Public library as a catalyst for sustainable development: a case study

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The paper discusses the activities of the Valapattanam Grama Panchayat Library, a public library of Kannur District, Kerala. Through observation, meeting with the librarian and library committee and study of library records, data were collected. We found that the Valapattanam Grama Panchayat Library is playing an important role in the lives of the local population. People of Valapattanam including children, youth, parents, and senior citizens love to spend time in the library for reading, recreation, learning etc. Other public libraries can gainfully emulate the Valapattanam GP library, customising it wherever required to suite their own community situations and cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Public libraries; Sustainable development; UN 2030 agenda; Valapattanam GP Library

Introduction

During the corona-induced lockdowns of various types ranging from complete and general lockdown to area-specific restrictions on movement, the Public Library of Valapattanam in Kannur District of Kerala was in the limelight, especially on the social media, for its various community-oriented programmes on its virtual platform. It's mainly because of the guidance of Local Self Government (LSG) Board and Library committee member its librarian for almost fifteen years. A population that is more than 78 per cent Muslim, it was reported, was living life in a new way not bounded by socio-religious boundaries, thanks to the library's initiatives. The initiative of this public library exemplifies that a library lives up to its true calling when it energises a population to read and generate new knowledge by which social transformation occurs.

Rendered curious by these developments and reports about them, it was decided to make a case study of the Valapattanam Library in its role as a catalyst for sustainable development and libraries' ideals. The author made an on-the-spot survey of the library, met with the librarian and other stakeholders like the various related associations, and observed the Valapattanam Public Library's working. The author was also able to study and evaluate the yearly reports of the library.

Public library and sustainable development

The public library system is an institution found all over the world. Every country has its public library system. As they function in different contexts and cultures, there are bound to be differences in how they are operated but tend to have similar general characteristics. It assures space for each and every member of the society as it functions on the democratic principle of 'for the people, by the people and of the people'. The UNESCO/IFLA Public Library manifesto clearly states that the public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides an essential condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making, and cultural development of the individual and

social groups.[1]

Outside the formal educational settings, one of the most significant possibilities for an adult to carry on with her/his education is to be associated with the local public library. For this same reason, public libraries are also called 'people's university.[2] Public libraries have a wider impact on society's development. It mainly functions as the free public gateway to intellectual wealth, which boosts the general public's intellectual activities. Public libraries can help people overcome the barrier of information gap, knowledge gap, and the digital divide. Ken Williment has rightly observed in his foreword to a book "Managing cultural change in public libraries: Max, Maslow and Management" that:

While extreme wealth is constantly celebrated, we are ironically once again living in a period that Dickens referred to as "it was the best of the times; it was the worst of the times" a few are leading the good

life, while most people, daily, experience a tremendous amount of pressure trying to make ends meet.[3]

The gap between the haves and have-nots is always a hindrance to sustainable development. The most quoted definition for sustainable development stresses the valid concern for the future generations while meeting the present-day needs.[4]

In 2015, the UN proposed a sustainable development agenda for the world, known as the 'UN 2030 agenda'. It is a universal call for action to fight against poverty, to protect the planet and to ensure that everyone, everywhere, enjoys peace and prosperity and that no one is left behind in the process. UN 2030 agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. IFLA, a stakeholder actively involved in preparing the UN 2030 agenda was able to include the areas like access to information, safeguarding cultural heritage, universal literacy, and access to information and communication technologies (ICT) in the framework. These areas are closely knit to the library, and libraries are the key institutions to achieve these goals.[5] IFLA has even provided a manual for the librarians to how to share the libraries' unique stories.

Changes in the public library's mode of services rests on the public library's founding principles, and it will remain unchanged in the years ahead. The library will continue to contribute to the individual's development and remain a vital link in society's future knowledge.[6]

To help people keep pace with the cultural and technological changes, the librarian will have to make conscious and continuous efforts. Awareness and orientation programmes, assistance for the people to address the social situations and conditions which result from cultural and technological changes can influence people and their lives on the road to sustainable development. The library can become a catalyst in making the actual and necessary social change and minimising the impact of social inequality.

