner of selecting a book, how much time would children, on an average, spend in the library, and their interaction with the librarian and other staff members. Out of 10 libraries, it was possible to 'observe' only 5. This is because, barring the physical aspects, another objective was also to look at the ongoing dynamics of the library during its functioning hours; since not many children were present in some libraries during that time, I restricted my observation only to the books and the physical space. For the other libraries, data and information was obtained through interviews with the librarian. 2 of these 5 no longer run a children's library, and here I was keen on understanding what brought about this change.

The observation was recorded through hand written notes. In cases where a clarification was required, it was brought up during the interview with the librarian and/or the children.



## **b) Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with librarians, children and parents. A questionnaire for each group respectively was drafted. The interviews took place through a conversation and not through rounds of questions and answers. Aspects that were to be addressed for attaining information gradually snowballed through the conversation. Parts of it I recorded simultaneously in the questionnaire and the rest after the conversation. The objective of the interaction was to understand a general quality of the library and the role it plays in the child's life and education. The intention was to have the librarians speak about the present situation, juxtaposing it to an ideal situation; for the children, it was to understand why they choose to read what they do, and what made them decide on becoming a member of the library – a space that is not visited by the larger percentage of their peers; from parents it was important to know why they considered a library important amidst the pressures of school, tuition and co-curricular activities, and also their own experiences of libraries then and now. Interviewing 3 different groups helped gain clarification, and also acted as a cross check of information that were provided. The same questionnaires were used for all libraries, and it was interesting how public libraries and ngo libraries responded in different approaches.

The total number of librarians interviewed was 10, 6 children and 2 parents. Each interview lasted for around 30 to 45 minutes. Most conversations took place in Bengali, very few were bilingual and 2 were only in English. A few librarians were interested to read the questionnaire prior to the interview; this, I fathom, helped them attain a sense of the conversation that was to follow, enabling them to structure and respond with ease.

## **Limitations**

A strong limitation of the fieldwork has been that my library visits did not coincide with children's visits. This is because of the nature of the libraries – a few were non-thriving, and I did not find children even at the third visit, secondly, 2 were non-existing (even though the libraries no longer existed, the organization

still runs and have shifted their areas of focus) and ex-members were difficult to meet. Since there were almost no children, it was difficult finding parents too.

The sample size of 10 reflects a heterogeneous set of libraries. Although it is largely representative of the other libraries in the city, it does not take into count the top notch city libraries which are inhabited by a fairly large percentage of people. However, my efforts to include these libraries were in vain since these spaces would not entertain a survey. Also, there were plenty of libraries which did not have a children's section.

What surfaced mostly in the conversation with librarians in the public libraries was the role of the management. Perhaps a dialogue with the management would give the study a different dimension.

## CHAPTER 1 – The space and the people

*"The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more you learn, the more places you'll go."*

*- Dr. Seuss*

### The libraries

The libraries that I visited for field work represent the different categories of libraries in Kolkata. Of the 10 libraries visited, 2 are neighbourhood libraries, 2 institute libraries, 1 heritage library, 2 libraries run under private proprietorship, 3 ngo libraries of which 2 have closed down (even though the libraries have closed down, the organizations still operate. I spoke to them to understand why they decided to shut down, what socio-cultural/economic reasons brought about this change).

Category of Libraries	Names
<i>Neighbourhood Libraries</i>	1. Sharat Smriti Pathagar and 2. Vivekananda Pathagar
<i>Cultural Institute Library</i>	1. Ram Krishna Mission Children's Library 2. Sri Aurobindo Bhavan Children's Library
<i>Heritage Public Library</i>	1. Ram Mohan Library and Free Reading Room
<i>Private Proprietorship Library</i>	1. Lion's Club Children's Library 2. Eloor
<i>Civil Society Library</i>	1. Shikshamitra* 2. Service Center* 3. Mustard Seeds

\* - These organizations do not run the library any longer. Shikshamitra ran its library as a library school. They were compelled to close the library-school post the Education Act, 2009 and also since parents wanted an education for their children which resembled education at the other schools. I chose this library to understand how a library can act as a school and facilitate education through itself. For Service Center, the library shut down since children stopped coming and they were answerable to the funding agency. They were primarily a library of reference and information. However, the books still remain and are open as a resource to other organizations. I chose this library to understand how they operated with the agenda to disseminate only information through reference books and no fiction.

