



Realising the Goal of Women Empowerment through Access to Information: Basanti Devi College as a Case Study

Dr. Sabuj Kumar Chaudhuri

Librarian, Basanti Devi College (Govt. Sponsored)

Kolkata, West Bengal, India

E-mail: sabooj_c@yahoo.co.in

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Abstract:

Basanti Devi College, a Premier College for girls affiliated to the University of Calcutta, was established on 5th August 1959 as one of the first sponsored colleges by the Government of West Bengal. The College is named after and inspired by the ideals of Basanti Devi (1818-1972), a disciple of Gandhi, and was one of the first women to fight for the freedom movement of our country. Since its inception, the college is relentlessly pursuing her vision and mission of her life i.e., women empowerment through all of its activities. The College library is also putting all of its efforts to realize the goal of women empowerment through access to information. Our college is serving mainly rural, semi-urban girls and economically backward class students. Some of them are even first generation learners. Most of the students are computer and ICT illiterate and many of them even first time saw the computer in the college. Students are provided induction training or orientation to the library about how to search analog as well as digital information in the library, role of information in their day to day life and how information can be a vector of change in their life. For access to the world of digital information and digital learning, many initiatives have been taken by the library like internet access, dedicated website through which students and teachers (of 39 teachers 34 are women) can access to wealth of information and through which our digital resources can be accessed anywhere from the world. Library is determined to make them empowered through access to information. Library has also started a very innovative programme –Earn-while-you-Learn Scheme .The main aim behind this programme is to make them aware about the dignity of labour as well as to expose them to the world of information by which they can be able to make themselves economically independent in their future life. Information and active guidance are given by the librarian to make the students to prepare for various competitive examinations. With the collaboration of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Govt. of India, Library has also participated in community development by arranging various training suitable for women. All activities in the library are always focused on our basic goal of women empowerment through information.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, College Library, Information, Capacity Building, Basanti Devi, Gandhiji

1.0 Introduction

Smt Basanti Devi was a great lady and the first woman freedom fighter of Bengal who went to jail for participating in the Non-Cooperation Movement against British Raj in India in 1921 (**Indian Personalities, 2008**), led by Gandhiji. She was a disciple and ardent follower of Gandhiji. Basanti Devi was also the first woman of Bengal who boycotted foreign clothes and promoted *Swadesi* (indigenous) clothes along with Sikh women. She, along with her two sisters-in-law, popularised the movement of production and distribution of *khaddar* (indigenous cotton clothes) (**Thapar-Björkert, 2006**) by indigenous *Charka* (spinning machines) among rural women of Bengal. The whole life of Basanti Devi was dedicated to women empowerment through education; she fought against social taboos, atrocities and discrimination against women. On 5th August 1959 Basanti Devi College, a Premier College for girls, in Kolkata was founded affiliated with the University of Calcutta sponsored by the Government of West Bengal to realise her goal of women empowerment through education and to uplift the women up the social strata.

2.0 Philosophy of Basanti Devi on Women Empowerment

Women in society and family are like the two parallel lines of a railway track without which a train cannot move ahead. She knew very well that, without proper education, no social taboo or discrimination against women could be eradicated. It is like a cancer in society, and its tentacles spread to every corner of society and every sphere of our lives. From childhood to death women are victims of their gender. And nobody can choose their gender. She never compromised with the discrimination against women and always tried to uplift the status of women in society. She was also inspired by Sri Aurobindo - the great leader of the Indian Freedom Movement. It is said that her passion and love for her country's freedom and the freedom of our women from the darkness of society through education and self-reliance also inspired her husband Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das to give up his roaring business of barristership and lavish lifestyle and plunge into the struggle for independence of India.

An important political figure, she did much to encourage national appreciation of literature, dramatics, art and science through her friendship with intellectuals such as Tagore and others. She was her husband's constant companion, and provided the natural impetus his followers required in their untiring welfare work.

