



THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM AND ITS ROLE IN THE SOCIETY IN THE ICT ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the functioning of Public Libraries in ICT the environment and discusses how the users of the Public Libraries are benefitted in such environment. The ICT applications support and strengthen the Public Libraries to provide services to the Public effectively and efficiently. Further the definitions, nature and types and aims of the Public Libraries are highlighted. The present scenario of the Public Libraries in the ICT environment is also discussed. The role of Public Library in the society has been discussed with reference to its benefits, such as access to sources of information and education, informal self education, to promote cultural and social activities, etc., and the modern services etc., which are to be provided by these libraries in the present environment.

1. Introduction:

The primary mission of the Public Library is to provide services to the people in the society to meet their information needs. These libraries are called as centers of knowledge and information to enable the individuals for their life-long learning and enhancing their independent decision making and thus to support the development community. The majority of people in India live in remote rural areas and new emerging technology are not within their reach. Therefore, comparing the rural community with urban community, it is found that there is a gap between information deprived community and the information rich community.

The internet and web technologies make it possible to establish interactive communication between Public Libraries and their users. Due to advanced technologies the users at the remote places can be connected by one another with the most affordable cost. The impact of ICT applications in the Public Libraries drastically influence the collections and services of Public Libraries. The Public Libraries provide information for social, political, cultural, economic, industrial, agricultural, educational and human development of the nation, so these libraries are called as social in institutions and the perform specific functions for the development of society. Since these libraries have their own social mission, they function only for the development of the community. These libraries provide



information for education (Teaching and Learning activities), research, and development (R&D) as well as entertainment of the people. There for, Hendrix states that Public Libraries is seen as a safe place for people to meet or simply browse through rows of books.¹

The implementation and use of ICT makes it possible in the Public Libraries to establish free exchange of information, increasing efficiency of user, ensuring effectiveness of services and assuring the staff efficiency. The ICT based services like Network Services, Internet, RFID, Barcode, etc. facilitate effective and efficient services to the readers. The open source software is a big advantage to the Public Libraries, because it has not only free automation, but it also has free digitization, of Public Library resources. For example KOHA is open source software for free automation and the free open source software's such as D-space, Greenstone, E-print are useful for not only digitization of the Public Library resources, but they are also useful for achieving scholarly communication and discussion among users of Public Libraries. The Institutional Repositories ensure the long-term of preservation of collections by the way Open Source Software's. The Institutional Repositories are the part of Public Libraries and as recommended by National Knowledge Commission, the Public Libraries and Institutional Repositories are the key to knowledge management.

The Public Libraries are funded from public financial resources, there libraries hold collections of books, periodicals and other materials like audio books, e-books, CDs, DVDs, video tapes, cassettes. These libraries provide special services such as, Internet, Reader's Advisory Services, (called as 'readalikes'), Community meetings, storytelling sessions, adult literacy programs, career counseling, cultural programs, discussion groups, mobile library service, etc. These services provided by the Public Libraries and organization and management of special collections of Public Libraries are being strengthened by the implementation of ICT in Public Libraries.

2. Definitions of Public Library:

In order to understand in-depth, the nature of Public Library its objectives and functions, its role for the development of society, some of the fundamental definitions of Public Library are given at below.

While highlighting the role of Public Libraries in the society as equity of access to information to all and ethical commitment of staff of the Public Library, the American Library Association (ALA) defines Public Library as:

“no one should be denied information because he or she cannot afford the cost of a book or periodical, have access to the internet or information in any of its various formats.”

Depending upon the importance of objectives of Public Libraries, the different experts have given different definitions of Public Library. But the widely accepted definition of Public Library was formulated by UNESCO in the year 1972. According to this UNESCO manifesto, the definition of Public Library is as under.

1. Public Library is financed for the most part out of public funds.
2. It charges no fees from users and yet is open for full use by the public.
3. It is intended as an auxiliary educational institution providing a means of self education which is endless.
4. It houses educative and informative materials giving reliable information freely and without partiality.²

Considering the governing body of the Public Library, its funding and the services provided by the Public Library, Encyclopedia Britannica, defines Public Library as:

“a library maintained by a municipality or other unit of local government or usually supported at least in part by local taxation that provides books and reference services free to all local residence.”³

The above definitions make it clear that Public Library is a non-commercial library. It is supported by public funds and the very purpose of this library is that it should be used by general public. It plays an important role in dissemination of knowledge in the society. National Knowledge Commission had considered Public Library as the most important source of the foundation of knowledge economic and it is also recommended by National Knowledge Commission that there is dire need to reform the Public Libraries in India.

3. Nature and Types of Public Libraries:

The Public Library differs from special and academic libraries. It is funded / financed by government and it is called as the brain of the social community. The people in the society as the users of Public Libraries have been influenced in the present information era to the greater extent because of application of technology in these libraries. The popular materials and the historical materials are mainly made available in the Public Libraries easily.

The types of Public Library are as below:

1. National Library
2. State Central Library
3. District Central Library
4. Village Library
5. Mobile Library.⁴

4. Aims of Public Library:

The aims of Public Library are as given below:

1. Public Library plays a vital role in improving the standard of education.
2. Access is free to all.
3. Provided valuable information as a whole to the society.
4. Managed by five laws of library science by S. R. Ranganathan, the father of library science.
5. Public Library act in trinity that is document Librarian-users.
6. Information Literacy.⁵

5. The Present Scenario

India is one of the world's largest democratic countries. Its population growth is second in the world next to China. When the population of nation grows, it causes for major challenges related to literacy and education. In such circumstances the public library plays an important role to overcome these challenges.⁶ This role has been described by UNESCO in its Public Library Manifesto as that the public library is local get-way to knowledge and it provides basic facilities for lifelong learning and cultural development of an individual and the social groups. Considering this UNESCO declaration, the public libraries should be observed that people oriented institutions which should serve for widest population in the society.