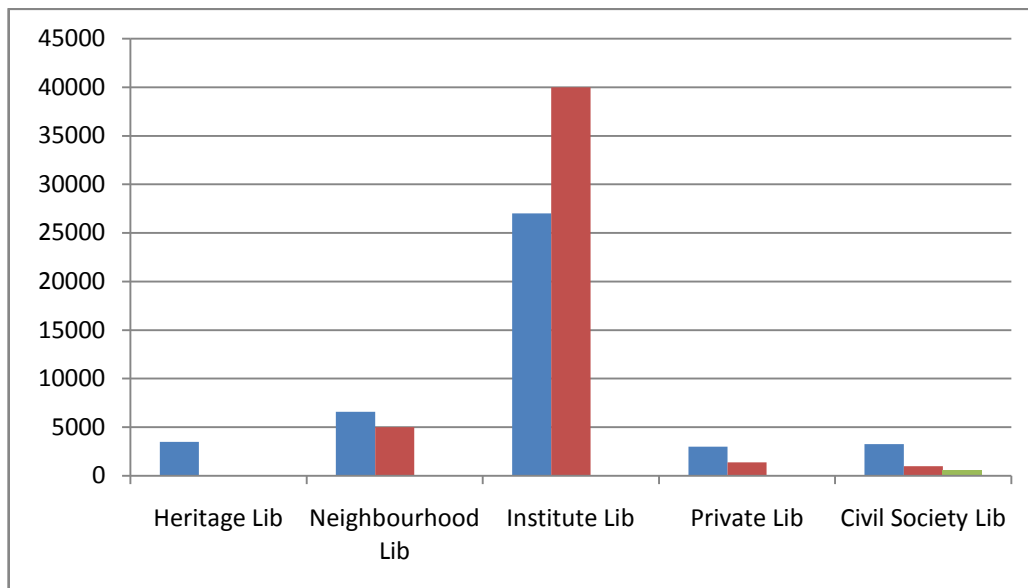
## **Establishment**

During colonial rule, the library culture found root in the city. The British and the intellectuals took initiative to set up space that would encourage people to engage with their culture and literary and political texts. In the 1940s, with consistent educational development and the coming of Bengal Secondary Education Bill, 1940, a large emphasis was laid to children's education, children's literature and reading gradually began to reach the mass. At this time, including books for children in the existing library spaces was decided upon. One such was Ram Mohan Library and Free Reading Room, which was established in 1904 but opened itself to children in 1940. This library was initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Sr. Nivedita, Prafulla Chandra Roy, Jagadish Basu, and Michael Madhusudan Dutta. Their agenda was also to ensure education for girls. With this, the library space flourished as a reading room, for lending, and also, a space where girls would meet and practice performing arts. It was a direct effort to expose women beyond only home and school. Gradually, libraries started mushrooming in various pockets of the city. These were neighbourhood or community libraries which catered only to people in the respective locality. They were established mainly by philanthropies and/or by charitable trusts. Each of these libraries began primarily as an adult library. For instance, in Sharat Smriti Pathagar, when parents came to borrow books, children also came along. The children's presence influenced the then President, which led to creating a separate reading space for children. Simultaneously, age old institutes like Ram Krishna Mission and Aurobindo Bhavan began children's library in addition to their adult library. These were funded by private entrepreneurs and also by the institutes' trusts. They required a nominal fee and a minimum membership charge as opposed to the government and community libraries. This marked a divide in the kinds of people who had access to the space. Also, it was only the middle and upper middle class of society who traveled a distance to access that particular library; mostly believers of the foundation. The private libraries, who were able to ensure and maintain funds, continue to flourish extensively even today. On the contrary, the heritage libraries, with a humble grant from the government are barely able to maintain their quality standards. The financial crises and the lack of dedicated network that would ensure donations and funding led to their downfall.

1980s and 90s saw the coming of civil society actively for the education system. The focus was largely 2 issues – a) to provide access to print world and other learning materials to those who are deprived of it, and b) to address issues of reading-writing, imagination and expression. For this, organizations with financial support from funding agencies established libraries. However, it was interesting to come across Mustard Seeds with almost no funds, run by librarian, Maura Hurley Basu, on a shoe string budget. Some libraries – Shikshamitra and Service Center, catered only to marginalized sections while others for children across city spaces and social positions. These libraries – Mustard Seeds, Shikshamitra, Service Center, are very flexible in terms of operation and contest the conventional notion of a ‘library’ where the focus is solely on lending and borrowing of books. While interacting with children, I found out that children who visited these libraries read differently and enjoyed the space much more than the public libraries libraries. Over time, libraries were set up across various parts of the city by private organizations with corporate funding and individual donations or under a proprietorship.

