

STUDY OF A FUTURE VISION OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES ON PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN INDIA

Lal Mohammad *
Sandip Kumar Pathak **

Abstract

The potential impact of the internet on the public demand for the services and resources of public libraries is an issue of critical importance. Public libraries are social institutions offering services based upon books and information for various public groups on social, political, economic, cultural and other matters. Among the different types of libraries evolved by the society in modern times, public libraries are the most popular because of the functions they perform. They play a significant role in the welfare of the society. An attempt has also been made here to provide a futuristic vision of ICT enabled public library services in India to help the entire rural as well as urban community especially unprivileged masses.

Introduction

Public libraries are primarily institutions of basic learning having a mission which involves in providing collection and services to meet information needs of local community. These serve as local gateway to knowledge and information and provide conditions for lifelong learning, community development and independent decision making by an individual. Majority of population in India lives in rural areas where new technologies are not within the reach of people, that is why a gap has widened between information rich and information deprived community. Public Libraries have a social mission and are devoted to the development of the community. It has been providing information for education, leisure and entertainment for decades and will continue this function for many more years. Users are able to read and borrow anything available in the system. The library is seen as a safe place for people to meet or simply browse through rows of books (Hendrix, 1998). Whatever may be the changes that are taking place, Public libraries cannot set back from their established roles i.e. culture, education, reading, literacy, and information.

Public Library- Definition

Public Library has been explained differently by different experts depending upon the importance they give to its objectives. However, the most widely accepted definition of a public library was formulated

* Research Scholar, Shri Venkateswara University, Gajraula.

** Supervisor, Assis. Lib., Gwalior, M.P.

by UNESCO in 1949 which was later revised in 1972 (UNESCO 2004). According to UNESCO manifesto, the definition of a public library is as follows:

- a. Public Library is financed for the most part out of public funds.
- b. It charges no fees from users and yet is open for full use by the public.
- c. It is intended as an auxiliary educational institution providing a means of self education which is endless.
- d. It houses educative and informative materials giving reliable information freely and without partiality.

Objectives of the Public Library

- To provide free public library services to the citizens.
- To function as a model public library in India and abroad
- To eradicate the illiteracy.
- To provide a platform for cultural activities, lifelong learning and creativity.

The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto indicates that "the public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups." The DPL conforms most of the missions as suggested in the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto.

Review Literature

India can now claim to be the world's largest democracy: its population growth has made it the second country in the world after China to cross the one billion mark (Arora, 2001). As its population grows, it is faced by enormous challenges in areas such as literacy and education, areas in which it has long been acknowledged that the public library has an indispensable role to play. This role accords with the definition in the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (UNESCO, 2004), which declares that the public library is "the local gateway to knowledge, [and] provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups". In this vision of public libraries, they are seen as people-oriented institutions which should service the widest population possible. However, public libraries in

India are in a state of abject. Possessing neither regularly renewed print collections nor vibrant non-print multimedia resources that could lure in illiterate or semi-literate folk; they suffer from a variety of infrastructure, manpower and monetary constraints, as well as being low in the priorities of policy makers and implementing bodies.

At the same time as India's expanding population looks for innovative support and services from its libraries, the country has emerged as one of the global leaders in information technology and one of the largest exporters of knowledge workers. In this digital era, the people of India should thus come to think of the public library not only as a champion of books and knowledge but as a major access point to the benefits of the digital age. But again, as a developing country, the economic conditions for libraries and information centres are poor in this regard, especially by comparison with the developed world. On the one hand, there has been a significant degree of implementation of automation and networking in special and academic libraries. But in rural areas, where a majority of population lives, public libraries are almost wholly dependent on financial support from central or state government for their collection development, infrastructure and human resources, and as a result planning for modern tools and IT facilities in public libraries has not taken place.