Public libraries in Kerala

With 8182 libraries affiliated to Kerala State Library Council (KSLC), Kerala is reported to be 'the State having the largest number of per capita rural libraries' in India.[7] On an average, there are eight libraries in every Grama panchayath (Village council). This is so even when the Government funding to public libraries in Kerala was reported to be minimal when compared to private individuals' voluntary efforts.[8]

When books and reading habit began to reach the common man in the 18th century in Kerala, a couple of libraries were started. The Kerala State Central Library is the first public library in India, established in 1829 during the reign of His Highness Sree Swathi Thirunal Maharaja of Travancore.[9]

During the second, third and fourth decades of the 20th century, various social and political movements emerged. Some social reform movements were national; there was a rapid growth of political consciousness, accompanied by formation of communal organisations. The country was aspiring for a responsible people's government, which gave rise to political parties. Against the background of such developments in the country, libraries began to grow and multiply. This, in turn, gave birth to the library movement in the country.[10]

There are four distinct stages for the library movement in Kerala.[11] They are:

1. The early beginnings (1829 to 1945)
2. The developing stage (1945 to 1977)
3. The problem facing the stage (1977 to 1994)
4. 21st Century Stage (1994 until today)

Before forming the present Kerala state, its area was governed by Travancore, Cochin and Malabar States. There were independent library movements in all these three states from the beginning of the 20th century. In 1931, the All Kerala Library Committee was formed. Thrissur, the cultural capital of Kerala, was the headquarters. Subsequently, the All Kerala Library Meet was organised in the same year. The resolutions passed in the meeting depict the enthusiasm and conviction of the Library Committee's activists. One of the most important resolutions was to put pressure to start at least 6000 libraries in Kerala's villages. They also created a quarterly magazine *Grandhaviharam* in the same year.

Even before the three political divisions of Kerala (i.e., Malabar, Cochin and Travancore) were united to form the State of Kerala in 1956, independent library movements had begun in all three areas. However, after the formation of the Malayalam-speaking State of Kerala, it was thought that a central governing system for the entire State Library Movement was necessary. Thus in 1958, the State Library Council (*Kerala Grandhashala Sangham*) came into being. It was taken as a deliberate action from the government to undermine the democratic character of The Kerala State Library Council (KSLC). Soon enough, public

resistance to prevent such a move took shape. With the passing of the Public Libraries Act of 1989, the popular democratic character of the library movement was restored.[7]

The Kerala State Library Council (KSLC), an autonomous body under the Higher Education Department of the Government of Kerala, is the statutory apex body of public libraries in Kerala. As per the Public Library Act 1989, a three-tier system is followed for the public libraries' administration in Kerala: The State Library Council, the District Library Councils and the Taluk Library Councils. KSLC has a very democratic set up. 'For the people, by the people and among the people' policy is practised for electing the council members. The system assures strong participation of people in the Public Library movement in Kerala. The involvement of people at the grassroots is also ensured.[12]

Valapattanam Grama panchayath (GP) Area and library

Valapattanam is a small town in the Kannur District of Kerala, situated 7 km north of Kannur. It is the smallest panchayath in Kerala with an area of 2.04 sqr. km. According to the 2011 census (which is the latest available), there are 7955 people in the panchayath in 1329 families. Valapattanam Grama panchayath is a Muslim majority panchayath with a 78.2% Muslim population. Also, around 700 migrant labourers are living and working in the village. The area is industrial, with practically no agricultural land in the village. However, many of the families maintain rooftop agriculture which in fact is encouraged by the panchayath library.

The library was established on 05th November 1950 with the financial support of Rs. 400/- funded by T.M. Ramaswamy, the then Deputy Director of Municipal Councils and Local Boards. The library got a full-time librarian in 1970, and it became one of the 70 libraries having full-time librarians in Kerala. Data on library resources for years 2017, 2018 and 2019 are given in Table 1.

Valapattanam GP library is a one-person library. The present librarian has been there for the last 15 years. As narrated by the librarian, when he joined the Valapattanam GP Library, the library just had two users, one being a child. In fact, there was no specific place for the library. There was no librarian for five years prior to his joining.

The librarian prevailed on the panchayat authorities about the library's importance and, as a result, was allotted a specific place for a library adjacent to the veterinary hospital functioning in the panchayath office building. The librarian visited all the schools in the vicinity, seeking co-operation, promoting the library, and inculcating reading habits among the students and the youth. He began to conduct reading weak celebrations and various competitions for the students. In the year 2009, the library started coaching for the competitive examinations, and a student from the I[st] batch secured 16th Rank in the Kerala Public Service Examination.

When we look back at the success story of the present Valapattanam Grama panchayath library, one can notice a slow but steady growth.

The major milestones of the library are:

➢ In 2014-15, the library received the "Aksharajwla Award" of the Kerala State Library Council.

➢ In 2017-18, the library was selected as the best library under Kannur Taluk.

➢ In 2018-19, Binoy Mathew, the librarian was selected for the 'Best Young Librarian Award" by the Kerala Academic Library Association.

➢ During the COVID-19 pandemic, when libraries were shut down, many libraries introduced various novel initiatives to join hands with the Government, health workers, and NGOs to help people in the times of COVID-19. IFLA website makes a mention of the COVID-19 efforts made by the Valapattanam GP Library https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries#closures.[13]

It is found from the library's Annual Reports for the years 2017, 2018 and 2019 that there are five different forums run by the library, viz., Children's Forum, Women's Forum, Youth forum, Elders' Forum and Cultural Forum

The formation of various forums makes sure that different needs of different groups of the population are taken care of. All the other platforms are well structured with elected leaders and animators. The forums gather in the library at least once a week and plan various activities.