## Books

Graph 1 – Total number of books for children



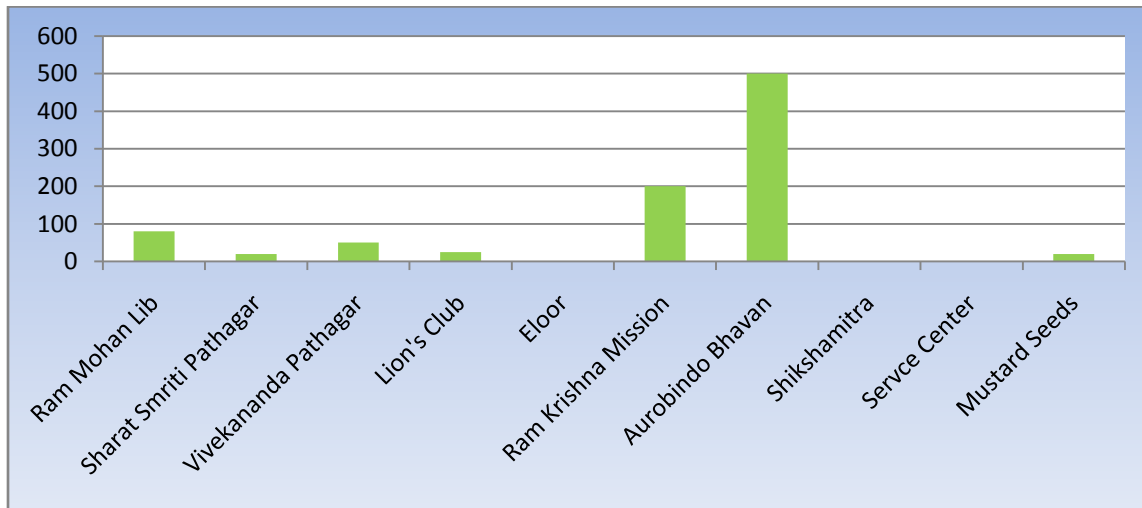
Most of the books in all libraries are donated. However, annual purchases are made as well. Interpreting the graph, we see that institute libraries have the maximum number of books. This is possibly for 2 reasons – they do not have paucity of funds since they are run by the well funded institute trusts, secondly, the devotees devote a very large number of books. For instance, in Aurobindo Bhavan children’s library, most books were donated by a devotee who then was the director of British Council Library. When the Council planned to give away its children’s books to make room for a fresh lot of reading material, it donated all of the 20,000 books to Aurobindo Children’s Library. Other libraries also have received books in large scales. But in the last 10 years, librarians claim that books are no longer donated in such great numbers; however, now they purchase books annually with an allotted amount of money. This is not the case with the cultural institute libraries or libraries that run as a private venture.

### **Book Arrangement**

The libraries are open shelved. In most cases they are categorized in alphabetical order according to author names. The shelves are not very high, most of them only 2 rows. But in the heritage and the neighbourhood libraries, since they are shelved in old racks, they are as high as the ceiling. Librarians here claim that they bring down the books for children. Ironically, there are not too many children who visit or borrow books from the library. Ram Mohan Library and Sharat Smriti Pathagar especially do not have children members. Regarding arrangement of books, Shikshamitra’s librarian, Mahua Dutta, made a very interesting point. She said that categorization of books and aesthetics cannot go together. There are libraries that shelve books according to its sizes and bindings – hard and soft. Such a categorization is an antithesis to honest grouping of books. However, I noticed that Shikshamitra’s book shelf does look very attractive despite honest categorization; the different categories of books are labeled in different colours.

## Members and Membership

Graph 1.1 – Total number of members



Members in 5 libraries are less than 100, out of which 3 have less than 50 members. The 2 institute libraries, which are most popular in the city have a large number of members who visit library regularly. Since the ngo libraries do not run any longer, there are no members; however, some of the old members do visit the organization frequently. Eloor does not have memberships for children. Here, children use their parents' membership card to borrow books.

