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# Libraries and Information Centres: Role in Information Society

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**Abstract:**

The paper introduces the researchers to the fundamentals of library and information society irrespective of their discipline and area of specialization. It focuses on the role of print and non-print documents, the concept of knowledge society or information society as different from agrarian or industrial society, as also the paradigm shift in library and information services in such a society. The role of ICT in developing information systems and information networks is to promote the process of national development. The paper poses an urgency to give a fresh look to the existing education and research programmes in Indian universities and colleges.

**Keywords: library, information society, ICT**

In supporting information and knowledge acquisition, dissemination of information and management of information resources, access to ICTs, libraries and information centres play a role second to none. The vital role libraries, documentation centres and information centres play in education; spread of literacy, research and overall socio-economic development of a country or a society is well recognized in the present day world. In universities, generally, students who pursue higher studies and research are offered scholarships and fellowships, for the award of research degrees. Theses or dissertations of research studies are stocked in respective university libraries, which are available for use, by others. Some of them get published.

In general, one is acquainted with these types of things in the libraries- storing, circulating books and getting it return. But researchers need to have more knowledge about the library and information centres. The paper gives an insight into what are libraries and information centres and what are their roles in the information society including services also.

Anyone undertaking studies from universities or colleges might have come across some libraries, not only the libraries in the colleges and university but also prior to that the school library and have had a chance not a chance once but might have had been regular visitors to the libraries in the colonies which are called the public libraries that are more accessible. So, one may had a chance to see libraries, to see their services, their functions but are introduced only to part of all these. In order to understand the function, the role and objectives of the libraries, it is important to find answers to these questions- What is a

library? What is a library meant for? What are the objectives and functions of the library? What are the services of a library?

Did not the libraries and information centres have a role before the information society? Yes, they had a role earlier also and libraries have existed since time immemorial. Libraries were present in ancient times also. Only their form and face has been changing. Libraries existed in the palaces of kings, they had their own libraries. Libraries were there in the religious places like temples etc. People also had their own personal libraries. But libraries, access to libraries was limited to the elite, to a particular cross-section of the society only and there was a reason behind that because it was only these people who were involved in acquiring knowledge and who were involved with the area whose domain of work was knowledge and information. The other classes of the society were the working class; all those who were not concerned more with these. So, it was considered a privilege for a few, for a cross-section or of a limited cross-section of the society who were visiting and using libraries. But with the increasing democratization, with the increasing democratization of education, with the increasing awareness of the rights of people in the society there has been a change in libraries and information centres. And the change is that all of the people in the society are using libraries- right from a child to an old aged person, from a house wife to a business man, from a teacher to a politician. Everyone needs a library; everyone needs help or the services of a library. So, library is a universal phenomenon. An institution surviving without a library is unthinkable. Even institutions like hospitals, prisons they too have libraries. Ship sailing across the sea it has a library. So library is a must, it is a unique phenomenon. This shows the importance of the library. Therefore, one should be very well aware of the libraries, its objective, its functioning and its role in the society. It is quite evident that libraries are an important part; the society cannot do without a library.

The general definition of library is- 'it is a room where books are kept', but one could say that it is not very appropriate; this is just a very basic, very generic definition because books kept in any room, is not a library. But if one has a room especially meant where books are only kept, can be said to be a personal library. Similarly, it is "a collection of literary documents or records kept for reference or borrowing." (Saravanan 109) This particular point stresses on the service aspects of a library that it is not only these documents that are stored there but they are stored for reference or borrowing. Then, it is "a depository built to contain books and other materials for reading and study."(Colomb 171) It is noteworthy that besides books there are some other materials which are also referred. It is also a 'building that houses a collection of books and other materials'. This definition stresses more on the physical aspects and little on the service aspects of a library. Therefore, from all the definitions of a library it can be concluded that there has to be a place kept apart, meant apart and there has to be a collection of books and other reading material.

The other reading material that is referred to while visiting libraries are- newspapers, magazines, periodicals and different kinds of books like the ones not meant for issue called reference books, text books are issued for use at home. The library provides the service of allowing to borrow the books to be taken back home and to be used there. The other types of

reading materials are- the electronic documents (not the printed) like the video records, CDs, audio cassettes and these are also part of libraries these days and besides that there are some other non-conventional material also like the maps, microphones and frames. One of the functions of the library is to act as a depository because a library exists for serving the society not only today but also in the future. It is a place which preserves the cultural heritage, literary record of a society. This reflects that the library is so important for a society.

Wikipedia defines library in its traditional sense, "is a collection of books and periodicals. It can refer to an individual's private collection, but more often, it is a large collection that is funded and maintained by a city or institution. This collection is often used by people who choose not to, or cannot afford to purchase an extensive collection themselves." This definition indicates why a library is maintained, that it may not be for an individual to afford such a large collection and therefore the access is provided to such documents in a library. And if these libraries were not maintained by individual certainly it has to be maintained by institutions/ organizations. Most of the activities in the daily life these days are done through organizations, institutions like education or any other conceivable activity is institutionalized. Similarly, library is also an institution, it is maintained by an institution, by an organization and this institution or organization pays for it. It is responsible for the development, upkeep and the maintenance of the library. The institutions or organizations include schools, colleges, universities, prisons, hospitals, any business house, research institution, national level institution, the media libraries etc. So, possibly all organizations maintain and manage a library because one cannot do away without them.