Basanti Devi, already widely travelled abroad, toured her own country spreading her husband's message. While her husband, along with his famous comrades including Maulana Azad and his disciple Subhash Chandra Bose (**Sen, 1989**), was arrested, she personally represented her husband and presided over the Chittagong Provincial Conference in 1922.

Owing to her determination, the marriage of her daughter Aparna was the first inter-caste marriage in Bengal to be conducted according to strict Hindu rites without registration (**Sengupta, 1988**). After her husband's death, Basanti Devi's welfare work in the centres set up by Deshbandhu did not cease till her last days. After her husband's death she chose the life

of renunciation but not enjoyment according to Hinduism, and finally gave up her participation in active politics. According to Gandhi, Basanti Devi had an exceptionally strong personality that attracted many contemporary personalities (**Gandhi, 1999**).

Her down to earth lifestyle used to manifest her philosophy towards life and women. She believed that womanhood is the gift of god, and that women have equal rights and responsibilities to develop our society. But, before that, women have to be self-reliant in every sense. Only the right education can make them self-reliant, empowered and economically independent and, above all, it can prepare them for life. It is not only education that can make women empowered - selfless feelings, devotion and dedication to society and nation will make their minds unchained and free from centuries long discrimination against them.

3.0 Objectives and Mission of the College

Women education from all the strata of society
Self-reliance and preparing themselves for their life
Inculcate human qualities among them
Spiritual and cultural development
Mandatory social service
Advancement of knowledge and promotion of scholarship
Intellectually enriched and professionally equipped
Above all make them financially independent and empowered

4.0 College Library

The College Library was formed in 1959 along with the foundation of the college. The Library has a very rich collection of 27,000 books (analog or printed) and 51,000 e-books (digital). In addition to these, there are 19 peer-reviewed as well as popular journals (analog or printed) and 2100 e-journals. E-resources are provided by the INFLIBNET (Information and Library Network) of the UGC (University Grants Commission) through its NLIST (National Library & Information Services Infrastructure for Scholarly Content) scheme. It was great privilege to become the first college under the University of Calcutta and also the first college in West Bengal which has received this connectivity. All faculty members and students have separate login ID and Passwords through which they can access these resources anywhere in the world. Connectivity to these vast e-resources help patrons to achieve our mission of excellence in teaching and research. More than 17,000 catalog records are computerized.

The Librarian designed and developed a dedicated free library website (<http://librarybdc.webs.com>) that provides Open Courseware of reputed institutions of India and abroad, open e-books and e-journals, important links & downloads for educational purposes. Launching of new books or anything important is uploaded in the library website regularly. This website is being accessed by the students and faculty regularly. Internet access in the library is open to the students and faculty. Moreover all computers in the college are internet connected and are used by the faculty as well as by the students for educational purposes.

The Library System (fig. 1) has 5 wings – Departmental Libraries, e-library, Book Bank, Reading Room, and Teacher’s Corner. The Central Library is the heart of this system and all activities in the 5 wings are controlled, monitored and maintained by the Central Library.

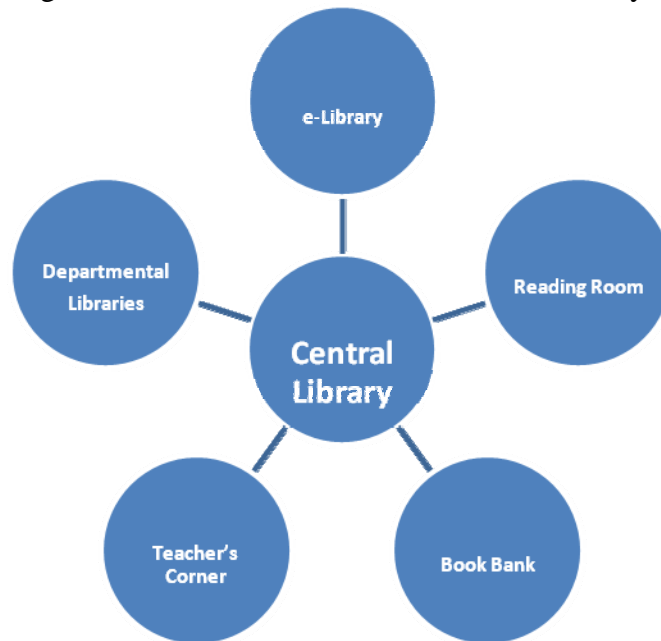


Fig1: Library System

The Library is open access and students can come personally and browse for the books they require. All present students and staff, as well as former teachers and former students are patrons of the library. The Library is the most visited place in the College. Library resources are quite secure in the library as there are many check points to ensure security and combat book lifting.