10 out of 10 libraries said that the number of members have decreased drastically in the last 10 years, so much so that a few of them are on the threshold of shutting down. This is especially true for the neighbourhood libraries, and also for the heritage library which runs only as a historical asset. The 3 most thriving libraries are of the cultural institutes and 1 of the private proprietorship – Eloor. To these libraries, members come from far distances to access resources here. They are very centrally located and easily commutable by public transport. But children who are members here travel by public transport as well as private cars. In Ram Krishna Mission though, I noticed that many children belong to humble middle class families and are brought by parents, traveling by bus and autorickshaw. Largely, most libraries cater to neighbourhood children. I feel, since reading is gradually being pushed out of a child's schedule, in its attempt to retain it, parents are not willing to devote much time; which is the reason why

parents prefer to send children to libraries close by. Parents, who are absolutely determined to expose children to a library, compromise on the traveling time to ensure the 'best' library experience for their child.

In 4 out of 10 libraries, the members are in the age group of 10-14 years, in 2 libraries, between 6-10 years. In 1 library there are members around 4-5 years and in another between 14-18 years. Some libraries could not state the definite years, the librarians stated an approximate age group since no record of age is maintained. The members show gender uniformity.

The library fee for all libraries is extremely nominal. Some charge a deposit with no other library charges. The deposit is a very basic amount of around Rs.20 and 30. Some have no library deposit but a membership fee of Rs.25, with an annual fee of Rs.100. Highest of all is the library run by proprietor, where a deposit of Rs.1000 (refundable) is charged. Here there is no membership fee. One pays 10% of the cost of a book that is borrowed. This amount, however, is non-refundable. The lowest is charged by a community library with a monthly fee of Re.1 and a onetime refundable deposit of Rs.50.

## **Funding**

The libraries visited were a mix of government funded and privately run. The heritage library runs solely on government aid. They receive an annual grant of Rs.25,000 for books, magazines and binding. This grant is supplemented by the income generated from renting their auditorium. There is also a fund allotted for this library by the Central Government for library development, which unfortunately does not reach them on time. For one of the community libraries – Vivekananda Pathagar, the money is collected physically by the librarian, from the head office. There are 2 staff members who are appointed as government officials. The other staffs hold honorary post or receive a nominal amount from the library's self generated fund. The institute libraries are flushed with funds. They receive large donations from devotees who live across the world. The library fund is a portion from the institute fund. Also, one of them receives a small grant from the government for maintenance since the building is a heritage spot –



the birth place of Sri Aurobindo. The library run by the Lion's Club have members who donate money every year and sometimes books as well. Although they have no dearth of funds, they do not buy new books since children do not read much. This was said by librarian and agreed upon by the library coordinator present there. Here, most children come for the drawing and hand writing classes. Every year, mandatorily, in Lion's Club Children's Library, the walls, shelves and the furniture are painted in bright colours to make it attractive. The neighbourhood libraries receive a grant of Rs.13000 from the government, which is inclusive of the salary of the librarian and the assistant librarian. Eloor, the library that is run under a proprietorship has its funds generated from the membership and each book that is borrowed. 10% of the cost of the book is charged as reading fee. This amount is non-refundable. Also, in cases where the book is lost, the cost of the book has to be paid as a fine. Late fee is 1% of the cost of each book, per day is charged. The ngo libraries however run and used to run on grants received by donour agencies. One of them is run by the librarian herself.

### **Infrastructure**

The physical space of a library reveals much of its culture. The arrangement of books and furniture helps, in one way, categorize the library as conventional or unconventional. In 6 out of 10 libraries the books are shelved in archives with low chairs and tables around, for children to sit and read. The well funded children's libraries are visually very different from the other libraries. The walls are very colourful, with low tables and chairs painted in stark solid colours. Here, the décor renders an animated look to the libraries. The other libraries do not as such resemble an exclusive space for children. Mostly, books are stacked in wooden or iron shelves, where it is impossible for a child to access books in the higher shelf without a ladder or a tall person. The librarians said that books that are popularly read and frequently borrowed are shelved lower in the book racks. The racks and shelves ran across the room, dividing the larger part of the room by archives. However, an interesting parallel that came up while looking at the arrangement of shelves is that, in the ngo libraries, since much of the focus was on activities, the centre of

the room was mandatorily kept empty for children to sit and work; books were shelved in racks supported against the walls of the room. There was almost no furniture.

Library: Mustard Seeds



In one of the neighbourhood libraries, around 4,000 books were arranged in wooden and iron shelves from the floor to the ceiling. Since the 12ft by 10ft room was all that the library was, the books had to be so tightly arranged in the shelves, that it was quite a task to pull one book out. The difficulties here were manifolds – most books were bound in grey cloth, members referred to the catalogue to select a book after which the librarian would pull it out of the rack. Also, there was no provision of children accessing these shelves since there was a large table separating the members on one side, and books and librarian on the other side. With dearth of fund, space and members, this library operates as a space for neighbours and management committee to meet for brief talks.

