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Special Libraries: An Overview

Rajesh Balasaheb Agavane

Librarian,

Saraswati Mandir Night College of
Commerce and Arts, Pune – 2.

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Abstract:

Special libraries are a natural outcome of the need for information support to research and development, business and industry, expanded functions of governments and similar other organisations. This article identifies and describes the activities, functions and services of special libraries that are attached to different types of organisations.

Keywords: Special libraries, Information support, Business and industry, Services.

Introduction:

Libraries can be broadly classified into four different categories, namely, National Libraries, Public Libraries, Academic Libraries and Special Libraries. In the case of the first three categories, the nomenclature of each one is self-explanatory. For example, the public libraries are open to one and all, that is, public and their holdings are of general in nature. The academic libraries are attached to academic institutions like universities, colleges and schools and cater to the needs of teachers and students in their academic pursuits. The collections in them also relate to the academic programmes / courses of the academic institutions. Special Libraries possess special collections in special formats and provide specialized library and information services to specialized clientele either on demand or in anticipation. They also alert the clientele about the existence of information, which otherwise might not be known to them.

The Special libraries are frequently attached to official institutions such as government departments, hospitals, museums, and the like. They come into being in order to meet specific needs in commercial and industrial organizations. A Special Library is: (a) a library or information centre maintained by an individual corporation, association, government agency, or any other group; or (b) a specialized or departmental collection within a library, for the organization and dissemination of information, and primarily offering service to a specialized clientele through the use of varied media and methods.”

Definition of Special Library:

A special library is a term for a library that is neither an academic, school, public or national library. Special libraries include corporate libraries, law libraries, medical libraries, museum libraries, media libraries scientific and technical libraries, etc. These libraries are not usually open to the public.

The renowned library scientist D.J. Fosket defines a Special Library as one serving group, having an extra library existence, whose members direct at least some of their activities towards common purpose.

According to A.F. Ridley Special Library is a collection of information covering a specific field, which may be administrated by a special staff and for the service of limited clientele.

A.G.S. Josephson defined that a special library is a library that covers a single subject, or a definite group of related subjects.

Dr.S.R.Ranganathan prefers to call it the 'Specialist Library'. He defines it by providing emphasis on information as 'to supply detailed information regarding some subject field – scientific, technological or otherwise. The resources are specialized and the users are specialists'.

According to International Organization for Standardization (1982,p.136), Special libraries are, "those maintained by an association, government, parliament, research institution(excluding university),learned society, professional association, museum, business firm, industrial enterprise, chamber of commerce, et, or other organized group, greater part of their collection being in a specific field or subject, e.g. natural sciences, social sciences, agriculture, chemistry, medicine, economics, engineering, law and history". Emphasis here is on „parent organizations“ and specific subject“.

According to UNESCO (1958,p.254), "these libraries may be attached to various bodies, such as parliament or a government department, a scientific or other research institution, a learned society, professional association, museum, industrial association, chamber of commerce, etc...Special libraries are primarily designed to serve a limited number of experts, scientists, research workers, etc, and not coming within any of the categories-national libraries, university libraries and school libraries."

Special libraries were now well-established adjuncts to research facilities. As research projects became group rather than individual efforts, the role of the technical librarian as the literature expert of the group was more widely accepted, and technical library information services expanded accordingly.

At the same time, the information explosion was increasing the problems of information organization and dissemination. Corporate and governmental special libraries with access to their organization's data processing and computer equipment were able to take the lead among libraries in experimenting with new methods of information handling. Records processing, circulation control, and journal control and routing, and the development of current awareness, bibliographic and abstract services arrived early in special libraries. More recently, machine-readable databases have found extensive use in special libraries.

As the need for and awareness of information grew, more elaborate information services appeared in some of the larger, research-oriented organizations. The goal of the special library movement has been the provision of information from any source to users in

connection with their work-related needs in the most useful form - whether document delivery or analysis and synthesis of information. In practice, the realization of this goal varies in each special library according to the environment in which it operates.

Some special libraries use the term information service or information centre (or in the past, information bureau) to describe their services more accurately. In 1960s, however, the term information centre began to gain wider use, and with a different meaning. Many commentators have tried, with various degrees of clarity and success, to assign the special library and the information centre separate functions in the information complex. Most see the information centre as a larger activity, primarily engaged in the analysis and synthesis of information, with the special library unit in this activity providing the collection, organization, and delivery of documents. The information analysis centres and scientific information centres which have been established over the past fifteen years are perhaps the clearest examples of this concept. In other situations, the information centre refers to a larger unit in the organization that includes report- and technical-writing specialists and indexers. Such elaborate centres are, of course, limited to large organizations. In most organizations, the special library which provides extensive information service continues as the principal information unit within its organization and operates in effect as an information centre.

