

Walls of Words

The revamped Nehru Centre Library in Mumbai aims to provide booklovers and researchers a serene atmosphere for comfortable reading.

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Could a new reading space tailored to the comfort of readers convince more people to read? A new reference library, with 25,000 books on its shelves, aims to do just that, by having invested considerably in the tactile ambience. The revamped Nehru Centre Library in Mumbai opened its doors to the public at its new location, in the Discovery of India building at the Nehru Centre. Previously, the library was in the basement of the Nehru Planetarium.

Arati Desai, Librarian of the Nehru Centre Library, says that the intent was to make the library as a one-stop research centre that would provide researchers the serenity to conduct their work. “For a long time, we contemplated on what an ideal reading space should be. We wanted it to be comfortable for the reader, with good ventilation and natural light”, she says. The end result is a library which is fully air-conditioned, with several cubicles, and computer and audio-visual stations. “One regular reader has told us that the chairs are so ergonomic that she could sit for long hours without feeling any discomfort”, says Desai.

Currently, the library is open to all for free. While the bookshelves are not directly accessible to readers, they can access the online catalogue, which, according to Desai, has more than 5,000 keywords. The books are stored in a separate neat space, in nine-foot tall racks which have seven levels of shelves each. “Put together in a single row, all these racks would extend to 2 kms”, says Desai. A one-of-its-kind fire sprinkler system has also been installed.

While it may not be drawing large crowds as yet, the library has surely garnered some loyal visitors since its reopening. One of them is college student Pooja Tolia, who admits that she is the odd one in her class to visit a library to read books that are not in her curriculum. “But I am not sure if I would frequent the library if I lived very far away”, says the 20-year-old. Tolia acknowledges the presence of a reading room in her own college, but finds it distracting as it is used by students as a chatting space.

In the current scenario, where the city is constantly trying to push its spatial boundaries, the idea of a vast reading room seems refreshing. According to freelance writer and travel entrepreneur Rushikesh Kulkarni, the few libraries present in the city have poor-quality reference materials, forcing people to work with whatever little is available. Desai is hopeful that the library’s provisions to accommodate up to one lakh books would entice readers. Readers in Mumbai were upset when the British Council Library shut down its large physical

space. Members can, however, browse through its online catalogue and order books. “I have a membership at the American Library, but, besides being far from where I live, it is limited to only American authors”, says Tolia.

But there are others who feel that it is pointless to fall into the vicious cycle of blaming the lack of adequate reading space to a non-existent reading culture, and vice versa. According to Ahalya Naidu, co-founder of a firm that curates libraries called The Eternal Library, the increase in the number of literary festivals and book-reading events only provides an optimistic scenario. “As avid readers get more options and avenues to explore their reading life, newer readers can also join the fold. There are also more books today with Indian content. All these threads are being woven together, ensuring a better reading culture in the city”, she says.

At present, the Nehru Centre Library shuts its doors at 6 pm, like most other libraries in the city. Kulkarni says, from his experience browsing through various libraries across the city, early shutdown prevents office-going people from accessing libraries. “What is the point of a library having a good collection if it has restricted hours?” he wonders. Similar is the case with libraries being shut on Sundays, which further prevents access to a significant number of people.

Desai says that there are plans to extend the reading hours, and also introduce wi-fi internet connection. The other feedback she has received is to further expand the already-vast repository of daily newspapers. But her priority is to change the perception of a librarian as a nerd and recluse. Her colleague, Pradeep Havale, who is a technical assistant for the database at the library, feels that a person entering a library in today’s internet age can be deemed a true booklover, and hence a librarian has a bigger role to play. “After all”, he says, “Google cannot do what a librarian can”.

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