Library: Sharat Smriti Pathagar



It was disappointing to find that none of the libraries were equipped to accommodate children with physical disabilities. The libraries did not have a ramp, neither was the arrangement of furniture congenial to easy movement for children with mobility difficulties. Since the idea of a library, as stated by most librarians, is to disseminate knowledge, information and learning experiences to children as wide as possible, the perception of 'children' and 'childhood' needs to be closely looked at. If libraries are denying access inadvertently to particular groups of children through a lapse in their infrastructure, then simultaneously, it is also depriving children of their right to recreation and learning. By not preparing itself for an inclusive atmosphere, the library keeps itself away from the range of educational/recreational spaces that parents could choose from for their children. In short, it submits to exclusiveness.

**TABLES – DETAILS OF THE LIBRARIES**

**Table 1 – Books**

Sr. No.	Library	Number	Language	Category
1	Sharat Smriti Pathagar	6,655	Bengali – 4,550 English – 2,105	Fiction
2	Vivekananda Pathagar	5,095	Bengali, English	Fiction and Non-fiction
3	Ram Krishna Mission Children's Library	27,000	English, Bengali, Hindi	Fiction and Non-fiction
4	Sri Aurobindo Bhavan Children's Library	40,000	English, Bengali, Hindi	Fiction and Non-fiction
5	Ram Mohan Library and Free Reading Room	3,500	Bengali, English	Fiction and Non-fiction
6	Lion's Club Children's Library	1,400	English, Bengali, Hindi	Fiction
7	Eloor	3,000	English	Fiction
8	Shikshamitra	3,266	English – 1,779 Bengali – 942 Hindi – 216	Fiction and Non-fiction
9	Service Center	-	English Bengali	Non-fiction
10	Mustard Seeds	Uncounted	English, Bengali, Japanese	Fiction and Non-fiction

**Table 2 – Lending and Borrowing**

Sr. No.	Library	Lending Period	Late fee (book per day)
1	Sharat Smriti Pathagar	15 days	50p.
2	Vivekananda Pathagar	10 days (timing flexible, on request)	25p.
3	Ram Krishna Mission Children's Library	15 days	50p.
4	Sri Aurobindo Bhavan Children's Library	28 days	Rs.3 (per week)
5	Ram Mohan Library and Free Reading Room	7 days	Re.1
6	Lion's Club Children's Library	7-10 days	No late fee
7	Eloor	14 days	1% of the cost of book
8	Shikshamitra	7 days	No late fee
9	Service Center	No lending	No late fee
10	Mustard Seeds	15-30 days	No late fee

**Table 3 – Members**

Sr. No.	Library	Number	Age group (of max. members)	Language groups
1	Sharat Smriti Pathagar	20 (14 come)	14-18	Bengali
2	Vivekananda Pathagar	50	10-14	Bengali
3	Ram Krishna Mission Children's Library	200	10-14	Bengali, English, Hindi
4	Sri Aurobindo Bhavan Children's Library	728 (600 are regular)	6-10	Bengali, English, Hindi

5	Ram Mohan Library and Free Reading Room	80	10-14	Bengali
6	Lion's Club Children's Library	25	10-14	Hindi
7	Eloor	Children borrow using parents cards	Not recorded	English, Hindi, Bengali
8	Shikshamitra	25	6-18	Bengali, Hindi
9	Service Center	No definite number	6-18	Bengali
10	Mustard Seeds	20	10-14	Bengali

**Table 4 – Librarian**

Sr. No.	Library	Number	Qualification	Prof. Training
1	Sharat Smriti Pathagar	1	HS	No
2	Vivekananda Pathagar	1	MA	B.Lib.
3	Ram Krishna Mission Children's Library	2 (Interviewed 1)	MA	No
4	Sri Aurobindo Bhavan Children's Library	2 (Interviewed 1)	MA	B.Lib., and USIS library training programme
5	Ram Mohan Library and Free Reading Room	1	BA	No
6	Lion's Club Children's Library	1	BA	No
7	Eloor	2	M.Com.	No