Although some special librarians see the information centre as a competitor and foresee either the demise of the special library or its relegation to a custodial role, it is perhaps more logical to see it as the development of more intensive specialization and a greater “team” effort in information handling, just as science and technology have fragmented into many subjects and research has evolved from an individual to a group effort.

History:

In 1909, a group of 26 libraries under the leadership of John Cotton Dana founded the Special Libraries Association (SLA), which had as its objective “to promote the interests of the commercial, industrial technical, civic, municipal and legislative libraries, the special departments of public libraries, universities, welfare organizations and business organizations”.

Since that time, thousands of libraries which call themselves special, or given that label by others in referring to them, have been established in the United States and Canada. The principal growth has taken place since World War II, stimulated by the tremendous increase in the number of scientific, technical, business, and industrial research and development organizations; the flood of technological and scientific materials being produced; and the accelerating widespread interest in the transfer of information and knowledge having an immediate utilitarian value.

Need for a special library:

- To make available to its clients any information they want on a special field;
- To have an organized place for all information materials;

- With this, the organization will have a centralized, coordinated and improved access to information.

Activities of the Special Library:

- Acquiring a complete collection (as much as possible) which is enough to meet the present and the future needs of the clients;
- Reaching out to the users and knowing what they really need;
- Aligning itself with the goals and activities of the organization.

Types of Special Libraries:

There are variant types of special libraries. They are:

- Research – The libraries which support the research needs of scholars;
- Corporate/industrial – Libraries that fulfil the needs of banks, advertising agencies, insurance companies, architectural firms, construction firms, etc;
- Government – This type of libraries serve various departments and agencies of the government;
- Institutional – Institutional libraries such as museums, hospitals, prisons, etc.

Characteristics of Special Library:

The Six distinguishing characteristics of special library are:

- Location of the library
- Subject orientation of the library collection
- Collection of material in special formats
- Specialist user groups
- Physical size of the library
- Emphasis on information services.

Need and purpose of Special Libraries:

The need for special libraries was felt for three major reasons:

- Rapid increase in the volume of literature (Books, Journals and non-Book material)
- Increasing specialization in all branches of science (Physical and social) and technology
- The need to have quick access to the vast amount of literature.

The Scientists in R&D organizations are required to keep abreast of latest developments in their areas of specialization mainly for two reasons:

- To get information that may be useful in connection with their current research programmes;
- To avoid duplication of the work that had already been done in other organization.

Scientists would not have time to consult the library catalogue and other tools to locate their needed information. The relevant information has to be gathered from various

sources and passed on to the users. A well-organised special library, which has a clear idea about the goals and objectives as well as plans, programmes and activities of the parent organization, can provide such information services.

Establishment of special libraries within the organization is, therefore, an imperative necessity. In view of specific emphasis on information services special libraries are located in many organizations.

Functions of Special Libraries:

- (a) Defining the objectives of libraries in conformity with the objectives of the parent body and drawing up plans and adoption of programmes to achieve these objectives more specifically
- (b) Acquiring library material that would respond to the information requirements of the organization.
- (c) Organizing and storing the acquired material appropriately to facilitate quick and pinpointed access to the documents. This would need classification of material using special schemes, indexing using special subject heading lists/thesauri, abstracting of documents, organizing and storage of non-book material, etc.
- (d) Organizing the following types of services: Dissemination of current information viz., current awareness services to keep the clientele informed of latest developments.
 - Reference service for locating specific pieces of information.
 - Literature search and bibliographical services on demand
 - Translation service
 - Obtaining documents from other libraries on interlibrary loan basis
- (e) Liaison with other special libraries and documentation centres for gathering information not available in the library.
- (f) Associating with local, national and international professional organizations of librarians.

The Library Personnel in Special Libraries:

The special librarian is called information specialist, “Information” rather than librarian. This specialist serves a clientele of specialists by examining all new literature which comes into the library, evaluating it, and making certain that it reaches the right persons; providing quick reference service, using photocopies as needed; making literature searches and providing bibliographies, abstracts, summaries, and translations if necessary; using interlibrary loan to provide additionally needed materials; providing Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) and Document Delivery Service (DDS); maintaining archives; encouraging the use of the library through displays, lists of new materials, and liberal loan policies; and developing programmes to retrieve information through the use of computers.

