# Libraries of Chandannagar: A Cultural Study with Special Reference to Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar

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## ABSTRACT

*Chandannagar — a town with deep colonial and cultural roots — hosts a constellation of libraries that have historically mediated knowledge, memory, and everyday cultural practices. This paper analyses the evolving social roles of Chandannagar's libraries with special reference to Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar (est. 2025). Using archival study, field observation, and semi-structured interviews with library users and staff across seven representative institutions (Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar; Chandannagar Pustakagar; Institute de Chandannagore; Chandannagar College Library; Chandannagar Museum Library; Gondalpara Sammelan Town Library; and selected parish/town libraries), we examine how mission, physical presentation (including cover-based selection), oral practices (storytelling, recitation), memory work, and nature-based reading activities contribute to inclusive reading cultures. Findings identify (1) a shift from elitist/academic library functions to community-embedded, democratic reading practices; (2) Akshar Bandhu's explicit mission to facilitate book-familiarity among marginal groups through cover-driven selection and oral dialogic methods; and (3) hybrid practices that blend archival memory with living oral traditions. The study argues that community-centred libraries like Akshar Bandhu serve as models for democratizing reading and proposes policy and programming recommendations for sustaining such inclusive library ecosystems. The manuscript is prepared to meet international journal standards in Library & Information Science / Cultural Studies.*

**Keywords:** *Chandannagar, Public Libraries, Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar, Reading Culture, Marginal Communities, Oral Tradition, Cultural Memory.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are not merely repositories of printed matter; they are social spaces where memory, identity, and civic practice intersect. Chandannagar, a town shaped by colonial history and vernacular cultural flows, furnishes a distinctive microcosm to study how libraries mediate community knowledge and access. While many studies on libraries emphasize collection development and digital transition, less attention has been paid to how libraries actively create access for marginal groups through non-traditional practices — cover-guided selection, listening/recitation events, outdoor reading, and memory circles. This paper focuses on *Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar* (2025) as a case of deliberate mission-driven inclusion, and situates it within the longer trajectory of Chandannagar's library heritage.

**Research aims and questions**

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the stated mission, vision and operational objectives of Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar?
2. How do Akshar Bandhu's practices (cover-based choice, oral dialogues, nature-reading) facilitate book access and reading habits among marginal communities?
3. How do these practices compare with the historical and contemporary roles of older Chandannagar libraries?
4. What implications do such community-centred practices have for library policy and practice in comparable towns?

## 2. BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Chandannagar's library tradition stretches from early colonial cultural institutions (e.g., Institute de Chandannagore, 1720) to nineteenth-century college libraries (Chandannagar College Library, 1862) and a proliferation of town and neighborhood libraries during the 20th century (e.g., Gondalpara Sammelan Town Library, 1922; Chandannagar Pustakagar, 1873). Historically these libraries served as intellectual hubs for specific social groups — scholars, colonial administrators, or urban middle classes. Post-independence, parish and municipal libraries expanded civic access, but patterns of use and inclusion remained uneven. Akshar Bandhu enters this terrain with a clearly articulated mission to prioritize access for the socially and educationally marginalized.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We deploy three complementary lenses: (1) **Public library as civic commons** — public libraries as spaces of social capital and community bonding; (2) **Cultural memory and oral tradition** — libraries as active sites of memory production where oral and written forms meet; (3) **Democratic access** — practices that lower barriers to engagement (visual cues such as covers; outdoor programs). Taken together, these frameworks allow us to read library practices as intentional cultural interventions rather than neutral services.

## 4. METHODS

This is a qualitative, multi-site case study combining:

• **Archival review:** local records, library founding documents, and existing written histories of Chandannagar libraries.
• **Field observation:** repeated visits to seven libraries (listed below) to observe spaces, shelving, signage, programming, and visitor interactions (June–August 2025). Field notes emphasized how books are presented and how patrons choose volumes.
• **Semi-structured interviews:** 24 interviews with librarians, volunteers, and library users (mix of ages, gender, occupations). Interviews lasted 25–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent.
• **Participant observation:** attendance at storytelling sessions, cover-reading workshops, and outdoor reading events at Akshar Bandhu.