Table 1 — Library statistics			
	2017	2018	2019
Members	897	967	1200
Total Book Collection	10130	10683	12134
CD/DVD	311	311	311
Newspapers	10	11	11
Periodicals	22	22	22

Children's Forum

The formation of the Children's Forum is with the idea that today's children are tomorrow's citizens and leaders. They are encouraged to conduct various programmes. They run about 25-30 different educational and cultural programs every year. These programmes also strengthen the bond between the children and the library as they grow into adulthood.

Every year during the summer holidays, the Children's Forum organise a set of well-structured and well-planned activities. The Children's Forum has sub-committees like programme committee, media and publicity committee, report and documentation committee, and little librarian's committee. During the summer holiday activities, some programmes put the children in touch with nature.

Besides the summer holiday activities, the Children's Forum also commemorates important historical days like Hiroshima Day (06 August), Independence Day (15 August), Republic Day (26 January), World Environmental Day (05 June), Gandhi Jayanthi (02 October), Reading Day (20 June) and others.

To attract children to love reading, all the children are given a diary each, in which they are asked to write or draw their experience of reading a book. In the year 2019, 198 children have been given such diaries. The resource team of the library checks the diaries, and the best presentation is awarded. The project was started in the year 2018.

Since 2016, it is the members of the children's forum who select and purchase books for the children's collection from book festivals. Panchayat provided a fund of Rs. 2,00,000 (Two lakhs only) for the innovative project of 'walk with a mentor', where professionals from different walks of life interacted with the children. Dr. B Santhosh, Junior Administrative Medical Officer; Dr. P.M. Sidharthan, ISRO former senior scientist and science writer, Vijayakumar Blathur, Science writer and zoological researcher; Dr. T.K. Anilkumar, Psychologist; Jayasree E.S, Handicraft maker and teacher; Dr. K.T. Baburaj, Writer, Sahithya Academy Award Winer; and Arjun Pandian IAS, Assistant Collector, Kannur were some of the eminent personalities who interacted with the children. So far, 15 such programs have been conducted.

Women's Forum

One of the library's activities is the 'Parental School', where women are given expert classes on varied topics. The library's firm belief is that knowledge sharing, experience sharing, and training make women more self-confident. With this broader aim in mind, the Women's Forum conducts about five to ten programmes for the women of Valapattanam. They also celebrate cultural events during festivals like Onam, New Year's Day, and other events. Because women are active members of the library, they also encourage their children to become active participants.

Youth Forum

While forming the Youth Forum, the library's conviction is, 'Youth is the nation's powerhouse. And the Library must build a creative as well as a socially responsible youth.' The library is striving to materialise this conviction through various group activities and proper guidance. The forum members take up various social projects like river cleaning, cleaning the children's park, flood relief activities and other activities according to the hour's need. They also conduct Seminars and one-day programmes on various topics, including mental health and career-related topics like GST. On average, Youth Forum conducts three to five such seminars, all of which have good participation.

Elders' Forum

Life expectancy in Kerala has been showing an upward trend since 1950. The expected lifetime at birth in Kerala has is 74.9 years.[14] This comes, however, with a serious problem of loneliness of the aged.

Valapattanam GP regards the senior citizens with respect and creates a space for them to spend their time in a friendly and relaxed manner in the library. The Forum conducts various dialogue sessions on the law regarding health protection of the aged, topics related to various developmental projects of the elderly and creative ageing, to name just a few. Anyone visiting the library can see aged people engaged in reading newspapers, periodicals and books.

Cultural Forum

There are several writers in the panchayat. The cultural forum conducts about five to ten different activities in a year. Important personalities from various fields are invited to share their life experiences and deliver lectures.

Besides the programmes conducted by the various Forums for the different age groups, the library conducts some general programmes. On average, the library conducts 10 to 15 such programmes, including competitions, quiz programs, seminars and other celebrations.

Library as an extended place of study

During the public examination of the secondary school leaving students and higher secondary school leaving students, the library remains open until midnight, with mentors and resource persons available to clarify their doubts and prepare for the examinations. This is a great help for those students who suffer from a lack of a conducive learning environment or need some expert assistance to help them study better. Many students use this facility, as it gives them the freedom to study in small groups. Qualified youth and well-wishers of the library extend their valuable service for this purpose.

Library as a coaching centre for competitive examinations

Another thrust area of the library activities is the coaching given to youngsters for competitive examinations. As mentioned earlier, in 2009, the library started coaching for the competitive examination and secured 16th Rank in the Kerala Public Service Examination from its very Ist batch. Many candidates from outside the panchayat area too make use of this opportunity.