The information specialist must have an understanding of the structure and policy of the organization or agency the library serves; knowledge of the subject specialty of the library, the supporting literature, and the techniques of reference and information service; a

familiarity with the entire collection and the particular interests of the clientele, and the ability of match literature and client; an understanding of the basic principles of classification in order to adapt or devise systems to meet the needs of the diverse materials and forms of materials; an acquaintance with outside sources useful in locating needed information; ability to perform such special services as indexing, editing, abstracting, translating, and database searching, or knowing that these services can be procured quickly. The information specialist must be able to work well with people and within an organization.

The staffs of the special library are small, often consisting of one professional librarian together with clerks assisting. However, some special libraries have a number of specialists on the staff, such as a translator, an abstractor, an indexer, or an information systems specialist.

Special libraries engage in co-operative activities and participate in most forms of cooperation: storage of certain materials, including on microfilm, microfiche, or optical disks; interlibrary loans; directories; cooperative cataloguing and acquisition; duplicates exchange; union lists; and shared resources.

Services:

A special library may provide the following services:

- Issue of documents.
- Interlibrary loan
- Replies to enquires
- Retrospective search
- Current Awareness and Selective Dissemination of Information
- Referral and reference
- Translation
- Bibliographic information
- State of the art reports etc.

Types of Special Libraries:

- Art Library
- Botanical Library
- Corporate Library
- Law Library
- Local History Library
- Map Library
- Medical Library
- Military Library
- Map Library
- Museum Library
- Music Library
- News Library
- Non-profit Organization Library

- Personal Library (working for someone with an unusual amount of money and collections)

Special Library Networks:

Scientific and technological revolution has led to globalization of science, technology and electronic communication which now-a-days play a dignified role in all scientific endeavours. In the present scenario, the collection of libraries is not only limited to printed documents as earlier, but also accumulates huge amount e-resources and databases. In the last few decades, libraries have changed in many dimensions and directions than ever before after introduction of technological developments with the provision of unexpected opportunities and advantages for personnel and users altogether. In this context it can be said that, special libraries have acquired new skills to work on the new environment for better co-operation and co-ordination in library activities to overcome the challenges of new millennium.

Libraries have a long tradition of universal repositories of knowledge. They are closely bound to the development of book culture and its manifestation as archives or independent documentation centres. However, with the introduction of completely innovative storage medium such as: Magnetic tapes, Magnetic discs, floppy disks, and CD-ROMs are having massive data storage capacity. The quality of work and activities of special libraries has been led from traditional to e-library. The modern libraries offer a variety of services like circulation of reading materials, reference services, and information services to their clients, optimizing services offering reading materials for the users from other libraries on inter-library loan basis, on-line information services at national and international level and so on. Apart from this, applications of electronic media are encouraging Special libraries to construct and participate in networks.

A Library network helps to convert the entire libraries of the globe into a single information platform removing geographical barriers.

Special Library Association (SLA):

One major professional association for special libraries is the Special Libraries Association (SLA), which has chapters in Canada, the US, and Europe. The UK based Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals and the Australian Library and Information Association also has focus groups devoted to special libraries.

The Special Libraries Association (SLA), which began in 1909 with 26 members, had a membership of 12,000 professional librarians and information specialists by 1988. The objectives of SLA are to “provide and association of individuals and organizations having a professional, scientific or technical interest in library and information science, especially as they are applied in the recording, retrieval, and dissemination of knowledge and information in areas such as the physical, biological, technical and social sciences and the humanities; and to promote and improve the communication, dissemination and use of such information and knowledge for the benefit of libraries or other educational organizations.”

Composition of SLA:

SLA is organized into 44 regional chapters which elect officers, issue bulletins or announcements, and hold programme meetings during the year. It is further organized into 26 divisions representing, broad subject fields or types of information-handling techniques. Membership status is granted on the basis of education or professional experience and provisions are made for student members.

In addition to its official organ, special libraries' publications include source books, bibliographies, periodicals, monographs, and directories.

Conclusion:

India has been quite active in developing its special libraries and information centres in the last sixty years. While other types of libraries serve multiple objectives such as education, research, recreation, cultural and social activities, the major and perhaps only objective of a special library, is the provision of information, in support of the objectives of its parent organisation. Special libraries are formed in research and development, establishments, government departments, directorates, industrial and business undertakings, learned societies and professional associations, trade and business associations, hospitals and health services, social and welfare organisations, museums, national gallery of arts; etc.

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