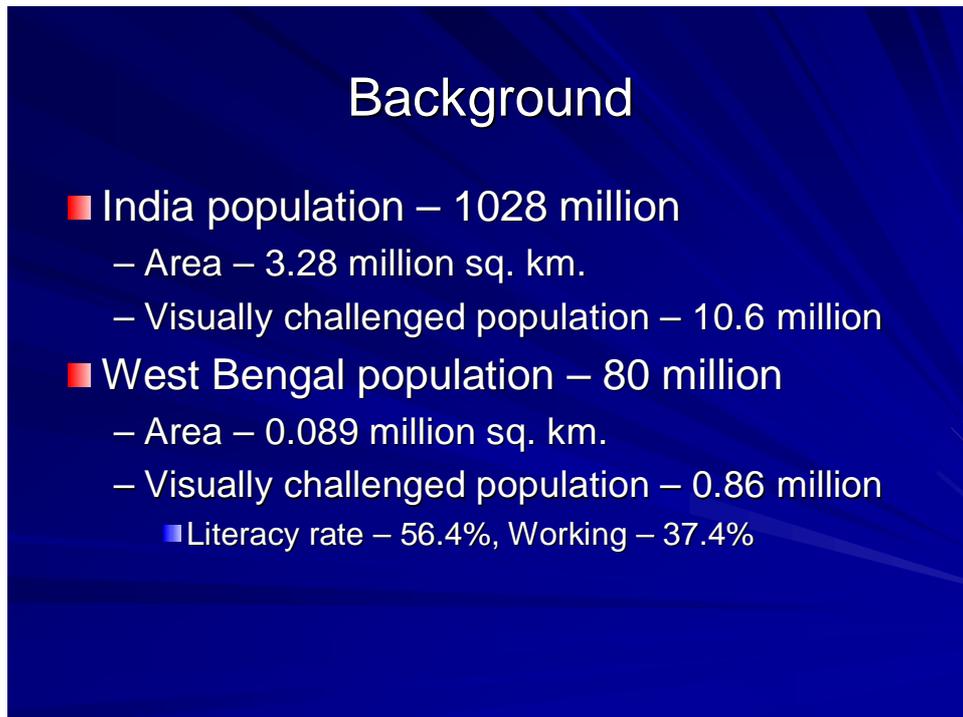


	<p style="text-align: right;">Date : 08/06/2007</p> <p>Development Oriented Library Services for the Visually Challenged in West Bengal, India</p> <p>Ratna Bandyopadhyay University of Calcutta Calcutta, India</p>
<p>Meeting:</p>	<p>156 Libraries for the Blind with Libraries for Children and Young Adults</p>
<p>Simultaneous Interpretation:</p>	<p>No</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 73RD IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL</i> 19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla73/index.htm</p>	

Abstract

The state of West Bengal in India has libraries in schools for the visually challenged as well as public libraries providing special services for them. These libraries cater to the basic needs of their education. In a developing and multi-lingual country like India, it is important, for visually challenged children, to be offered appropriate vocational training opportunities according to local needs and in their native languages. In this paper we discuss in detail the present services for the visually challenged provided by the different libraries in West Bengal and focus on the innovative development oriented services offered. We also give suggestions on how these services may be enhanced and made more effective.

Background



Background

- India population – 1028 million
 - Area – 3.28 million sq. km.
 - Visually challenged population – 10.6 million
- West Bengal population – 80 million
 - Area – 0.089 million sq. km.
 - Visually challenged population – 0.86 million
 - Literacy rate – 56.4%, Working – 37.4%

India is the second most populated country in the world with over 1 billion people spread over an area of 3.28 million square km. Its visually challenged population is over 10 million which is the population of some countries. Of these only 49.8% are literate and 39.9% are working, whereas of the total population of India 64.8% are literate. The state of West Bengal (WB) in India has a population of 80 million spread over an area of about 89,000 square km. Its visually challenged population is about 0.86 million and of these only 56.4% are literate and 37.4% are working whereas of the total population of WB 68.6% are literate. [5,18]

It is estimated that there are about 6 million children worldwide with a disabling visual impairment and of these 80% or 4.8 million live in developing countries. “On an average less than 10% of these children currently have access to education. This means that there are an estimated 4.4 million preschool and school aged children who live without access to a basic human right...” [4]

It is indeed a challenging task to provide educational facilities to this large number of visually challenged persons in both West Bengal and the entire country. In a developing and multi-lingual country like India, there are some specific issues that need to be addressed. For instance a general education is not enough for a person to assure him of earning his livelihood. So it is important, for visually challenged children, to be offered appropriate vocational training opportunities according to local needs and in their native languages so that they may be economically independent. Many libraries in West Bengal are providing services to meet the basic educational needs of the visually challenged and also providing development oriented services for them to become economically independent. We will discuss what services are being offered now and how much more can be done.

