POLICY BRIEF

**Key Findings from the Study “**Public Library Services for Children – Case Study of 10 Public Libraries in Mumbai and Rural Konkan”

**Introduction**

As part of its elementary education portfolio, Sir Ratan Tata Trust’s Publication Initiative, branded ‘Parag’, focuses on publication and dissemination of children’s literature in Indian languages. Recognizing the need for creating avenues and spaces for children to access quality children’s literature, the Trust has supported running of classroom, school or community based libraries with a range of partners. However, due to lack of primary data on the status of public libraries for children in India, it was difficult to provide inputs into programme planning of the Parag initiative, which aims to engage with all kinds of library spaces including public libraries. Lack of data on public libraries and children’s section particularly, has also been faced by the National Mission on Libraries (NLM), a body constituted by the Government of India to look into the current status of libraries in India and recommend measures for improving and strengthening libraries.

The Trust had commissioned a case study that critically evaluates the role and functioning of children’s sections of 10 public libraries, seven in Mumbai and three in rural Konkan, in providing access to quality children’s literature and advocating reading and knowledge dissemination among children from diverse backgrounds. All 10 libraries were studied through observations and in-depth interviews with library staff and management. The study attempts to answer several questions including the infrastructure available, kind of children coming into public libraries, their reading habits and preferences, the available book selection and the role of public libraries in the context of thousands of first generation learners accessing school education. This policy brief summarizes major findings from the study. The research adds to the existing literature on children’s libraries in India and also provides important inputs for the NLM as it tries to rejuvenate the public library system in India.

**Key Findings**

**Profile and Membership**

* Of the 10 libraries surveyed, seven were public non-profit. Two were private non-profit and one was private for profit. It was observed that the privately run libraries were better equipped with adequate seating arrangement, drinking water, toilets and other facilities such as an online catalogue. In urban Mumbai, all the four public libraries funded by the government were struggling for space and adequate display of its children’s literature collection. In rural Konkan however, the public libraries had managed to get sufficient space with help from the community in different ways.
* Membership at the three private libraries totalled 1,150, while the seven public libraries together had around 1,000 members, ranging from 60 to a maximum of 300. Amongst public libraries, the rural libraries in Malgaon and Shiroda had adequate membership in terms of coverage area. However, all others were struggling to get children to come to the libraries.
* A majority of members of the three private libraries came from a high income group. Even when the membership fee was low, as was the case with most of the public libraries in Mumbai, the members were mostly from a middle class, literate background. Few children from lower socio-economic backgrounds accessed the public libraries in Mumbai. The exceptions were the libraries in Konkan which were accessed by children from the neighbouring government schools and villages.

**Table I: A snapshot of membership vs. number of books across the 10 libraries**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Library** | **Membership** | **Books**  | **Type** |
| MCubed Library, Bandra | 850 | 6,500 | Private non-profit |
| Vohu Monu Children's Library, Churchgate | 300 | 9,000 | Private non-profit |
| Manikrao Kirtane Vachanalaya, Vashi | 81 | 3,000 | Public non-profit |
| Swatantryaveer Sawarkar Vachanalaya, Thane | 63 | 660 | Public non-profit |
| Just Books clc, Nerul | Around 800 | 3,557 | Private for profit |
| Mahim Sarwajanik Vachanalaya  | 230 | 6,666 | Public non-profit |
| Town Library, Vashi | 150 | Around 4,000 | Public non-profit |
| Kailaswasi Pradhyapak Uday Ramakant Khanolkar Wachan Mandir, Malgaon | 293 | Around 3,000 | Public non-profit |
| Natt Vachanalaya, Banda | 60 | 4,000 | Public non-profit |
| R. G. Khatkhate Granthalaya, Shiroda | 136 | 4,062 | Public non-profit |

**Book Selection and Reading Preference**

* In the three privately managed libraries, a majority of books were in English. In three of the public libraries in Mumbai, there was a good mix of English and Marathi selection. The exception was the library in Thane which had only Marathi books. In the three rural libraries, Marathi children’s literature dominated, with a few English books.
* In Mumbai, the public libraries that kept a large collection of Marathi books were struggling to find readers as children preferred English literature. Thus, new additions to the library now comprise mostly English books.

*At MCubed Library, the fewer Marathi and Hindi books are kept at the reception to display them prominently and encourage children to pick them up. The library also organized a Hindi-week and an author meet with a Marathi poet to encourage children’s interest in regional language literature. However, interest of children has remained low.*

* A difference in the selection of books was also found. The public libraries had a wider selection of genres including moral stories, fairy tales and magic tales, small biographies for children, general knowledge, science books, poems, stories, novels and mythologies. In the three private libraries, majority of books were in the category of fiction.
* Foreign authors dominated the English literature collection, in both private and public libraries. While Enid Blyton and Roald Dhal were found in almost all libraries, few books by contemporary Indian authors, especially for primary school children, were found. In the young adult section, authors such as Sudha Murthy, Chetan Bhagat, R. K. Narayan and Ruskin Bond were found in some libraries. Indian publishers bringing out Western classics and series were also generously represented.
* For Marathi literature, several classical authors and poets were represented across the libraries and genres included biographies, fiction, old classics translated from different languages, mythology, science, general knowledge and poems. However, contemporary Marathi literature and authors were absent from the collection.