In 2010, the library received accolades for this project in the "Green Kerala Express Reality Show" conducted by Doordarshan. Tables 2 gives an idea of the number of beneficiaries of the coaching project for three years, and Table 3 summarises the various activities of the library.

Table 2 — Beneficiaries of the PSC coaching project

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Number of classes given	39	33	52
Number of candidates placed in government services	11	10	11
Number of resource persons	14	10	19
Number of candidates availed of the service	1516	1712	1938

Table 3 — Consolidated summary of the activities of the library

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Total number of activities conducted	55	54	42
Total number of attended various activities including PSC coaching	3938	3700	3875

Library during emergencies

Kerala experienced a devastating flood in 2018, which affected all the districts. It was the worst flood in Kerala in a century. Over 483 people died. About a million people were evacuated. According to the Kerala Government, one-sixth of the Kerala population was directly affected. The Indian government declared it a Level 3 Calamity, or "calamity of a severe nature. The estimated property damage was 400 billion rupees (US$ 5.6 billion).

The whole of Kerala and Keralites all over the world rose to the need of the situation. Kerala survived and returned to everyday life fast due to the united work and assistance from various quarters. Help poured in the form of financial, physical, and mental support. Valapattanam GP library also contributed its share. The Youth Forum of the library collected dresses, sanitary items, 100 kg of rice, buckets, cups, plates, and other vessels and handed them over to the Assistant Collector of Kannur. Some of the children donated their pocket money to the Chief Minister's Flood Relief Fund.

In the year 2019, too, Kerala had to face a flood during the monsoon. If we compare it with the previous year's flood, it was less severe. However, in 2019, the Kannur district was affected more seriously than that of the year 2018. The Youth of the Valapattanam collected Rs. 31,000/- (Rs. Thirty One Thousand only) and food, clothing, sanitary items, bed sheets, and other things handed over to the Disaster Management Cell of Kannur District.

Library in social media

Valapattanam GP library has WhatsApp groups for the different forums of the library. Altogether there are more than 600 members. The Library also has a blog (https://valapattanamgplibrary.blogspot.com/) and a Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/library.vpm/about).

During the Covid-induced lockdown, the library is engaging its children on the online platform with various activities. The platform called 'Creative Home' is divided into seven groups, and each group is given a name. Each group has a mentor to provide them with instructions and guidance. They get opportunities to listen to various experts from all over the world through this online platform. They are guided to make videos of multiple assignments they are given, like craft making, birdwatching and poetry recital.

Fig. 1 — Media reporting of the library activities

An interesting competition they were given was to make origami. Each team must come up with a script. The actors of the play are the origamis. As the members of the group are in different places, they had to coordinate everything online. The best video was awarded.

Complete lockdown started in Kerala on 31.03.2020. In April 2020, Valapattanam GP Library conducted 18 different programs, assignments, and competitions for the children. The best and exciting part of this program is that not only children, but the youth and parents too became active participants, helping and encouraging the children. All the activities are well documented in the BlogSpot of the Library. In May 2020, there were nine programs, and in June 2020, 3 programs. It is worthwhile to mention that the friends of the 'Creative Home' planted 500 saplings on 05th June, World Environment Day.

From 01st June 2020, online classes began in the State. 'Creative Home' friends are helping each other. The higher-class students clear the doubts of the younger ones, all online. The Library took the initiative to make sure that all the students can attend the online classes. For that purpose, the children's forum funded to provide cable TV connection to three students. The library was able to provide a TV set to three houses. Two students were given a smartphone each. Also, nine students were given facilities in the library itself to attend their classes online. These efforts got the attention of the media (Fig.1)

The other thrust areas of the library activities are anti-drug activities and energy conservation-related activities. At present library is undergoing an infrastructural change evolving to a 'green library – digital library', which is being funded from the MLA (Member of Local Assembly) Fund to the tune of Rs. 34 lakhs.

Conclusion

The study leads us to the conclusion that the public libraries, which are the gateways to the accumulated knowledge, have the great potential as well as responsibility to stand for the sustainable development of the society at large. There are 8182 village/panchayat libraries affiliated to Kerala State Library Council in Kerala. If all these libraries and librarians take up the sole mission of sustainable development as declared by the UN 2030 agenda, and strive hard to attain these goals and objectives, it can enable sustainable development of the society. Valapattanam GP library shines as a role model for all Public Libraries. Other Public Libraries can profitably emulate the working strategy of Valapattanam GP library, customising it wherever required to suite their own community situations and cultural backgrounds. The Valapattanam GP library may not be the only library providing such excellent services. More research on public libraries is required to strengthen the public libraries in the country.

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