Libraries for the visually challenged in West Bengal

Libraries for the Visually Challenged in West Bengal

- School libraries of schools only for the visually challenged
- School libraries of schools for the physically handicapped including visually challenged
- Some public libraries
- Some college and university libraries
- Other libraries by NGOs

Calcutta Blind School was the first school meant only for the visually challenged to be set up in West Bengal. It was established in 1894 and it has a school library providing a range of services to its students [3]. Since then many more schools have come up in West Bengal with special facilities for the visually challenged. Their libraries as well as other libraries are providing various services to the visually challenged. These libraries may be categorized as follows:

- School libraries of schools only for the visually challenged (e.g. Lighthouse for the Blind, Calcutta and Naihati Apex Blind School, North 24 Parganas both Government (Govt.) sponsored and Mary Scott Home for the Blind, Darjeeling and Divine Fellowship and Institute for the Blind, South 24 Parganas both Govt. recognized) [23]
- School libraries of schools for the physically handicapped including visually challenged (e.g. Ananda Bhavan Deaf and Blind School, Howrah and Baidyapur Bikash Bharati Pratibandhi Kalyan Kendra, Burdwan both Govt. sponsored and Shelter, Hooghly and Vikrapool Netaji Club School for the Disabled, Cooch Behar both Govt. recognized) [23]
- Some public libraries (e.g. State Central Library, Calcutta)
- Some college and university libraries (e.g. Jadavpur University, Jadavpur and Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta)
- Other libraries by NGOs (e.g. Welfare Society for the Blind, Calcutta and Jibananda Sevashram, Midnapur)

We have selected the examples given above from different districts of WB to indicate that the services are spread out almost uniformly across the state. There are about 50 special schools spread over 18 districts in WB. [23]

All of them have their own libraries contributing greatly to the development of their students. Also nowadays visually challenged students are increasingly enrolling themselves in general schools, colleges and universities and availing of the inclusive educational facilities available. So the libraries of these mainstream institutes and organizations are also providing some basic services to the visually challenged.

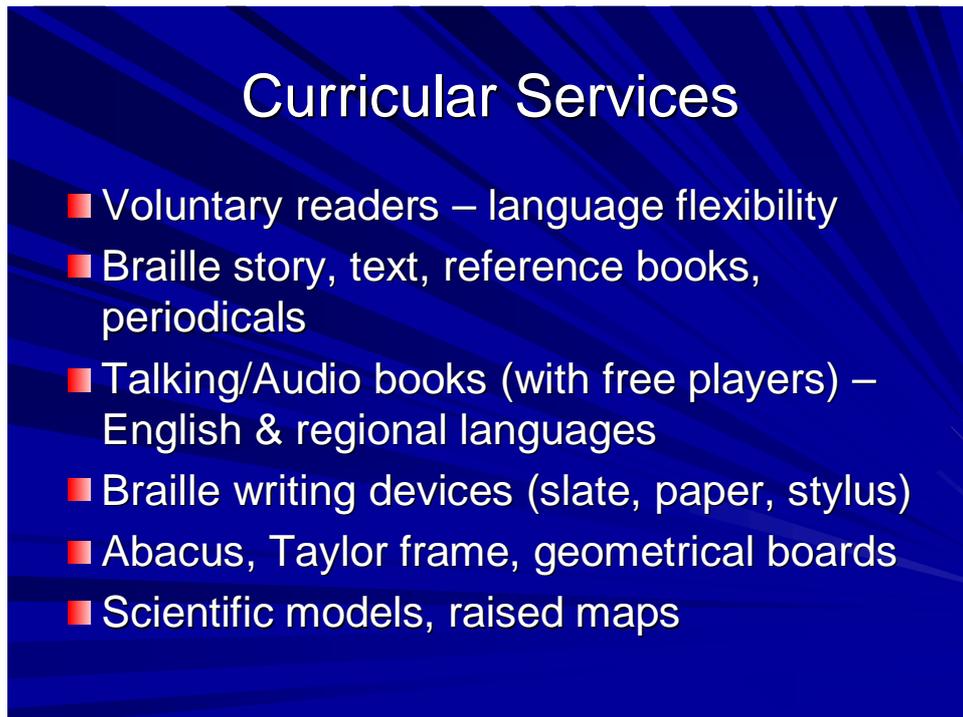
Current Services



At present, a variety of services are being provided by the different libraries in West Bengal catering to the visually challenged. The services may be categorized as follows:

