

The National Library of India



The National Library was formally opened to the public on 1 February 1953. At the opening: (from left) Dr B C Roy, the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Dr H C Mukherjee, Dr S S Bhatnagar, Prof. Humayun Kabir and B S Kesavan

The christening of National Library and its shift to its present premises took place exactly sixty years ago

The genesis of the library lies in the Calcutta Public Library that was established in 1836. It was not a government institution. It ran on a proprietary basis. Those who paid Rs300 in one payment or three instalments was considered a proprietor. Poor students and others were allowed to use the library free of charge for a fixed period of time.

The then Governor General, Lord Metcalf transferred 4,675 volumes from the library of the College of Fort William to the Calcutta Public Library. This and donations of books from individuals formed the nucleus of the library. Prince Dwarkanath Tagore was the first proprietor of the Calcutta Public Library.

The Calcutta Public Library had a unique position as the first public library in this part of the country. Such a well-organised and efficiently run library was rare even in Europe during the first half of the 19th century.

The Imperial Library

The Imperial Library was set up in 1891 by combining a number of Secretariat libraries. Of these, the most important and interesting was the library of the Home Department, which contained books that belonged to the libraries of East India College, Fort William and the the East India Board in London. But the use of the library was restricted to the superior officers of the Government. (*cont. overleaf*)

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The National Library which was once Warren Hastings' residence

The library is the largest in the country and an institution of national importance

But Lord Curzon, the then Governor General of India, found that both the libraries – Imperial Library and Calcutta Public Library – were underutilised because of restrictions or lack of facilities. So, he decided to amalgamate the two.

The library, called Imperial Library, was formally opened to the public on 30 January 1903 at Metcalf Hall, Kolkata. The aims and objectives of the Imperial Library, well defined in a notification in the 'Gazette of India' as – 'It is intended that it should be a library of reference, a working place for students and a repository of material for the future historians of India, in which, so far as possible, every work written about India, at any time, can be seen and read.'

John Macfarlane, the Asst. Librarian of the British Museum, London, was appointed as the first Librarian of the Imperial Library. After his death, the famous scholar and linguist Harinath De took over charge of the library. After his death J A Chapman became the librarian. After his retirement, Khan Bahadur M A Asadulla was appointed as librarian and he continued till July 1947.

In 1948, the Government of India changed the name to National Library and the collection was shifted from the Esplanade location to the present 30-acre Belvedere Estate. On 1 February 1953 the National Library was opened to the public, inaugurated by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. B S Kesavan was appointed as its first librarian of free India. – *Courtesy, the National Library of India*

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