Now, what is the purpose of library? Why does a library exist? The purpose of library is to provide access to a large collection of different kinds of books and other reading materials at one place otherwise beyond the reach of an individual and to preserve literature for posterity. It provides a place for study and research. So, it is not only providing access to different kinds of reading materials and to those materials per se physically but also to those materials through different services because one may not know what exist. So, library provides certain-services and makes it known to the users- what exists, where it exists, by whom it exists. So, all this is also library and besides that it also provides a place where one can study, refer to and be involved in one's own intellectual pursuits. It provides an environment and atmosphere for study and research.

A few basic services that a library provides are- 'reference', 'circulation' and 'inter-library loan' (see fig. 1 and fig. 2); in fact inter-library loan can also be viewed as a part of circulation. Library is a place which is a little out of bounds for a general person. It has certain artificiality in the environment and therefore it may be initially a little difficult for a new reader or a new person entering and using a library. Therefore, the very basic service that a library provides is reference service which helps a user to use the library. It helps the user to overcome that initial fear or the psychological barrier and helps him to go and use the library. This is called reference service and this is not only reference because reference includes a number of other things but this is the most basic and essential part of these services and that

is why the 'reference service' is called the 'hub of services' in the library. Because it is not only this initial help to the user or reader but also there are so many other services for which the reference service helps them. The reference services are provided on the basis of certain documents which are called 'reference documents' and these are called such because they are to be referred to, they are not to be used like other general books. Therefore, these are the services that are provided on the basis of documents or reference books. Besides that in these services the user is not allowed to borrow these certain kinds of documents and for borrowing, borrowing services are provided which is referred as 'circulation'. When this circulation is done within the library it is called 'circulation' but when circulation is done when the user is provided the documents not from within the libraries but from some other libraries, it is called 'inter-library loan'. Library provides access to different kinds of documents in print and electronic form. These can be books, periodicals, newspapers, magazines and non-conventional forms like microphones, charts, frames, maps and atlases.



**Fig. 1. Reference Librarian**

a. Reference librarians assist library patrons in finding information. Working as a reference librarian requires social skills, strong familiarity with the library's resources, and knowledge about a broad range of subjects. (Halsey)



**Fig. 2. Automated Library Circulation**

a. Most libraries equip their collections with bar codes that can be read by optical scanners at the circulation desk. Automated circulation systems enable libraries to quickly and accurately determine the status of borrowed items, monitor overdue materials, and track the inventory of their collection. The library clerk shown here reads the bar code of a book with an optical scanner that records data about the book and its borrower. (Halsey)

Is there any difference between library and information centre, or is it just a synonym? The information centres is an evolutionary development of a library. Due to the increasing needs of different kinds of users and dissatisfaction from the documents that were available within the physical confines of a library, the libraries gave way to a new concept called information centre. Another concept that emerged which provides services on the basis of information and this information could be from anywhere and to be provided to anyone at any place and any time. The information centre thus is an information providing institute or centre or organization which does not depends solely on the documents that are available there within the physical limits of that particular institution or organization. It could be providing information as such, as required by the user from anywhere across the globe.

Human beings living in a modem society have some expectations. So, it becomes significant to know the needs which the library can meet. The needs of the modem society are the educational needs, the economic-well being needs, the spiritual and ideological needs, the cultural and aesthetic needs, and the recreational needs. These are the broad groups which can be extended further. The modem society and needs means a society which is very well aware of its rights and is involved in the information. These needs can be differentiated as educational, which refers to those who are studying or teaching in educational institutions. They have their needs that are related to imparting or getting education or learning and for that they depend on the library. The library has to satisfy these needs, these are the educational needs. Besides this, it is not only education but a researcher also has certain needs that help him in conducting his research. Similarly, there are spiritual and aesthetic needs because it is not only education or business that generally one does for earning one's bread but besides these there are certain innate needs that are there in all and for satisfying these needs like those which relate to culture, to consciousness, religious needs; an individual would like to get help from a library. This justifies the existence of different kinds of libraries- the academic libraries, the special libraries or research libraries and the public libraries. The academic libraries (school, college, university libraries) are generally meant for fulfilling the educational needs and for the research needs there are research institutions though these are partly covered by universities also. For aesthetic needs there are institutions of fine arts and they are meant to satisfy these needs. Library exists with all these and it is different from all these because it satisfies not only educational; not only research, not only the aesthetic needs but all these needs. Whereas educational need is only school, college, university, research need is research institution. In today's society human beings are working in an institutionalized way and these institutions exist to satisfy different types of needs. But library is different from all these, it is different because it fulfills each and every institutional need.