- Curricular services to meet the basic needs of their education;
- Vocation oriented services which helps them in getting trained in different vocations to help them earn their livelihood;
- Personal development services to help in their all-round development to enable them to become confident citizens.

The vocation oriented services of the libraries are the ones that will help the visually challenged most to become self-sufficient. It is these programmes that need to be emphasized so that the development of the visually challenged can be a sustainable process. We have given more stress on these vocation-oriented services and treated them under four separate sub-categories: traditional, local industry, scientific agriculture and computer oriented.

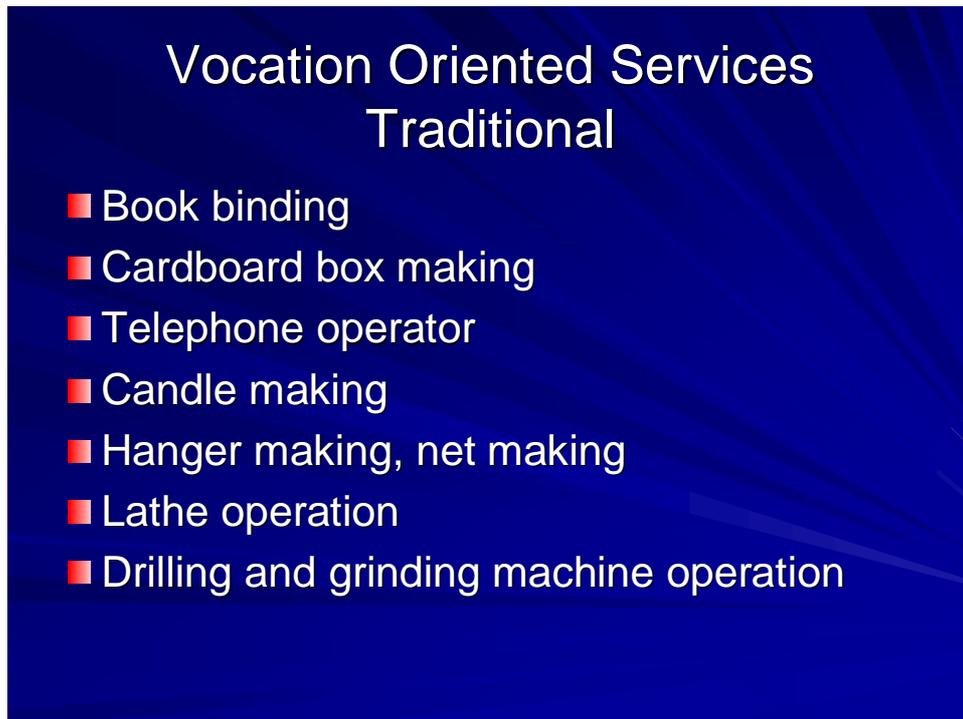


Currently, all these libraries offer at least the basic service of providing voluntary human readers to read aloud the printed books to the visually challenged users. This has the advantage of reading from books both in English and in regional languages according to the languages known by the reader. While this is a simple service to introduce it is not sustainable in the long run as volunteers become difficult to find. All the libraries associated with schools for the visually challenged (physically handicapped) offer Braille story and text books. Some of them also offer Braille reference books and periodicals.

Talking/Audio books are in English as well as the native languages. Most of the above school libraries offer these. NGO libraries like Voice of World [15,17] and some public libraries also offer talking/audio books. Many of them including The State Central Library (with the collaboration of an NGO Society for the Visually Handicapped) have a section to prepare talking books [1]. Some libraries like RK Mission Blind Boys' Academy [14] and Lighthouse for the Blind also give a free player to the users to listen to the audio books.