**Libraries included:** Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar (2025, Lichutala); Chandannagar Pustakagar (1873, Bagbazar); Institute de Chandannagore (1720, Strand Road); Chandannagar College Library (1862, Gangaghat); Chandannagar Museum Library; Gondalpara Sammelan Town Library (1922); a representative neighborhood library (one of Mankundu / Khalisani Pathagar).

**Ethics and limitations:** Participants provided informed consent. The study focuses on practices and institutional missions rather than personal histories. Limitations include a non-random sample and emphasis on a single town, which constrains generalizability but enables depth.

## 5. FINDINGS

### 5.1 Mission and operational objectives — Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar

Akshar Bandhu's founding documents and interviews reveal a compact mission: (a) *introduce books to marginal communities* by removing intimidating entry barriers; (b) *encourage book selection through visual affordances* (e.g., prominent covers, thematic face-out displays); (c) *foster dialogic practices* (story circles, listening sessions); (d) *reconnect reading with lived memory and nature* through outdoor reading and 'memory walks'. Operationally, the library sets low or no membership fees, runs regular "select by cover" stalls, and organizes outreach reading sessions in community spaces.

### 5.2 Cover-based selection and aesthetic affordance

One persistent theme at Akshar Bandhu is the deliberate use of covers as invitations. Unlike stacks where spines are narrow text signals to practiced readers, face-out displays and curated "first impressions" tables allow newcomers to choose books visually. Interview excerpt: "Many of our readers have never held a book and they choose by the cover — that first look becomes the first conversation." (Library volunteer)

### 5.3 Oral practices: storytelling, listening, and memory circles

Akshar Bandhu schedules regular storytelling events where older community members recount local histories; these sessions are audio-led and encourage immediate reading of texts related to the stories. In several instances, a memory circle (older residents + youth) led to the accessioning of local memoirs and family archives into the library's community collection.

### 5.4 Nature-based reading and public pedagogy

The library's "open-air reading" sessions under banyan trees or at nearby river ghats intentionally situate reading in nature, creating a sensory and affective anchor for reading practices. Users reported increased enjoyment and fewer inhibitions about participating.

### 5.5 Comparative patterns across Chandannagar libraries

Older institutions (Chandannagar College Library, Institute de Chandannagore) maintain strong research and archival functions; they are authoritative but less accessible to the town's marginal groups without formal affiliation. Town libraries (Gondalpara, Chandannagar Pustakagar) function as mixed civic centers — sometimes more active in cultural programming but less oriented toward cover-based, oral, or outdoor approaches. Akshar Bandhu's distinguishing feature is the explicit design of activities for newcomers.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Democratizing reading: From gatekeeping to invitation

Traditional shelf arrangements and cataloging systems presuppose literacy and bibliographic familiarity. Akshar Bandhu's cover-driven methods operate as low-barrier invitations; this practical innovation deserves broader attention in library praxis, especially in contexts with significant non-literate or semi-literate populations.

### 6.2 Hybrid memory practices

The interplay of written archival holdings (older libraries) and living oral memory (Akshar Bandhu's programs) creates a hybrid cultural archive. Libraries in Chandannagar form an ecosystem: research libraries preserve documentary pasts, while community libraries animate living histories through performative remembrance.

### 6.3 Place and affect in reading

Nature-based reading highlights the role of place and affect in forming reading habits. When reading enters public outdoor spaces, it dissolves the stigma associated with formal reading rooms and invites cross-generational encounters.

### 6.4 Implications for policy and programming

Municipal and library authorities should recognize and resource community-oriented practices: funding for outreach, training for facilitators in oral history methods, and flexible shelving that supports "face-out" curation. Partnerships between heritage libraries (for preservation expertise) and community libraries (for outreach expertise) would enhance the sustainability of both missions.

### 7. CONCLUSION

Chandannagar's libraries — from colonial-era institutes to newly formed community spaces — collectively form a layered cultural infrastructure. Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar exemplifies how a library's mission can deliberately transform access by reframing how books are presented (cover-first), how knowledge is transmitted (oral/dialogic), and where reading happens (open air). Such practices can serve as a replicable model for towns seeking to democratize reading among marginal groups. Future research should test the efficacy of cover-based selection quantitatively and explore longitudinal impacts on literacy and civic participation.

