

Libraries not a closed chapter yet in Mumbai

Namita Devidayal | TNN

When Sobhi Sofi and two other post-grad students of SNDT were sent to intern at the Nehru Centre's gorgeous new library, they scarcely imagined that they would get so mesmerised by the dusty world of journals and books and the Dewey Decimal System. "Even after our internship work was over, we couldn't pull ourselves away. We ended up staying on to do our own research," says Sofi, who is doing her masters in political science.

Back in the day when people read books rather than text messages, and Wikipedia was not the Oracle, going to a library was as important—and as matter of fact—as going to church. It was the place that took you into worlds away from your world, where you could get happily lost in translation, where you made some of your best non-human friends.

It is with a view to bringing this culture back into the city that the Nehru Centre recently launched a public library, featuring more than 25,000 books, 100 journals and a rapidly-expanding documentation centre which has 1,50,000 newspaper clippings on subjects ranging from astronomy to foreign policy. "I want to create a public library culture in the city, very much like how it is in the west," says its dynamic librarian Arati Desai.

Unlike many of Mumbai's libraries and reading rooms, where heritage architecture provides ambience by default, and noisy fans encourage dozing rather than reading, the Nehru Centre library is most inviting, with air-conditioning, wi-fi and even ergonomic chairs prompting reactions from students like 'awesome!'. Not surprisingly, a woman who visits regularly and reads whatever she can lay her hands on, wrote recently in the comments book, "I wish I could live here!"

If public libraries are a component in a city's cultural index, Mumbai would not score too well. P. Jayarajan, who used to head the British Council's libraries across India, says, "Libraries are absolutely essential if you want to create a knowledge-driven society. The public library system in India started in a good way, but over the years things have declined a lot, especially when you compare them with public libraries in other countries. They fail to cater to different categories of people. So, you hardly find any women or young people there."

Vispi Balaporia, honorary secretary of the Asiatic Society Library, which boasts of a formidable collection of over 100,000-plus books and other research material, says, "We are funded by the ministry of culture but, unfortunately, they keep reduc-

ing the amount and we are really left in the lurch." She recalls her own childhood where books became her best friends. "I regret that today children are getting disconnected from books—so they miss out on that special feeling that books can give you."

But where the government has failed, institutions and individuals have stepped in. In fact, despite the onslaught of malls and digital distractions, there is clearly a subterranean world of book lovers who find entertainment between the covers, judging by the number of new libraries that have sprung up across the city—open to the public and offering subsidised membership, some walk-in, some circulating libraries. Apart from the Nehru Centre library in Worli, there is a comic books library in Versova and the charming M Cubed in Bandra, which has become an active hub for book clubs and film clubs, and a godsend for mothers who



THE NEHRU CENTRE LIBRARY

are endlessly looking for ways to extricate their children from their ipads and itouches.

After learning that a prime space in Bandra had been earmarked in the development plan for a library, three mothers along with the Maharashtra Mitra Mandal, a local activities group, got together and threw out an invite to people to donate books. Some two years and 13,000 books later, the library is buzzing with members of all ages. A range of membership rates goes down to almost-free for that mother with three children and free for low-income children from organisations like Akanksha. The library has made such a mark that, recently, someone from England who had no connection to it randomly heard about it and wrote a letter saying, "I've heard about the wonderful library you have created so can I please donate my top ten favourite children's books to the library?" And the next thing, packages from Amazon were arriving at the library's doorstep.

If libraries are the hallmark of a civilised society, apparently Mumbai has some hope. As Desai of the Nehru Centre says, "I can't wait for the day when all those ergonomically designed chairs are full."