8	Shikshamitra	1	M.Sc.	M.Lib and Information Sc.
9	Service Center	1	BA	B.Lib.
10	Mustard Seeds	1	BA	No

**Table 5 – Facilities**

Sr. No.	Library	Drinking Water	Toilet	Ramp/Lift
1	Sharat Smriti Pathagar	No	No	No
2	Vivekananda Pathagar	No	Yes	No
3	Ram Krishna Mission Children's Library	Yes	Yes	No
4	Sri Aurobindo Bhavan Children's Library	Yes	Yes	Not required since the lib is on the ground floor, and almost leveled with the courtyard.
5	Ram Mohan Library and Free Reading Room	Yes	Yes	No
6	Lion's Club Children's Library	Yes	Yes	No
7	Eloor	Yes	Yes	No
8	Shikshamitra	Yes	Yes	No
9	Service Center	Yes	Yes	No
10	Mustard Seeds	Yes	Yes	No

**Table 6 – Fees**

Sr. No.	Library	Membership	Deposit	Monthly	Funding
1	Sharat Smriti Pathagar	Rs.58/-	Rs.30/-	Rs.15/-	Donations
2	Vivekananda Pathagar	Nil	Rs.50/-	Re.1/-	Govt. aid – Rs.40,000/- per year. Youth Club – Rs. 14,000/- and donations
3	Ram Krishna Mission Children’s Library	6-11yrs: Rs.72/- 12-15yrs: Rs.92/-	Nil	6-11yrs: Rs.20/- 12-15yrs: Rs.30/-	Govt. and RKM Trust (details are not known to the librarian)
4	Sri Aurobindo Bhavan Children’s Library	Rs.125/-	Nil	Rs.100/- (annually)	Govt., trust and donations (details are not known to the librarian)
5	Ram Mohan Library and Free Reading Room	Nil	Nil	Nil	Govt. aid and donations
6	Lion’s Club Children’s Library	Rs.100/-	Nil	Rs.25/- (charged quarterly)	Trust and donations



7	Eloor	Nil	Rs.1,000/-	Charged on each book borrowed – 10% of the cost of book	Proprietor
8	Shikshamitra	Nil	Nil	Rs.30/-	Private
9	Service Center	Nil	Nil	Nil	Private
10	Mustard Seeds	Nil	Nil	Nil	Private

## CHAPTER 2 – Library beyond the space

*Reading makes immigrants of us all.*

*It takes us away from home, but,*

*More important, it finds homes for us everywhere.*

*- Jean Rhys*

### Children, Books and Activities

Librarians said that children enjoyed reading detective stories the most. This was common in groups who read Bengali as well as English. There are plenty of authors from the Bengali canon who wrote detective stories. They are still top favourites of children in the age group of 10 to 14 years. Those who face difficulty in reading Bengali read the English translations. However, in libraries which had younger members, fairy tales and fantasy fiction were more popular, with children who are between 5 to 7 years. Harry Potter was a hit in both language groups. In the top libraries, children borrowed only English books, and libraries did not make any efforts to help children read their mother tongue. I was very surprised to see, that in the Lion's Club Children's Library, the Bengali books were pushed to the extreme shelf in the corner, with a huge table in front of it. They created a physical barrier assuming that no children would ever wish to borrow Bengali books. The libraries passively submitted to the domination of English over all indigenous languages. But in the community, heritage and ngo libraries, children read mostly Bengali books, with some English readings as well. Children from the middle and lower-middle, and lower class come to these libraries respectively. I feel, the higher one is in the class ladder, the aspiration for English as a means to 'modernization' is much greater. This is not to say that there is no desire for English learning in other classes of society. English is considered essential now in order to 'shine' in life. Also, most children in the upper-middle class attend private schools where English is the first language as well as the medium of instruction. They are so successfully taken away from knowing their mother tongue that a child said, "Bengali is so tough and disgusting!" It was rather shocking to hear that it was 'disgusting'. So great is the dislike! Contrary to this, I came across a more humble approach to

English. A mother told me that she sent her son to the library to expose him to English texts. Her son is an avid reader and reads only Bengali books at home. The family is unable to purchase English books since they are more expensive, while Bengali books are affordable and also a part of the family book shelf that has been added to over generations. Since parents now feel that their child should learn English equally well, they bring him to the library.

