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LIBRARY SERVICE IN INDIA:
SOME STRAY THOUGHTS

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To perpetuate the sweet memory of its Founder Director Professor Sachidulal Das gupta, the School of Library Science of the Delhi Library Association instituted a Memorial Lecture Series way back in 1957. The inaugural lecture in the series was delivered by Shri B S Kesavan followed by Dr D S Kothari, Prof S Parthasarthy, Dr Jagdish S Sharma, Shri Girja Kumar, Prof S Parthasarthy, Prof M L Saini, Dr T A V Murthy, Prof T N Rajan, Dr Usha M Munshi, Mr N Dutta, Dr (Ms) Uma Kanjilal and Dr A L Moorthy and Dr B K Sen.

17 July 1912 – 7 April 1966
I see no reason why Professor Vashishth chose to expose me before such a gathering of librarians this morning. I am reminded of a couplet of the famous Urdu poet, Ghalib in which he bemoans that “I never claimed to be a learned soul, never had mastery over any craft, I fail to see why sky has developed enmity with me.” I must dispel in the very beginning that I am not going to deliver an oration containing certain novel ideas in library service. These are stray thoughts of a person who left active involvement with the subject about fifteen years back. They mostly concern with our practical life while we are on duty in an organization. I have tried to bring to the notice of the younger colleagues that in our enthusiasm to catch up with the digital age we have overlooked certain important aspects of our responsibilities that should have been attended to. The foremost among these are the ethical aspects of our professional behavior. The profession has developed certain principles that serve as guide and we must always remember them while we are on duty in a library.

These principles have been adopted by librarians in most of the countries of the world and have been called as a code of ethics. I remember, some twenty years back, or even earlier we had adopted a code of ethics for performing our duties and it was circulated among the professionals. But I could not lay my hand on the document. I am, therefore reproducing below the code of ethics adopted by the American Library Association:

**Code of Ethics for Library Professionals**

(a) We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased and courteous response to all requests.

(b) We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.

(c) We protect each user’s right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought, or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.

(d) We recognize and respect intellectual property rights.

(e) We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the right and welfare of all employees of our institution.

(f) We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues or our employing institutions.
(g) We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal belief to interfere with fair representation of aims of our institutions or provision of access to their information resources.

(h) We believe for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skill, by encouraging professional development of our co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.

Another associated document that deserves our attention and that has also been adapted by the ALA is the Bill of Rights. The code of ethics serves as our guide in rendering service to our clientele. Bill of Rights tells us why we must protect the rights of the user for access to the materials available in the library and how we must protect his personal privacy while he is in the library. As I am not aware if ILA has also adapted a Bill of Rights I shall put before you Library Bill of Rights adopted by ALA.

**Library Bill of Rights**

1. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest information and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Material should not be excluded because of the origin, background or views of those contributing to their creation.

2. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Material should not be proscribed or removed because of the partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

3. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

4. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgement of free expression and free access to ideas.

5. A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background or views

6. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available for public they serve should make such facilities available on an equal basis regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individual or groups requesting their use.

Code of ethics serves as a guide for our behavior while we are on duty in the library. It explains our duty towards the user, our behavior towards colleagues and the moral values that we must uphold in offering service to our users in the library. The code also enjoins upon us the responsibility to resist any attempt to put restriction on use of materials available in the library.

**Censorship and Libraries**

Of late censorship has become a frequently used tool in the hands of the government/influential pressure groups. The cold war situation in the world is the main cause for its frequent use. Most of the time these are imposed by junior level authorities and are removed when challenged in the court. The American Library Association regularly brings out ALA News Letter on Intellectual Freedom to keep the profession alert on the subject.
Censorship has been categorized as

1. Regulative Censorship
2. Existential Censorship

Regulative censorship refers to suppression of information that are considered inimical to the values safeguarding religion, protection of state, or personal morality and purity. Mr. A R Singh has cited many such cases in his book *Information Management in Archives and Libraries*. As a professional, we have not shown any sensitivity against such censorship.