The modem society that exists today is called 'information society'. Information society "is a society where the majority of people are engaged in creating, gathering, storing, processing or distributing of information."(Branscomb 279) Information society:

> is a society in which quality of life, as well as prospects for social change and economic development, depends increasingly upon information and its exploitation. In such a society, living standards, patterns of work and leisure, the education system and market place are all influenced by advances in information and knowledge. (Martin 3)

This shows the importance of information in the information society. It is bit difficult for people to realize and visualize such a bold statement. But the reason may be that India has shades of all different types of societies- agrarian, industrial and a less of information society. The majority of professions or businesses or the working class is those who are involved in information industry. Example- certain people are involved in creating information, the producers of information. These people are one type of people who are called information workers or those involved in information. Similarly, there are a set of people who are involved in creating the contents of information, some in the form of the carriers of this information, some in disseminating this information and some in creating the technology for enabling this transfer of information from the producer to the consumer. All these different sets of people are the information workers. In our country there has been a change and a large number of people are involved in such activities and they are important part of the society today but in the developed countries the majority of work force is involved in information. The teachers, the researchers, the media people, the press people, the database administrators, the information communication technologists are all examples of information workers. There is a change in the society; also importance given to such people has increased. There is an increase in information products coming into the market due to these people being engaged in the different kinds of activities and that is why there is a change in libraries also. Earlier these were the only organizations and institutions that were involved in this information business though there were others also but not to that extent. In fact they were the soul people who were involved in processing, accessing and providing that information but now days there is a diversification, number of other players coming into the market because of the information society. Information Society has come to represent:

> societies at an advanced post-industrial stage, characterised by a high degree of computerisation, large volumes of electronic data transmission and an economic profile heavily influenced by the market and employment possibilities of Information Technology. (Martin 5)

There is a large influx and heavy influence of information communication technologies when referring to this information society. In fact it is a major factor that has made it responsible, it is a cycle and information technologies influences information and knowledge and it goes on increasing. Information technology is a major factor or force that has influenced the information society which is responsible for its coming up and development. So, one of the cross-sections of this information society workers are those who

are involved in the technology or infrastructure part of it. Because when involved in transfer of the information from the producer to the consumer here a role is played by the infrastructure, the telecommunication or communication technology and when we refer to providing it in different forms; again a role is played by the storage and processor technology. So, this is an important and major part or portion of the information society.

The factors that have been responsible in coming of this information society are- knowledge explosion, dissemination, distribution, accessibility and availability which means the knowledge that is being made available today, it is coming at a very fast pace and that is why it is referred to as explosion. Globalization of trade, commerce and business and polity has been made possible due to diminishing boundaries between countries as well as increasing influence of information communication technologies. It has also been caused by the intellectual activity resulting in new knowledge due to research in science and technology and also the developments in information and communication technology. (ICT) So, these changes have resulted in the coming of the information society. Library has to change because of all these factors that have brought in a change in the society which exists and libraries have to serve the society.

Library has a role to play in the educational needs (both formal and informal), the research needs, the business needs, the needs of governance, recreational needs. Like in education it could be the teacher as well as learner, when referring to governance, it could be governance at the level of an institution or organization or even at the level of country, it could be also at the level of defense. So, all these cross-sections demand heavily from libraries and while playing its role, the library has changed itself in a way that it has brought in the concept of information centre and besides that it has brought in the concept of information systems and information networks. It is not only a deal at local level but also at the state, national, global level and again these developments have been made possible due to the developments in the information communication technology. It is not only ICTs but also the conceptual developments in providing services that have been made possible by library mission science professionals like the conceptualization of new services, the concept of marketing in libraries. The libraries provide user centered services based on the needs and the requirements of users. The services have been so designed that it suits the availability and the time available with the user that it is not the user who comes to the library, library goes to the user. This has been made possible again due to the developments in networks and networking. These networks exist at the local level, within institutions and organizations, as well as at the global level. Example- Internet. Due to the developments in these networks there is a change in the face of library. The face of library is changing and this change of face of libraries is that we are coming towards paperless/ digital/ virtual and hybrid libraries and all these libraries provide user centered services. Keeping in view the needs of different cross-sections they provide value added ad-on services. Libraries are making their access and availability far and wide with local collections; they are providing access to international/ global information and here users is not a limit. It had been made possible due to new concepts like virtual/ digital libraries. So, this is how the libraries have been changing, adapting and adopting new things to play their role in the information society.

The paper not only tries to enrich the researchers of various disciplines in the world of library and information centres theoretically. But, also awakens their interest to visit the libraries and see the various activities performed like how the classification is done etc. It also prompts them to interact with the librarian to gain the practical aspect of the theory and correlate theory with praxis. This helps to have a more successful life and career.

Thus, it is not surprising to hear the claim that the concept of the ' Information Society' proposed in the works of such American writers as Machlup, Bell and Porat is providing the foundation for a new paradigm for policy research and analysis. In conclusion, the idea of Society as 'Information Society' continues to exercise certain amount of appeal. It somehow captures the feel of modernity and of society moving along exciting technological trajectories which are freeing mankind from the tyranny of time and distance!

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