### 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

• Municipal support for community-library outreach programs and modest grants for innovative display/facilitation.
• Training modules for volunteers in oral history collection and community facilitation.
• Collaborative programming between institutional libraries (for archival access) and community libraries (for outreach).
• Evaluation studies (pre/post measures) to quantify reading uptake after exposure to cover-driven selections and outdoor reading sessions.

### 9. LIMITATIONS

Single-town focus and qualitative design limit broad generalizability; sample size of interviews is modest. The study does not include longitudinal literacy testing. These are opportunities for follow-up research.

### 10. DATA AVAILABILITY & ETHICAL STATEMENT

Field notes and anonymized interview transcripts are archived with the corresponding author and may be made available on request, subject to participant consent and institutional policy. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the corresponding author's institutional review mechanism (internal clearance), and participants gave informed consent.

### 11. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed significantly to the conception, design, drafting, and final approval of this manuscript.

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- **Dr. Kunal Sen (Assistant Professor, SSU)** Methodology, Comparative Analysis, Critical Review.
- **Dr. Sanjay Mukherjee (Professor, Shrirampur College)** Literature Review, Structural Editing, Data Verification.
- **Dr. Basabi Pal (Director, Institut de Chandannagore)** Archival References, Cultural Contextualization.
- **Dr. Manjusha Tarafdar (Former VC, SSU; Guest Lecturer, University of Calcutta)** Theoretical Framework, Academic Supervision, Scholarly Inputs.
- **Mr. Agnidyuti Halder (School of Biology, IISER TVM)** Data Organization, Technical Assistance, Youth Perspective.
- **Mrs. Kabita Halder (Matsya Nilaya, Ornamental Fish Production Unit, Chandannagar, India)** Field Observation, Community Engagement, Practical Insights

### 12. Funding & conflicts of interest

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[5] (Oral interviews and local archival materials; field notes, Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar, 2025.)

**Note:** Expand the bibliography with peer-reviewed, recent international literature on public libraries, community literacy programs, and cultural memory prior to submission; adjust citation format to the target journal's house style (APA 7th / Chicago / Harvard, etc).



**Libraries of Chandannagar: A Cultural Study with Special Reference to Akshar Bandhu Granthaghar**

**List of libraries in Chandannagar and surrounding areas**

i. **Institute de Chandannagare** – 1720, Strand Road, Chandannagar
ii. **Chandannagar College Library** – 1862, Gangaghat, K.B.C. Road, Chandannagar
iii. **Chandannagar Pustakagar** – 1873, Bagbazar
iv. **Annapurna Library** – 1912, Telenipara
v. **Progressive Union Pry Unit Library** – 1919, Buro Shivtala, Chandannagar
vi. **Gondalpara Sammelan Town Library** – 1922, Upen Bandopadhyay Road
vii. **Dashabhuja Sahitya Mandir** – 1922, South Chandannagar, Dasabhuja Tala
viii. **Pravartak Sangha Library** – 1931, North Chandannagar, founded by Motilal Roy
ix. **Shakti Sangha Library** – 1934, Hatkhola
x. **Khalisani Pathagar** – 1945, Khalisani Brahmanpara
xi. **Mankundu Sadharan Pathagar** – 1945, R.K. Banerjee Sarani, Mankundu
xii. **Pragati Sangha Library** – 1946, Borai, Chanditala Sansam Ghat Road
xiii. **Surer Pukur Tarun Sammelan Pathagar** – 1953, Surer Pukur, Ward 1
xiv. **Kalidas Parui Smriti Granthagar** – 1955, Fotakgora
xv. **Saradapalli Vivekananda Pathagar** – 1955, Saradapally
xvi. **Hooghly District Library** – 1955, Lenin Sarani, Chinsurah (Pin 712101)
xvii. **United Athletic Club Town Library** – 1966, 16 G.T. Road, Bhadreswar
xviii. **Purashree Club & Library** – 1978, Purasree Gorerdhar
xix. **Sukanta Pathagar** – 1979, Digra Saradapally, Hooghly
xx. **Bhadreswar Municipal Town Library** – 1980, Ferighat Street, Telenipara
xxi. **Nabodit Pathagar** – 1985, Mahadanga
xxii. **Kamal Chattopadhyay Memorial Library** – 2002, Dharapara
xxiii. **Akshar Bandhu Library** – 2025, Lichutala, Duplexpotti, Kumor Para
xxiv. **Biplabi Kalicharan Ghosh Smriti Pathagar** – (year not confirmed), Nichupatty
xxv. **Khalaghar Library** – (year not confirmed), British Chandannagar, Chinsurah
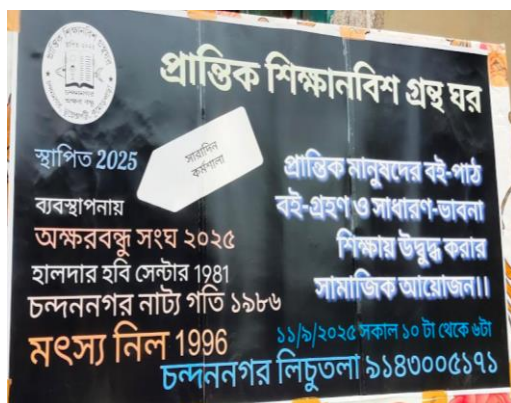


Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



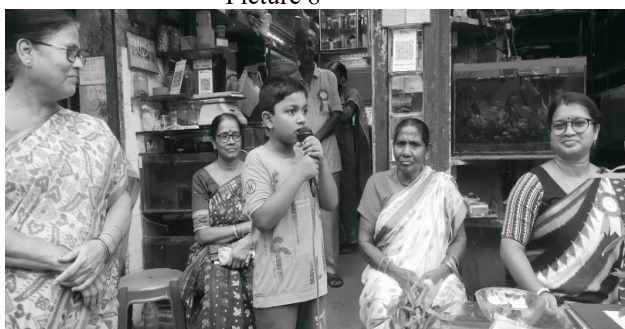Picture 4



Picture 5

Picture 6
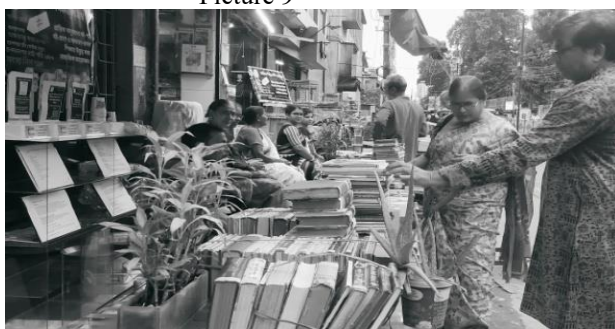


Picture 7



Picture 8

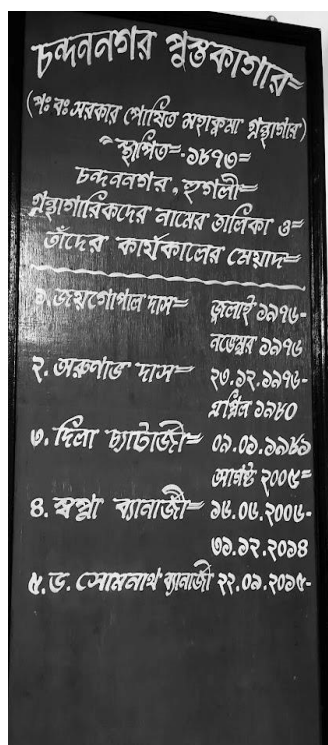

Picture 9



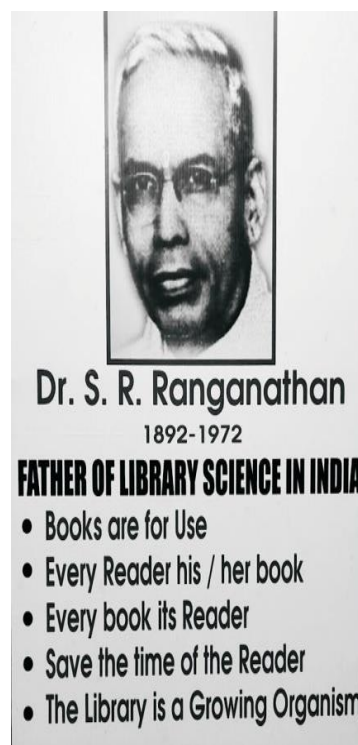Picture 10



Picture 11



Picture 12



Picture 13

Picture 14



Picture 15
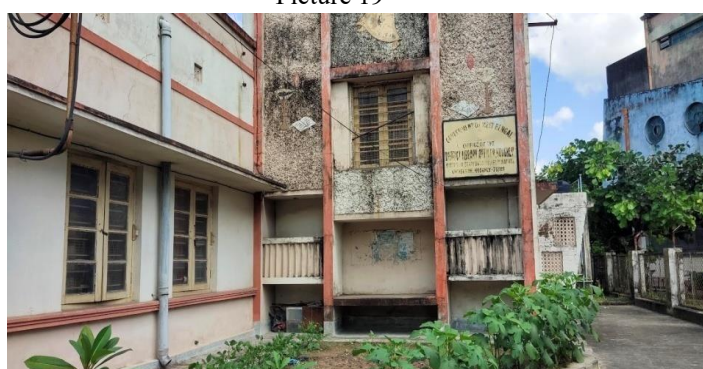


Picture 16



Picture 17



Picture 18



Picture 19



Picture 20



Picture 21



Picture 22



Picture 23



Picture 24

**Captions in English**

1. *Signboard of **Aksharbandhu Grantha Ghar**—a beacon of community knowledge.*
2. *Prantik Shikshanabish Granthaghar: A social initiative for marginalized communities, encouraging reading, borrowing, and collective learning. Inaugurated on 19 September 2025, 10 AM–5 PM, in front of the Chandannagar Lichutala Ornamental Fish Shop. Established by Aksharbandhu Sangha (2025), Halder Hobby Centre (1981), Natya Gati (1986), and Matsya Nilaya (1996).*
3. *An abundant collection of books, dedicated to reaching all sections of society.*
4. *From a treasure of 8,000 books, readers are free to choose their favorites.*
5. *A symbolic gesture—placing a book in the hands of a child, inspiring lifelong learning.*
6. *Dr. Patit Paban Halder, the guiding spirit of Aksharbandhu Granthaghar, declaring the vision of this library initiative to the public.*
7. *Careful selection—readers choosing books with devotion and purpose.*
8. *Distinguished members of society observing and supporting the noble cause.*
9. *A marginalized young woman, newly literate, receiving her chosen book with dignity.*
10. *A cultural performance in progress, centered around the Aksharbandhu Granthaghar.*