Though there are a number of constraints faced by Public Library system in India for effective dissemination of information, they are providing traditional library services with utmost care and trying to serve the community in the changing atmosphere also. A number of public libraries especially in the urban sector have adopted Information Technology (IT), thanks for the help received from RRRLF. But despite these advances, majority of the population are still denied the benefits of these services (Parameswaram & Vimal, 2008).

Information and Communication Technology in Libraries

ICT has been one of the major factors causing changes in the way people communicate, locate, retrieve, and use information. Libraries and information centres have embraced the ICT more

profoundly than many other fields, and most of them are currently using electronic products and services. It is evident that ICT has created a division in the modern society: information poor and information rich. The countries that had the ability to utilize ICT for information resource development have generated information-rich societies while those countries which were weak in utilization of ICT have created information-poor societies. As information is directly related to knowledge and skills which influence socio-economic development, one could hypothesize the relationship between information and development. This has speculated the assumption that information-rich countries have developed economies and information while poor countries have less developed economies (Yapa, 2003). Because economy and information are closely related and information resource development leads to economic development, policy makers pay special attention to the development of information resources. It is recognized that ICT is a tool which could be manipulated effectively for information resource development. This explains why economists in the Developed World are interested in ICT. Library systems were re-structured to accommodate ICT in library operations, because of the belief that the success of a library can be measured by the extent of ICT use by the library (Yapa, 2003).

H.K. Kaul has opined that "Our public library system in the country failed totally in bringing knowledge to the doorsteps of every individual. It is advisable for us to look at the problem afresh, especially when the computer and communication technologies have now become available to us at a minimal cost (Kaul, 2002).

It Enabled Public Library Services in India- A Future Vision

The new technology which today is available is just a new tool to produce, store and distribute information. It also makes the communication more effective and rapid. That is why we call it nowadays ICT, Information and Communication Technology and not only IT, Information Technology. As means of communication this new technology is comparable with the book. We all know that ICT has already changed the way libraries function. As information and knowledge institutions, public libraries in developed countries are probably among the

institutions within the public sector that have been most actively involved in the digital revolution.

The Indian scenario in this regard still depicts the gloomy picture as only libraries of national repute have started using ICT in providing services and state public libraries and district libraries are still deprived of this vital service. However the Indian government has started taking stock of the situation and states are enacting Public Library Acts. Punjab government's recent announcement to pass this Act is a step in this regard. Therefore, in near future it is expected that all public libraries would get equipped with ICT and following services would be provided by them:

Networked Library Services

Communication services on Internet are now more accessible for public use. Blogs, Wikis, Pod Casting, RSS feeds, email, instant messaging and SMS are powerful communication tools available through Internet. These services have the capability of changing the nature and delivery of library services. SMS, E-mail and chat services are already popular among public libraries to deliver reminder, notification and reference service. Sending SMS via on-line is comparatively cheap or free. As ICT is implemented in public Libraries in India, these would be aware of how to make use the advantage of these new age communication services to keep connected to the community.

Informational Libraries and Reading Habits

Present urbanized society observes a changing face of new generation, where children have access to various modes of entertainment and amusement. Every middle-class household in India equips with at least one electronic gadgetry, like, television, music system, DVD-player, VCD-player, Internet, video games, etc. All these gadgets may be detrimental to our new generations as well as older generations, that is also one of the reasons for declining number of regular users of public libraries. We know public libraries build up collections of literature of local languages, national literature and world literature. A public library user can get higher satisfaction if they read classic literature, contemporary literature and know cultural heritage of India and the state he/she belongs. Other than books on literature, many informative books and magazines that enhance

knowledge levels of the users are available in the public libraries. Other useful documents, such as career handbooks, encyclopedias, directories, dictionaries, etc. are also accessible in public libraries. Reading habits not only help a person becoming knowledgeable, socially responsible and socially productive person but also help in personality development. Information literacy competency development programmes may be initiated to impart necessary information skills and reading skills to public library users in maximizing utilization of public library resources. A public library may be participating in a library resource-sharing network. The public library users should learn how to search union catalogues of the network, how to obtain documents from other participating libraries through inter-library loan service and document delivery service. This way the limitation of collection in one public library may overcome and users get satisfaction for this service. Public libraries also conduct various extension programmes, like, quiz competition, story, poetry and essay writing competition, etc. that also aims to enhance reading habits of the users, especially younger users of the public libraries.