*Lion's Club Children's Library: The Bengali and Hindi bookshelves are the last two towards the wall, to which easy access is obstructed by the table.*



Almost all librarians of public libraries were unhappy with the fact that children no longer read classics, very few read novels but most read comics. Reading comics seem to be a problem for them since, they feel, it curbs children's imagination and are not considered to be literary work; it only exposes children to a world of fantasy. Another reason why the librarians feel children like reading comics is because it is an easy read which is less time consuming and does not entail much thought. They felt concerned that children would ruin their language abilities if they continued to read comics. I would have empathized with them on another note, if they considered the poor print quality of some comic books and small sized letters which is damaging for a child's eyesight. Stigmatizing comic books by a librarian reflects the lack of knowledge of the place popular reading holds today. Also, acknowledging the value of comics. As we well know, Tintin, Asterix, the Amar Chitra Katha series, Batman, Superman, Spiderman, Archies and more have been loved by children over the last couple of generations and considered an equal to readings of other kinds. Thus, libraries could utilize children's reading comics to supplement their reading, with activities, which would lead them to reading other related texts.

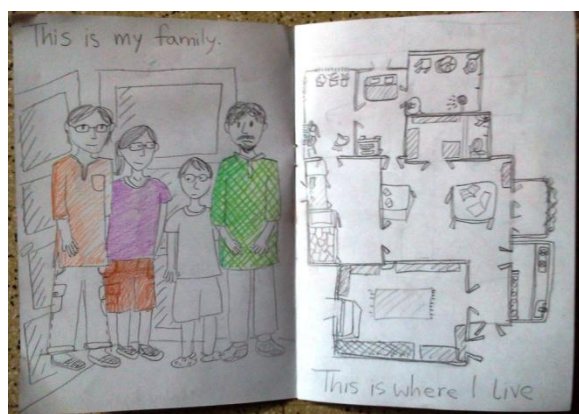
Most libraries do not have regular, structured activities to supplement children's reading. Most of them mainly focus on lending books and annual programmes like cultural shows, drawing competition, essay competition and puppet shows. In the library run by the club, regular classes on drawing (not art) and handwriting are conducted. Children have to separately enroll for these classes. The librarian said that these classes were scheduled to bring children to the library. Reading and books were not enough, hence the extra classes on drawing and handwriting were set up in order to continue the library and its grant. The classes were extremely dull with no peer interaction. Also, it seemed that the teacher was least interested in her task. There was no thought or any learning that was taking place here. Children were copying an art work in the drawing class and copying from a printed text in their handwriting class. Some of these children are not members of the library, but come for the classes. There are hardly a few who borrow books. As opposed to this, 2 of the ngo libraries focused on activities and art work. They consider a library to be the means of an end and not an end by itself and feel that it is a space where "the seeker and the sought meet".

One of the librarians, Sudeshna Sinha, of Shikshamitra said, a library "is a space where sharing of information takes place. Book is not the only resource here. It is a place where one learns to create new knowledge with one's experience and the acquired knowledge. It must help the child to spill over this knowledge to other spaces this space has the potential to substitute a school. A library has more things than a regular classroom, it is more flexible. Also, more economical for the children since library provides much of what one needs, whereas in school the children have to buy." Activities are immensely important in a library. They help locate the place of reading and all that reading intends to do. In short, it facilitates children's thought and imagination and provides another dimension to their learning.

## Children at the drawing class in the library run by the Lion's Club



Activity: Making a book on one's world, at Mustard Seeds.



### Access

It would be quite incomplete to look at a library without understanding who the library stands for. Access to a library would imply the liberty of a child to approach and be a part of the space in the way many other children are. For a child and a family to know of the existence of such an opportunity, a library is responsible for taking the initiative to publicize itself. The distinct publicity programmes or the lack of it reveals the kinds of children a library intends to include.

The libraries that I visited do not publicize themselves by any means. There are no attempts to include more children or other kinds of children. Since the institute libraries are most well known and are the top children's libraries in the city, it is a desire of parents whose children read or who want to inculcate the habit of reading in their children, to enroll their child to these libraries. This is true for the second tier libraries which are run by clubs and on proprietorship. This brings focus to two aspects. One, like most aspired places in a city, these libraries too are known to only a particular section of society, primarily the middle and upper middle. Despite the membership and library fees being very nominal, children from the lower socio-economic classes are not able to access. Children from different parts of the city come to these libraries. Most are either brought by parents or in their private cars, some walk. Given that traveling to the library needs adult assistance, it is difficult in cases where both parents work and who do not own a car to bring children here. Secondly, the libraries do not publicize themselves to include children belonging to the lower socio-economic groups who live around the area. It is assumed that these libraries are for 'good' families. A librarian said that including other groups of children would distort the quality of the library since children from the poor families, according to her, would not handle books properly or behave appropriately in the library space.