Again most of these school libraries offer Braille writing devices like Braille slate, paper and stylus. They also provide raised maps for geography, Abacus, Taylor frame and geometrical boards for mathematics and scientific models for physics and chemistry.

Vocation Oriented Services Traditional



Libraries for the visually challenged give emphasis to vocational training and offer these courses. Often the librarians and other library staff are themselves trained to teach some of the vocational courses and at other times they arrange for the courses. They also help in getting employment or assignments from the industry on these areas for their current and previous students. These courses covering some traditional employment areas include the following:

- Book binding
- Cardboard box making
- Telephone operator
- Candle making
- Hanger making
- Net making
- Lathe operation
- Drilling and grinding machine operation

Local Industry



They also focus on vocation courses based on the need of the local industry and organizations as these offer better opportunities for the self-employment and earning prospects of the students. These courses include the following:

- Handloom
- Caning of chairs
- Coir mat making
- Spice grinding
- Incense stick making
- Bidi making
- Chalk pencil

Most of these are based on raw materials available locally and so important to the local industry.

Scientific Agricultural Training

Scientific agricultural training

- Crop cultivation – paddy, wheat
- Vegetable gardening
- Horticulture
- Floriculture
- Poultry, goat, cow keeping

Many of the schools are in rural areas and have to cater to the needs of their students. They take the responsibility of arranging courses in scientific agricultural training which are needed in community based development programmes and they include the following:

- Crop cultivation – paddy, wheat
- Vegetable gardening
- Horticulture
- Floriculture
- Poultry, goat, cow keeping

Computer Oriented Vocational Services

Computer Oriented Vocational Services

- Internet and email access with audio software (e.g. JAWS)
- Computer awareness (in collaboration with Webel Mediatronics)
- Braille technology (Sparsha software supporting Indian languages, reverse transliteration)
- Regional Braille press

In West Bengal, Webel Mediatronics, has taken the lead in developing computer awareness courses for the visually challenged. They have also marketed software (Bharati Braille Transliteration System and Sparsha, both developed in Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, WB) for converting text documents in English and other regional languages into Braille. Sparsha software also supports several Indian languages, normal keyboards with audio feedback and reverse transliteration that can convert a coded Braille file into printed text. [6] Many schools for the visually challenged have conducted courses on computer awareness and Braille technology in collaboration with Webel Mediatronics. R.K. Mission Blind Boys' Academy also runs a Braille press in several regional languages (e.g. Assamese, Oriya, Bengali, Sanskrit, etc.) to meet the needs of special libraries in Eastern India. Libraries also offer courses on Internet and Email as well as offer these services with the help of audio software (e.g. JAWS) to their visually challenged users.

Personal Development Services



They also focus on courses and activities for the personal development of the visually challenged students. These help in building their confidence and in their all-round development so that they can be productive and self-sufficient individuals. These courses and activities include the following:

- Swimming
- Sports and athletic competitions
- Music teaching
- Teaching spoken English
- Literary competitions
- Career counseling
- Preparing for competitive examinations

National Policy

National Policy

- Persons with Disability (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995
- National Institute of Visually Handicapped, Dehradun since 1979

There is a national policy for the visually challenged in India which resulted in the Persons with Disability (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 [11]. Also the National Institute of Visually Handicapped, Dehradun was established in 1979 by upgrading the National Center for the Blind [10].