Public Libraries in India

Public libraries in India have a countrywide spread, consist of state central libraries in every state, district libraries, urban public libraries at the cities and rural public libraries at the villages. Public libraries are mainly supported by state governments and local authorities, and some times by the central government, developmental agencies, non-government organizations and private trusts. The Delhi Public Library, established in 1951 by government of India in collaboration with UNESCO, caters library and information services to the National Capital Territory of Delhi. Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation is the nodal agency of the Government of India to support public library services and system and promote public library movement in the country. The RRRLF undertakes different functions in each state and union territory through a State Library Planning Committee or State Library Committee. Its headquarters is located at Kolkata and it has four zonal offices in Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai. RRRLF provides financial and technical assistance to public libraries and organizations engaged in the promotion of public library development through

different schemes. Schemes of RRRLF broadly categorized as Matching Schemes and Non-Matching Schemes. Assistance under matching schemes is given from the resources shared on 50:50 matching basis with the state governments. Assistance under non-matching schemes does not have share of the state governments.

Library Legislation in India

Public Libraries Act also ensures each village or city at least have one government-aided public library. This Act also makes provisions of finances, human resources and other resources for the development and functioning of public libraries. Some state governments provide grants for the public libraries; some other state governments collect Library Cess from the taxpayers.

The states that passed Public Libraries Act are shown below along with the year:

- Tamil Nadu (then called Madras Public Libraries Act, 1948);
- Andhra Pradesh (Hyderabad Public Libraries Act, 1955; then Andhra Pradesh Public Libraries Act, 1960);
- Maharashtra (Kolhapur Public Libraries Act, 1945; then Maharashtra Public Libraries Act, 1967);
- Karnataka (Mysore Public Libraries Act, 1965; then Karnataka Public Libraries Act)
- West Bengal (West Bengal Public Libraries Act, 1979);
- Manipur (Manipur Public Libraries Act, 1988);
- Kerala (Kerala Public Libraries Act, 1989);
- Haryana (Haryana Public Libraries Act, 1989);
- Mizoram (Mizoram Public Libraries Act, 1993);
- Goa (Goa Public Libraries Act, 1994)
- Uttaranchal (Uttaranchal Public Libraries Act, 2005)

Role of State Level Library Associations

Library associations exist in most of the states and union territories of India. State level library associations are very active in public libraries development in their respective states. Some library associations also conduct certificate and diploma courses in library science that help the learners get into the profession. Some library associations also conduct refresher courses for the in-service public librarians, mostly in the areas of library automation,

ICT applications in libraries, and other contemporary issues. Most library associations observe Library Day and Dr. S.R. Ranganathan's birthday. On those occasions they organize one-day seminars or lectures. These way public librarians get informed about the recent development in the librarianship and public libraries movement in India and the states. Some library associations bring out their newsletters and bulletins for their member librarians and disseminate various professional information.

Information Literacy Programmes for Public Librarians and Public Library Users

Information literacy (IL) competency development programmes for public librarians would be a kind of training course for the trainers. The public librarians would impart training to the end users of public libraries. Some of the skills required for the information literacy are already achieved by the public librarians through their formal degree or diploma courses; induction, orientation, and on-the-job training programmes. Some librarians started their career before the introduction of information communication technologies (ICT) in library services and information handling. Such ICT skills, communication and teaching skills need to be obtained freshly through the refresher courses.