Families with first generation school goers may not understand the role of reading in a child's life, in which case, they certainly have no desire to send children to a library. Here, the role of school is important. If the school compels private tuition, much of the time is then spent in doing homework and other tasks for school. In ngo school-libraries, where programmes are subject oriented and based on library and art work, it becomes most interesting for children, so much so that they wish to spend time beyond school hours in the school itself. In situations like this, the library is a mammoth exposure to a greater world, which otherwise the children would not have had access to. The library held meaning to the children's lives so much that despite the organization school-library closing down, an ex-student has set up a library on his own in a community center, on every Saturday afternoon. Plenty of children from the community look forward to this time of the week. Ironically, children of the libraries are not very excited about their libraries or reading. Thus, it can be said, that when access is provided in a way that is

conducive to children's needs and development, quality outreach of books, imagination and a larger world is certainly ensured.

An interesting observation was that, one of the institute libraries has provision for parents to borrow books for their children. I noticed that mothers who are housewives come to the library in the evening to issue books. I saw 2 of them sit at a table and discuss *The Jungle Book* and *The Little Prince* for a very long time. In one of their interaction with the librarian, it was clear that this was her first encounter with *The Jungle Book*. This was confirmed in my conversation with her. She said that she was very grateful to the library for allowing parents to borrow books for children. Although her child prescribes the book she wants, it gives the mother an opportunity to leaf through many other books and most importantly, come to the library which she had never before in her life. It was wonderful to see how the library provides a larger access in a way to parent groups, especially mothers whose lives revolve around domesticity.

## CONCLUSION: A Few More Findings...

- It has been told by all librarians that children hardly find time to read books for leisure after completing homework, tuition and lessons for recreation – singing, dancing, art, cricket and more. Library or reading, unfortunately, is not given adequate importance as a recreational activity by children and parents. One reason for this is the immense overload in the school curriculum which takes most of children's time after school hours.
- A parent shared that many children do not complete the book they start to read. They return a book unfinished. According to parents and librarians, children lose interest in the book half way. This could be because they lose the thread since they do not find enough time to engage with the book everyday. In most cases, comics are much preferable by the children.
- The market has provided material that gives immediate entertainment to children as opposed to a journey through a two hundred page novel. In the changing world, an electronic gadget is far more attractive to the child than a book. None-the-less, I was happy to find three children whose responses deviated from this. They found reading much more enjoyable. But it is to be noted that these children did not have a computer at home, neither do they possess a mobile phones, also, they do not have access to video games and play stations.
- It is also interesting to see how receptivity of a book is promoted by the market and media publicity. Harry Potter has uniformly been a favourite for children in 8 out of 10 libraries. Librarians said that children who usually read Bengali have made an effort to read the Harry Potter series.
- Children from low socio-economic groups, who have had the opportunity to engage with reading in ways that middle and upper-middle class children have not, have a different approach to texts and the willingness to know. Children at Shikshamitra who had the exposure to books and reading consider it as an exposure to a larger world, while children who belong to the same socio-economic group and have not had the opportunity to engage with texts do not enjoy reading at all.



This could possibly lead to the conclusion that it is the responsibility of the adults – parents or teachers or librarians to help a child find him/her through reading. A child's choices are thus determined on his/her experiences which are facilitated by the adults.

- An interesting aspect that I noticed in one of the libraries is that in the room which shelved books on romance, like Mills and Boons and Sweet Valleys, had a large rectangular mirror. The mirror was placed on the top shelf, in an angle, at the topmost corner of the room. It was strategically placed in a way that the reflection of the room could be seen from outside the door. While wondering what the mirror was for, I assumed it could be to see the books in the topmost shelf, through reflection. On asking the librarian, she said that the mirror was kept there to check on couples so that they do not use the library space for physical intimacy. Also, a check so that no books were stolen. The mirror was present only in this particular room and no other. This was the most shocking and amusing experience for me during the study.

#### **Limitations:**

A limitation of this study is that I have not been able to consider libraries like The British Council and The American Embassy Library which are very popular among a large number of city children. There are plenty of schools who suggest the British Council library to children. It was disheartening to not have been granted permission to interact with the librarian and children for the study. It was also slightly disappointing that my visit to most libraries did not coincide with the children's visits; I would have liked to speak to children in each library.

It emerged from conversations with librarians that the school curriculum plays a large role in controlling children's time after school hours – one of the reasons why children are unable to make time for reading. Understanding the school's perspective regarding this situation possibly could have helped in looking at libraries in context to education. Perhaps a second phase of this study could be to study the place of libraries in schools and the schools' treatment to children's reading.

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