Focus of National Policy

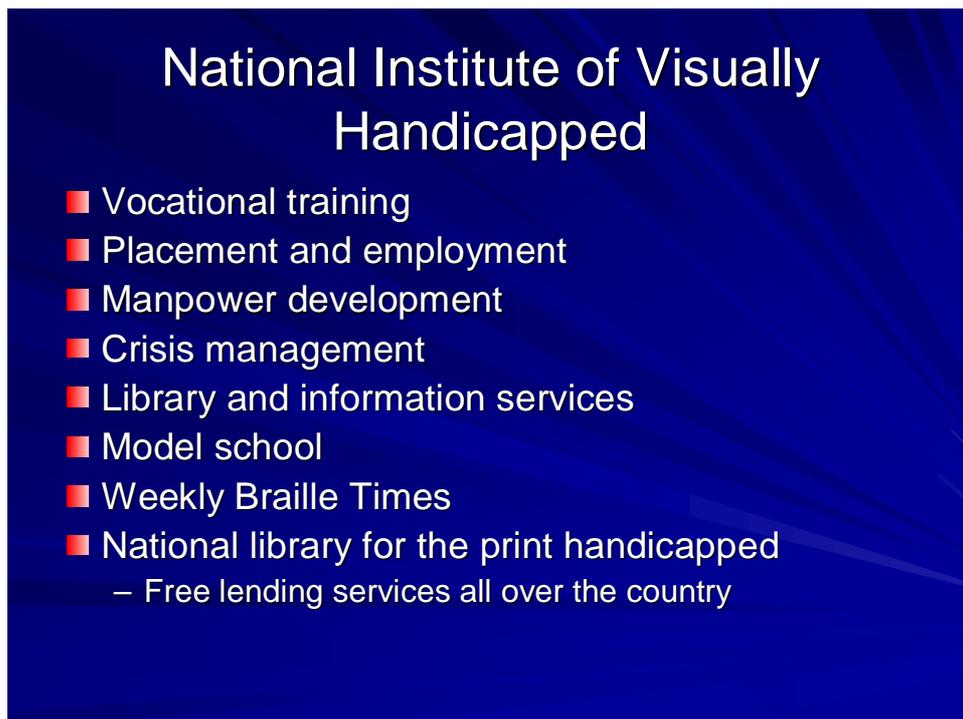
Focus of National Policy

- Prevention of disabilities
- Physical rehabilitation strategies
 - Early detection and intervention
 - Counseling and medical rehabilitation,
 - Development of rehabilitation professionals
- Educational (incl. vocational) rehabilitation
- Economic rehabilitation
 - Government and self employment

The national policy provides for the following [11]:

- Prevention of disabilities
- Physical rehabilitation strategies
 - Early detection and intervention
 - Counseling and medical rehabilitation
 - Assistive devices
 - Development of rehabilitation professionals
- Education for persons with disabilities
 - Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)
 - IEDC scheme
 - Scholarships
 - Technical and vocational education
 - Access to higher education
- Economic rehabilitation of persons with disabilities
 - Employment in Government establishments
 - Wage employment in private sector
 - Self employment
- Women with disabilities

National Institute of Visually Handicapped



The Institute was established in Dehradun in 1979. It has a regional center in Chennai to provide rehabilitation services in the states in South India. The Institute has the following programs and facilities. [10]

- Vocational training
- Placement and employment
- Manpower development
 - Training course for secondary school teachers of the visually handicapped

- State level training course for primary school teachers of the visually handicapped
- Research and development
- Crisis management
- Library and information services
- Education for the visually handicapped
- Model school
- Workshop for the manufacture of Braille appliances
- Publications
 - News magazine - Weekly Braille Times
 - Quarterly newsletter - INSIGHT
- National library for the print handicapped
 - Free lending services all over the country

Some current projects

Some Current Projects

- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) from 2000
- Child with special needs (CWSN)
 - Every child is provided with quality education
 - Zero rejection policy
 - Inclusive education intervention
 - Identified 25796, enrolled 18521
- Community based rehabilitation (CBR) projects

At the national level the programme Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan started in 2000 and is also being implemented in West Bengal [21].

The state of West Bengal also has its own programme for identifying children with special needs. This programme has identified about 26000 visually challenged children and enrolled more than 18000 of them.

There are also Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) projects undertaken throughout the country.

CBR project by RK Mission Blind Boys' Academy

- Community based rehabilitation project for the rural disabled
 - Awareness, prevention, early detection
 - Intervention, medical care
 - Psycho-social and vocational rehabilitation
 - Manpower training
 - 81 visually challenged (571 physically handicapped) rehabilitated in 5 years in 7 villages

There is also a national initiative for Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) projects. These are also being implemented in West Bengal with the help of NGOs including schools like RK Mission Blind Boys' Academy [14]. The highlights of this project are:

- Awareness, prevention, early detection
- Intervention, medical care
- Psycho-social and vocational rehabilitation
- Manpower training
- 81 visually challenged (571 physically handicapped) rehabilitated in 5 years in 7 villages

Proposed Services

Proposed Services

- Mobile services
 - Exhibitions
 - Demonstration with mini lathe machine, etc.
- Awareness and preventive programmes
- Co-operative lending programme
- Public library system
 - Coordinating the services of special schools and NGOs