Existential censorship refers to monopolistic domination by either the state or a pressure group. In our country, this type of censorship has become very frequent in recent years. It was demonstrated very recently during the literary gatherings at Jaipur. A few years back the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute library was ransacked by certain group simply because it had a manuscript which presented an old rulers personality in a way not acceptable to the group. The Bombay University and the Delhi University had to remove from their syllabus books against which a group carried demonstration.

**RFID and Libraries**

We are very enthusiastic for adopting the RFID tags in books in the library. We have not paused to think about its implications vis-a-vis the users right to privacy. But the ALA, before adopting it discussed its implications with regard to its impact on user’s right to privacy in its *Intellectual Freedom Committee*. The Committee has adopted the following guide lines for using RFID in library books.

1. Use the RFID selection and procurement process as an opportunity to educate the library users about its technology.
2. Allow users to opt out from using RFID enabled borrowers card.
3. Ensure that institutional privacy policies and practices are reflected in the configuration of RFID system.
4. Notify the public about the library use of RFID.
5. Librarians should continue their long standing commitment to securing bibliographic and patron’s data bases from unauthorized access and use.
6. Train staff not to release information about an items’ unique identifier in response to blind or casual inquiries.
7. RFID numbers have the potential to compromise the privacy of users and therefore must be considered highly confidential.

**Libraries, Archives and Museums**

As librarian, we have always considered our selves as a class distinct from archivists and museulogists. But if we closely study the materials available in the three places we would be surprised to find that some element of archive is present in most of the university and public libraries. The National Knowledge Commission has already recognized this and recommended that “there should be an effort to include
them in the LIS sector” (LIBRARIES, GATEWAYS…ANNEX.5). Similarly
museum are often also in possession of manuscripts, written documents on
parchments, stone, barks, etc. It is time we start close relationship with these
components of culture.

Preservation. We have confined preservation work to only binding of damaged
books, to the negligence of conservation techniques and preparation disaster
management etc. as part of preservation. Acquisition of non-book materials such as
private papers, paintings, digital sources etc. call for proper arrangement for their
preservation in libraries. The topic should receive attention that it deserves

Key Challenge Areas for Libraries in Digital Age

Digital sources are now an integral part of library collection. The situation has
thrown up many challenges to the library. These challenges include awareness and
access issues; understanding of users’ needs, wants and expectations; changing
organizational structures and ways in which people work. Maintaining tools to identify
and locate information, and increase utility of those tools for end users has become
one of the most important tasks for librarian. The function of librarian is becoming
more and more advisory that helps user reach his information source. “The librarian
is becoming a location awareness device”. These thoughts expressed by new
generation librarians overlook the fact that these have always been the functions of
librarians. The only change is that instead of books, which are a physical entity, it is
information bit, available in digital form.

On the other hand a number of society’s normal practices are going to severely
affect libraries when libraries change over to on line information delivery mode. Chief
among these changes are movement from flat fee payment system to pay per use
model; consolidation of electronic information distributors; erosion of privacy and
issues of access and cultural diversity. Let us have a look at some of these practices
that are going to be affected:

Flat fee vs pay-per-use. The system will seriously affect users’ habit. It will
discourage habit of searching the most relevant source from among the sources
available in the library and encourage them to examine items that have become more
popular in use (use only best-seller books)

Best-seller Phenomenon. Any item produced in large scale becomes cheap.
Similarly information distributed in mass scale becomes cheap and is readily
available. This may make information needed by smaller group of people more
expensive and even harder to find. Over time this may lead to a situation where
electronic delivery of entertainment will be favored over delivery of solid information.

Consolidation of Electronic Information Distributors. As tendency of corporate
mergers, buyout and consolidation increases result into fewer independent
information providers. This may affect the quality of information delivered to the
library users.

Privacy. When information is received electronically it may raise problem of
privacy of the users. Libraries may not adhere to their strong privacy tradition when providing pay-per-view information.

**Access.** In an environment of pay-per-byte of information era, libraries may not continue to provide free access to all the members. This may lead to division in society among haves and have-nots.

At present, Internet, which is considered to be a free access tool, is not under the management of an international body. In a recently held international conference a proposal made by certain countries to bring Internet under the control of an international organization was vehemently opposed by those who are now having control over it.

In addition to the above problems, Michael Gorman identifies the following other problems associated with electronic documents. These problems arise due to the basic characteristics of digital documents.