**Outreach Activities**

* Seven of the 10 libraries surveyed conducted some outreach activities, although the frequency and quality of activities conducted varied a lot. It was observed that libraries that had a high membership implemented planned set of activities around reading and books.
* There is limited understanding amongst the library management and librarians on conducting activities keeping in mind the development needs and interests of children. Therefore, while several libraries conducted annual competitions such as elocution, essay writing and poetry writing, these had failed to attract children or result in an increase in membership.
* Only the three rural libraries showed significant collaborations with neighbourhood schools, where teachers used the libraries for ideas and suggested books for the library collection. Children also used the libraries regularly for project work. No collaboration with schools was seen in any of the urban libraries.

**Human Resource**

* Five out of 10 librarians interviewed had done a course in library science. However, there was no correlation between the qualification received and the librarian’s understanding of children’s literature and needs. While librarians were familiar with the children coming to the libraries and knew most of them well, they were not aware of the latest publications and authors, or the books preferred by children.
* None of the 10 librarians had attended any workshops or capacity building courses related to children’s libraries, literature or development needs. They were not aware if any such courses existed.
* A majority of librarians did not participate actively in the selection of books for the library.

**Recommendations**

While a majority of the libraries surveyed has a large collection of books and basic infrastructure, they are struggling to get membership and make the library an active space for children. With small but significant changes, these libraries can make themselves more relevant to both the curricular and extracurricular needs of children and young adults. Some recommendations are:

**On Membership**

* A majority of libraries cater to children from literate backgrounds whose parents want them to read. Libraries need to reach out to first generation learners or children from underprivileged backgrounds. Outreach initiatives such as collaborating with NGOs, government schools and community will help in attracting children who are not currently accessing the library.
* Few of the libraries in the study (none of the public libraries) had books or space suitable for very young children. Interactions with books at a young age in the presence of a parent or a guardian can help literacy development and can foster an interest in reading. Services for toddlers, pre-school and primary school children will go a long way in increasing and sustaining membership.
* Integrating technology by installing computers and providing children access to the Internet and other digital resources has a huge potential to attract more members.

**On Material Selection**

* Libraries could institute a book selection committee or refer to recommended book lists brought out by agencies such as the NCERT, CBSE and reputed literary websites and magazines. Most of the book selection is done through references from publishers, retailers etc. Libraries could come out with criteria for selecting books emphasizing aspects such as quality of writing, story, illustration, context and multiculturalism.
* Widen the base of publishers, authors and illustrators to include contemporary books that reflect today’s society and children. Several Indian publishers have come out with books rooted in Indian context and have tried to address issues which children in India are likely to confront.
* Buy new editions of Marathi books and source books by contemporary Marathi authors along with the older books. Prominently displaying regional language books, arranging interactions with authors and poets, and building regular and sustained programmes around Marathi books can revive children’s interest in regional language literature.

**Extension Activities**

* Conduct interactive programmes around books such as book clubs, author-reader meets and children’s festivals and story-telling that attracts and engages children and encourages them to read.
* Target pre-primary children through early literacy activities such as summer reading and writing workshops, games and plays around building vocabulary etc. This will enable children to gain literacy and reading skills and get them interested in reading early in life
* Collaborate with neighbouring schools as was seen in the case of the rural libraries in Konkan. This will increase membership and usage and enable the libraries to cater to the needs of the school curriculum such as non-fiction books and summer projects for students.

**Human Resource**

* Organise workshops and courses that introduce librarians and library staff to the importance of developing a reading culture in children, train them in conducting activities around books and conduct exposure visits to dynamic children’s libraries
* Provide budget for librarians/library staff to attend book fairs, children’s literature festivals and encourage participation in other such forums

**About the Fellow**

Ms. Abha Basargekar has completed her M.A. in Education (Elementary) from TISS in 2013. She is working as an Academic Associate with the Rural Education Centre of Rishi Valley Education Resource (RIVER) in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. Her work involves developing support tools for the teachers, material review and development, and supporting the teachers in the classrooms. She is interested in learning about the ways children learn and how their learning can be supported.

**About the Fellowship**

This Fellowship was awarded jointly under two initiatives of the Trusts under Elementary Education, Parag and Nurturing Education as a Discipline (NED). The Parag initiative of the Trusts supports the development and dissemination and active use of children’s literature in Indian languages. Under NED, the Trusts focus on creating a cadre of professionals specializing in elementary education and knowledge building to inform action and policy. Under the NED portfolio, as part of Trust’s partnership with TISS (2012-16) for the MA Education programme the Trust is supporting five fellows every year to undertake a short term action research studies on various aspects pertaining to elementary education. Fellowships are expected to build capacity of young professionals and contribute to developing knowledge for the sector.

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