5.0 Women Empowerment through Information by the Library

The College Library is untiringly working towards women empowerment through provision of various information services, training, and participation in community development and, above all, advancement of knowledge and promotion of scholarship. The Library is realising its goal of women empowerment in many ways (fig. 2).

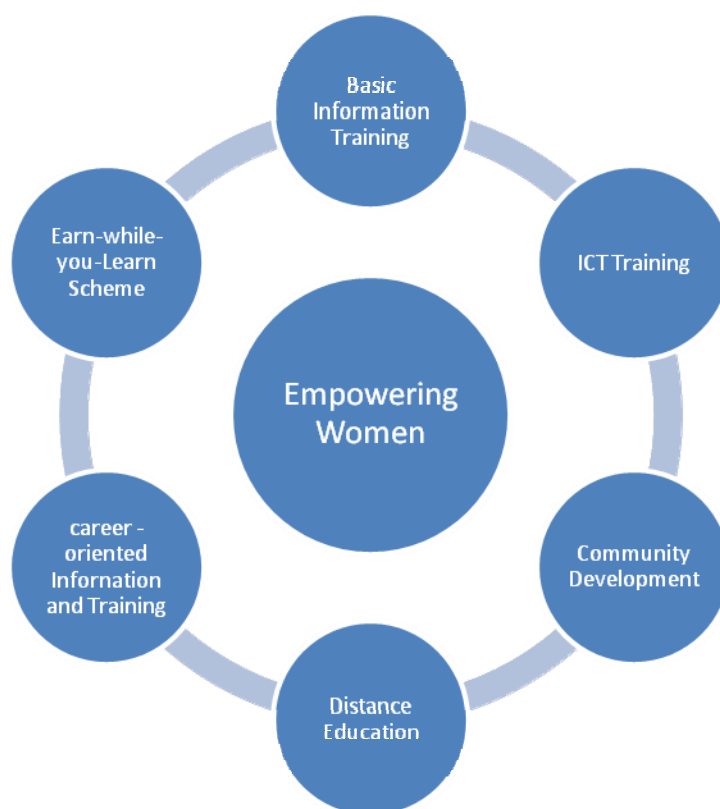


Fig.2: Women Empowerment and the College Library

5.1 Basic Information Training

Our students come from all the strata of society - rural, semi-urban and urban. Some of them are first generation learners. Once they are admitted to the College, they immediately become members of the College Library. There are 17 departments in the College including science, social sciences and humanities. Before each academic year starts (in July), the students receive compulsory Basic Information Training i.e., induction or orientation to the Library. This training involves how to search for books/documents in the Library from its analog as well as digital collection, how to use computers, how to use the catalog, ethics in the Library, types of journals, and to make them aware of various collections and references. In this training they are also taught about the basic theoretical aspects of data, information, knowledge and wisdom, and the importance and power of information in our everyday life. They are advised to consult the library website for further details.

5.2 ICT Training

The College Library provides ICT (Information and Communication Technology) Training to all library patrons including students and faculty staff. The College Library at present has 15 terminals in the Teachers' Corner and 6 terminals in the Central Library and in the Reading Room. All terminals have broadband internet connectivity by LAN¹ and these are accessible by library patrons. There are laser printers, scanners, LCD Projectors, 3M smart Classroom, digital board, digital camera, laptop, headphones, and webcams. Students are taught from

scratch as many of them either have no prior knowledge of computers or have technophobia. Basic components of a computer, hardware, software, basic MS –Office applications (specially Word, PowerPoint and Excel), how to use printers, scanners, LCD projectors and how to synchronize with the terminals and laptops, digital board, digital camera , web cam for video call through Skype or other software, how to use the internet, how to search the internet, basics of search engines and their mechanism of searching, compulsory e-mail account opening, how to search the e-library for e-books, e-journals and e-databases are all parts of this ICT Training.