**Malleability.** Authenticity of a document is of prime importance in the field of knowledge and learning. A published book is its own documentation because its matter has an element of fixity. If a piece of writing is not in a state of fixity of what it says it is, how can it generate new knowledge? An electronic document lacks fixity; it has no publisher to certify the text. One has no certain knowledge if it is truthfulness and not sure if it will remain the same the next day.

**Selectivity.** The speed and convenience that is associated with access to electronic documents prevents library users from seeking out better information and recoded knowledge in books in the shelves. For them any result retrieved by the search engine is acceptable irrespective of whether there are better results that were not retrieved by the search engine.

**Exclusivity.** Due to the dominance of English language in the web, only the educated elite, in the non English speaking country, can participate fully in the global digital network.

**Vulnerability.** Hacking digital information is now a common phenomenon. It is done for any one of the variety of reasons—political, economic or just to show off. We are vulnerable to an extent which were not known during the book era. Again, data can be accessed only if the system is available. In a crashed system data is imprisoned and there is no way to access it.

**Superficiality.** In the absence of literacy and proper appreciation of the value of the new technology, interaction of the masses with internet have been superficial and more for seeking pleasure in place of knowledge (through games, chatting and viewing pornography), or for such services as shopping from home for books, CD, DVD, etc.

The above should not be taken as points against introduction of ITC in library services. The possibility of interconnectivity is the most important contribution of ICT. Consortia have given a boost to access to far lying resources. Open source software is another example of collaboration among libraries. OCLC'S World Cat in partnership with Yahoo, MSN, and Google has made possible access to 50 million library catalogue records.
National Policy for Libraries and Information Services

The public library, local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural development of individual and social group”. In Chili library services are provided at metro station. In Indonesia and in Norway services are provided through book boats. In parts of South Africa library services are provided even to informal settlements or squalor areas along with no infrastructure. Books are delivered through car boots. In France public libraries coordinate their services with medical centers for toddlers where parents are awaiting their turns.

In our country we are still awaiting for a library and information policy to guide the development of a national library system. Looked at in the perspective of the fact that we got a model public library from UNESCO as early as 1951 the existing situation is a sad commentary on the profession.

The first attempt in formulating a policy was made as early as 1944 by Ranganathan in his Post-War Reconstruction of libraries in India. His model Union Library Act 1948 had provisions for a National Library Committee headed by Minister of Education, and a National Committee of Librarians to discuss problems of common interest. There was a long gap of a decade when in 1957 an Advisory Committee on Libraries with SK Sinha as Chairman was set up by the Government to survey the public libraries in the country. In his report, Mr. Sinha also recommended for the appointment of a Standing Committee, called as National Library Committee to oversee the developments of public libraries in the country. The story of any development on the subject of a library policy remains static for almost fifteen years, when in 1972, the Centenary year of Raja Rammohun Roy, Government established Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation to foster public library system in the country. The Foundation was also assigned the task of enunciating a national library policy and to work towards its adoption by the Central and State Governments. The draft policy statement issued by the Foundation also recommended for setting up a Central Coordination Council to develop an overall plan for the Country; coordinate the programmes of different States, Departments and Organizations and to recommend financial support for the programmes. The Foundation hinted in its recommendations that, with suitable modification in the Foundation Act, the Foundation could take over the role of the proposed Co-ordination Committee for Public Library System. It also proposed establishment and maintenance of National Information Systems for remaining subject disciplines on the pattern of NISSAT.

In the meanwhile Indian Library Association was also asked to prepare a document on the topic. The ILA document was prepared as National Library and Information Policy. The Association in its document also recommended for establishment of National Commission on Library and Information Science to help develop nationwide public library system in the country. The Association explained that the policy shall be governed by the Government and shall form an integral part of social and economic policies in consonance with the directive principles of the Constitution. It shall be, in line with other national policies such as those of Education, Health, Industry, etc. After describing the proposed structure of the library system,
the report recommended for setting up a National Centre for Education and Research in Library and Information Science. We shall find this proposal included in the recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission. Around the same time Government also set up a committee under the chairmanship of Prof D P Chattopadhyaya in 1985. It was asked to prepare a Report on National Policy on Library and Information system. Prof. Chattopadhyaya studied the subject under the heads, public library, academic library, special library and information system, national library system and bibliographic services. Apart from the structural organization of libraries he also covered in his study manpower development, professional status of librarians and problems of modernization of library and information systems. Under the head manpower development he called for establishment of a National Centre for Higher Education and Research in library science and recommended for the academic status for professional staff. He advised the government to consider instituting an All India Library Service. This document was prepared after studying the proposals of Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation and proposal of the Indian Library Association.