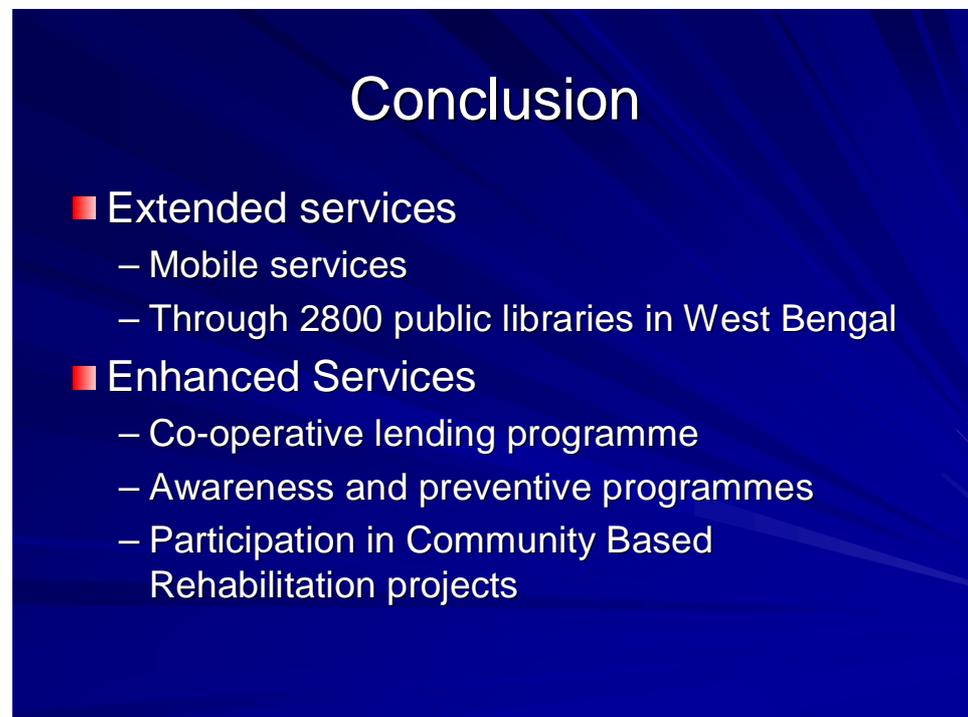
As we have seen, currently some schools and libraries are providing these development oriented services for both the visually challenged individuals and also to the community. These need to be strengthened so that libraries are an active partner in the progress of the society. We propose some further services that they may provide with their existing infrastructure in a more effective manner. They should extend their services to include the following:

- Mobile services (to provide greater outreach and spread awareness)
 - Exhibition of Braille books, etc.
 - Demonstration with mini lathe machine, etc.
- Awareness and preventive programmes
- Co-operative lending programme

Also the public library system should begin to extend special services to the visually challenged. They should also take the lead in coordinating the services of special schools and NGOs.

“The public library has to aim to serve all sections and groups” [Section 3.2 of 13] including the visually challenged. The services envisaged here include providing “...special equipment and reading materials...” [Section 3.4.9 of 13] Hence public libraries have a significant role to play in access to information to the visually challenged. They also have role to play in “Co-operation and resource sharing” [Section 3.7 of 13].

Conclusion



Conclusion

- Extended services
 - Mobile services
 - Through 2800 public libraries in West Bengal
- Enhanced Services
 - Co-operative lending programme
 - Awareness and preventive programmes
 - Participation in Community Based Rehabilitation projects

All libraries currently offering special services to the visually challenged can easily try to extend their reach with some form of mobile services and also enhance their services through co-operative lending programmes, by conducting awareness and

preventive programmes and also by participating in Community Based Rehabilitation projects as already done by some schools.

In West Bengal there are over 2800 public libraries and Community Libraries cum Information Centres [1,8]. It is proposed that their services for the visually challenged should be extended to the rural level and that they should co-ordinate with the existing special schools and their libraries by introducing co-operative lending programmes. It is thus possible to take the benefits of the existing collections of Braille books and Audio books to a much larger user base. Instead of spending money on the simultaneous reproduction of the same document more documents can be converted to Braille and Audio. Each participating library would need to possess or purchase one audio player. The public libraries can help in coordinating and channelizing the services of the special schools and NGOs. These would fulfill the objectives of IFLA/UNESCO guidelines for development. The policy making and co-ordination can be shared by Bengal Library Association and State Central Library, Calcutta, the apex library in the West Bengal public library system.

Acknowledgement

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