However, it is not sufficient to teach them how to use technology for class-room teaching and learning, seminars and conferences – the great challenge for the Library is to teach them how to use ICTs for the betterment of society and the empowerment of women. Students and faculty staff regularly participate in various social research projects where these ICTs are applied in innovative ways.

5.3 Community Development

Basanti Devi College has developed a Community College within the College, in collaboration with IGNOU. The Library has actively participated in these programmes where poor women from the neighbouring slum areas are being trained by expert faculty staff for entrepreneurship, willing present or past students also participate in these programmes, which are targeted to make women financially independent. The Library collects and disseminates relevant information and makes the training rich and meaningful. Moreover it constantly helps the trainees by providing information regarding raw materials, potential market, credit providing organisations or banks etc.

5.4 Distance Education

Basanti Devi College is a recognised study centre of IGNOU where many professional and academic courses are taught - including bachelors and masters degree programs. It generally serves working women and past students or women who cannot afford to study in regular programs due to various socio-economic reasons. Study materials and required books are maintained and disseminated by the Library. Presently the Librarian teaches and conducts a BLIS² degree affiliated with the IGNOU which prepares women to become future librarians, and economically independent too.

5.5 Career-oriented Information and Training

Students of various disciplines opt for various careers like teaching, civil service, management, study-abroad, research, beauticians, self-entrepreneurship, airhostess etc. The Library always provides the right information regarding the best institutions, best placements, and competitive examinations for various government services, lectureship and other professional careers. In addition to this, the Librarian teaches for the civil services examination along with other faculties, and coordinates this training program as a former civil servant. The Library also counsels students to choose the right career according to their interest, ability and qualifications. Past and present students feel very confident after availing

this information service and training. They have reported immense benefits from these programmes which make them better prepared for the future.

5.6 Earn-while –you Learn Scheme

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he Earn-while –you Learn Scheme is an innovative programme where two students from two different departments do work as well as learn many new things like intensive ICT training for two months. Students are selected through an interview. In each working day they will work for only 1 and ½ hour during their class break without disturbing their study, examinations, seminars etc.; they get Rs. 50.00 (approximately slightly greater than US \$1). At the end of two months they get a participation certificate which will help them in finding future part-time jobs in the Library. The basic objectives behind this scheme are to help students to learn the dignity of labour, responsibility and empower them for the future in terms of learning and earning too.

6.0 Empowering Women and Information Interplay

Women empowerment to make them aware or increase their awareness for greater capacity building, more participation in decision making processes and control leading to transformative power is a continuous process. There is a close relation between women empowerment and information. Only the right information can help to choose the right options, and the right path helps one to be aware, enriched and empowered. With reference to women the power relation that has to be involved includes their lives at multiple levels, family, community, market and the state.

Importantly, at the psychological level, it involves women's ability to assert themselves and this is constructed by the 'gender roles' assigned to them specially in a culture, like the Indian, which resists change. It is here where information has to play the role of a Good Samaritan that can only show women the eternal light of inner freedom. Keeping in view this mission of Basanti Devi, the College Library is relentlessly marching to the future where women will be treated equally everywhere in life and they will not be bowed to any imposed decision but will be rightly empowered to take decisions on their own.

7.0 For a Better Tomorrow

It is true that we still have miles to go to attain the goal and realise the dream of Basanti Devi to empower women. We are neither complacent nor do we stop our innovative ways by which we can attain the targeted goal. The Library and the information it disseminates has a great role to play and it has to penetrate more and more both in vertical and horizontal directions to make women empowered soon, and bring parity and equity in every aspect of society.

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