Community Skills Development

Functioning effectively in the information age of the 21st century is not just a matter of computer or technological competence. It also calls for a new kind of information literacy or intelligence attuned to the digital world and the changing nature of what counts for knowledge, and for what we have termed civic literacy. The main thrust of the efforts of public libraries would be in developing citizens' capability and confidence in using ICT. In this regard, the public library would establish an in-house training team to provide a tailor-made, flexible training programme to staff. The team would also deliver ICT training to the public on a countywide basis, focussing on those groups most marginalised in our community, for example refugees, the elderly, travellers and those on low incomes

Digitized Heritage Service

With the implementation of ICT in public Libraries, an archive of local reminiscence materials, based on citizens' stories, photographs and objects from an

earlier period of the town's history, would be digitized. The resources of library will stand networked or mounted on the web and these shall be accessed from a PC located in the reference library. This application would also provide access to other information such as opening times of the cultural institutions, special exhibitions and events, and to other services such as ordering photographic prints or downloading images.

Online Catalogue and Related Services

This would facilitate remote access to the full range of library services, including the ability to renew or reserve books and other stock, and to check the user's own borrower record. Accessing an electronic database of community information, tailored to the library would be feasible. Posting an inquiry to the 'Ask a Librarian' service, using the electronic portal to access the digital resources of the library and partner organisations and Finding information helpful to selecting reading material e.g. 'top ten reads' of the month would be possible. The library's catalogue being online, would allow users to perform basic search/browse functions from any networked PC.

Library Extension Service

Library services have traditionally used mobile libraries as a way of reaching remote users from library service points or physically unable to access the library. Information on local community groups and in one particular case, information on local tourist attractions was presented with commentary and images alongside. With the application of ICT, the information would now be hosted on the library's website or loaded onto a CD-ROM and networked. It will further pave the way to establish gateways to information compiled in collaboration with other agencies. Examples of these include local education and training opportunities; local services and support agencies for people from minority groups; information for careers about available support services and rights entitlements; learning materials dedicated to sport education and training and alerts regarding health related issues.

Education and Training for Staff

Training are crucial in opening up online services for people using public libraries. Staff working in public libraries must be encouraged to attend continuing education programs and skill enhancement to use ICT

technologies to the fullest extent in delivering public library services. The public libraries must be under the control of a full time library professional and they should get allowances and service conditions comparable to the counterparts in academic, research and special libraries. What is needed most a competent librarian who can organize the services in a balanced manner for all sections of the community served by the library.

Conclusion

Information literacy competency ensures maximum utilization of the information resources as well as optimization of information handling capabilities. Many libraries and information systems introduce user orientation programmes to educate users on the salient features of information resources, search techniques, search strategies, scholarly communications and other aspects. In India a number of training programmes are conducted by the different agencies, who are also architects of modern information systems, to the end-users. The public library system in India is condemned to remain peripheral to the actual information needs of the masses; that it is in a depressed state, and serves as little more than a warehouse of recreational reading materials, a majority of which are in regional languages. Traditional in-house library services themselves cannot be stretched to meet the material needs of patrons who face distinct and different challenges involving library access and information delivery. Special funding arrangements, proactive planning, and promotion are necessary to deliver equivalent library services and to achieve equivalent results in community teaching and learning, and generally to maintain quality in public library services. Library leaders must have the skills to create and nurture a new type of library culture in which change is encouraged and new visions of service can be implemented (Kent, 2006). According to Susan Kent library leadership issues mainly revolve around three factors: architecture, technology and planning. In view of the public library setup in context to India, all these factors seem to be nowhere worked out yet. Christopher Edwards in his article has rightly pointed out 'Providing access to information has traditionally been about buildings, based around institutions offering services to onsite users. Building tomorrow's libraries will not simply be a matter of installing rows of computers with Internet access: our

users will increasingly expect to be able to access material from where they live and work. Providing access will increasingly be about developing electronic information services such as Internet portals and acting as a broker between content providers and remote users.

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