The sad part of the story is that none of the proposal was approved by the Government till 2005 when the National Knowledge Commission appeared on the scene. The Commission’s overarching aim is to transfer India into a vibrant knowledge-based society.” The Commission thinks that the developments in information communication technology have enabled libraries to provide wide public access to all and to bridge the gaps between the local, national and global levels. But “library and information services in India have not kept pace with the paradigmatic changes taking place in the country”. Among the five key areas of knowledge paradigm two deal with the access to knowledge and better knowledge services. The Commission has drawn a charter for the libraries with the following objectives:

Wide dissemination of knowledge.
Function as vehicle for creation of new knowledge.
Provide facilities for optimal use of knowledge by all sectors – Government, private, urban and rural.
Ensure access to relevant knowledge to all people of the country.

According to the Commission the libraries are now performing their functions in piecemeal and as an ‘isolated venture by different agencies. The Commission has therefore, recommended for creation of a permanent National Mission on Libraries. The proposed mission should be converted into a permanent National Commission on Libraries. The National Knowledge Commission has enumerated the role of the proposed Commission which include (a) advice to the Government on libraries and information sector, (b) set standards for collection, services and technical processing, and (c) encourage public-private participation in developing libraries, etc.

The Commission has, for the first time paid attention to the vast amount of materials lying in the country in private collections. These collections are of immense historical and cultural value. The mission has recommended for setting up a Commission on the subject so that the issues of identification, organization and access to this vast source
material are studied and suitable mechanism for their use is worked out.

A look at the various recommendations and suggestions made by the National Knowledge Commission makes it clear that most of the suggestions and recommendations are echoes of the proposals by earlier committees and commissions. The litmus test is the degree of success that the NKC gets to its proposals.

**Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation**

Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation was created for coordination, monitoring and developing public library services in the country. But even after four decades of its existence the Foundation has made no visible impact on the prevailing library system in the country. Though it claims to have a research unit it has made no attempt to assess its impact and formulate a revised policy in the light of the results of the evaluation. It has not succeeded in bringing out any guide book, or manual suitable in Indian conditions. Its journal which is subtitled as *Indian Journal of Library Studies* contains more articles on the contributions and ideas of Raja Rammohun Roy as a social reformer, than on library science. Even the books reviewed in the journal are not on library science. The January-March 2010 issue carries reviews of the under mentioned books:

- Birds, beasts, men, nature: Tales from the Mahabharata
- Some problems of translation: A study of Tagore’s Red Olenders
- Nehru, a contemporary assessment
- Beyond the world of Apu: The films of Satyajit Ray
- Family values
- Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah
- Written for ever: The best of civil lines

A brochure which was released by the Foundation describes existence of a research cell in the foundation. But the list of publications in the web site does not list any title published as a result of research till date.

The Foundation announces that it has three regional centers one each in Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai and has a proposal to set up a centre in Chennai too. But enquiries to the Delhi Office clarify that it is only a guest house for teams which visited libraries in the region.

I apologise the audience for presenting such a disjointed picture of the library services in the country. But I have done this with the hope that you may rectify some of these with your efforts.

Thank you!
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He served Ratan Tata Library of Delhi School of Economics (University of Delhi) during 1956-1961 as Assistant Librarian, Indian School of International Studies (Deemed to be University) during 1961-1972, Jawaharlal Nehru University during 1972 as Deputy Librarian and Jamia Millia Islamia during 1972-1995.


He is Life member Indian Library Association, Delhi Library Association, Association of Government Librarians and Information Scientists, India Islamic Cultural Centre. Convenor/ President Indian Association of Academic Librarians