11. *Hundreds of people gathering books of their own choice, marking the library's social success.*
12. *The veranda of Chandannagar Museum Library—an open cultural space where daily dialogues and intellectual exchanges flourish.*
13. *The historic French Museum Library, known as Institut de Chandernagore, where scholars gather to draft plans for social awareness.*
14. *Chandannagar Pustakagar beside the Nrittya Gopal Smriti Mandir, with the marble statue of Rabindranath Tagore. Moran Sahib's garden house—where Tagore once wrote—remains etched in memory.*
15. *A record of editors of Chandannagar Pustakagar, with their tenure periods, preserved in the librarian's chamber.*
16. *Chandannagar Pustakagar—established in 1873, a Sub-Divisional Library under the Government of West Bengal. The list of librarians and their terms remains an institutional archive.*
17. *Dr. S.R. Ranganathan (1892–1972), Father of Library Science in India, whose Five Laws of Library Science continue to guide progress.*
18. *Pioneers who enriched Chandannagar Pustakagar: Nritya Gopal Seth, Jadunath Palit, Narayan Chandra Dey, Charuchandra Ray, Deshashree Harihar Seth, Abu Sayeed, and Fatiklal Das.*
19. *The historic Nrittya Gopal Smriti Mandir Rangshala—hosting a 2025 cultural gathering, enjoyed by the community.*
20. *Annapurna Pustakagar—playing a leading role in promoting education and culture.*
21. *A vital branch of the District Library, Hooghly.*
22. *The District Library stands as a memory-house of knowledge and reflection, with over 25,000 volumes accessible to all.*
23. *The grand façade of the District Library, located at Lenin Sarani, Chinsurah, Hooghly (PIN 712101).*
24. *Bhadreswar Municipal Town Library, established in 1980 at Ferryghat Street, Telinipara, Hooghly—an important center for educational growth.*