In the present scenario, the public libraries in India suffer from inadequate infrastructure, man power and funds. These libraries are always on low priorities in the process of policy making decisions and decision implementing bodies. Since the growth of population is high in India, the public libraries are supposed to provide innovative support and services to the people. India is considered to be one of the leading countries in the world, so far as information technology is concerned. In fact this country exports the knowledge workers in this sphere. In the present digital era, the public libraries are major centers to provide access to the digital information for the benefits of people in the society. On the contrary it is found that the economic conditions of public libraries are poor, because India is the developing country. Therefore, in comparison with developed countries, the public libraries in India are significantly lagging behind. If it is observed, the implementation of automation and networking in academic and special libraries is at the higher level and on the other hand, in the public libraries it has been to the lowest degree level. Especially in rural areas in India, where the majority of people are living, the public libraries are almost suffering in all respects, such as inadequate funds, man power and infrastructure. These libraries are dependent on the funds / public financial support either from Central or State Government to develop their collections, human resources and infrastructure. As the funds received by these libraries are merge, these libraries are facing financial constraints and as a result it is quite difficult for these libraries to plan for application of modern tools and techniques and also to provide ICT based facilities to the public.

For effective dissemination of information, in addition to the traditional library services, the public libraries have to provide also the ICT based services to the community in the changing present environment.

The public libraries located in urban areas have adopted ICT and they are providing better services to the people comparing to the public libraries located in a rural areas. So, the population their in rural areas are denied the benefits of public library services through ICT facilities.⁷



After independence, in general the growth of public libraries in India is found to be remarkable. Prior to the independence, there many challenges, especially in rural community regarding illiteracy, poor transportation and lack of mass media. During the post independence period the scenario of public library has been improved to some extent, but it is seen that the improvement of these libraries still lacking in respect with manly aspects.

As stated by Verma and Agarawal if the public libraries in India are compared with those of the developed countries, we have to go a long-way.⁸ After independence, the first census was conducted in the year 1951 and it was found that in the urban and rural areas, there were 950 public libraries maintained by the local governments. In addition to this number there were about 1500 subscription libraries. Primarily these libraries were holding some few hundred books and the reading rooms. The Delhi public library was established in 1951. The very purpose of this library was to adapt 'modern techniques to Indian conditions and to serve as a model Public Library for Asia.'⁹

The landmarks like establishment of Delhi Public Library, the involvement of Union Government in the Public Library legislation in some of the states are the major factors which supported the improvement of public libraries after independence in India.

6. Role of Public Library in the Society

6.1 The Public Library Performs the Following Functions for the Benefits of the Society.

a) Access to sources of Information and Education.

It refers to selected and organize need-based sources of information and support educational requirements of the local community in which the library is located.

b) Informal Self- Education.

The Public Library should work as instrumental agency for giving informal self-education to the adults in the society. It has to provide the suitable learning materials to the adults to develop their skills and competence in the fields of their interest. The self-education may include methods of agricultural operations, bee keeping, scientific methods of poultry etc.

c) To Promote Cultural and Social Activities:

The Public Libraries supposed to provide active support to socio- cultural groups like children's club, youth forum, teachers association, dramatic club, film society, lawyers association, doctors association, etc. for these socio-cultural groups, the library has to conduct informative, educative and cultural activities.

d) Preservation of Local Materials:

This function of Public Library means that the Public Library means that the Public Library has to identify and collect important cultural materials available in its jurisdiction. Such materials include works of art or sculpture, paintings, musical instruments etc. These materials link the people in the society with their past culture.

e) Strengthening of Democratic Spirit:

In the socio-cultural activities, the Public Library has to bring together different people of the society on a single platform. This activity develops a sense of unity, respect for others, appreciation of the differences in languages, religion and customs. These activities support to develop democratic life patterns. Thus the Public Library should have its existences as a democratic institution.¹⁰

6.2 Role of Public Library in the society

The nature of society is multi-lingual and multi-cultural. Therefore, the public libraries have to strengthen these multi-lingual and multi-cultural groups existing in the society in order to achieve this function, the public libraries need to organize the different functions and get together meetings of different cultural groups. The functions like religions, festivals, celebration of birthdays of eminent persons in the society etc., should be organized, so that the people from multi-cultural groups can come together.

The another major role of the public library in the society is to preserve the historical cultural material with the help of historians, archaeologists, literary persons, social workers, leaders of the area etc. These efforts of the public library established the link between the past and future. In this behalf, the UNESCO Manifesto declares that ‘the public library is concerned with the refreshment of man’s spirit by the provision of books for relaxation and pleasure.’(UNESCO-2004)¹¹

Basically the public library has to meet the individual needs of the people in the society. So it has to collect the cultural material on local, regional and national levels. The public libraries are financed by public funds hence they have to provide free and impartial services to the local community irrespective of cast and creeds. So these libraries are called as the democratic institutions, which provide information for human development may be educational and cultural development.

Considering the role of public library in the society, the public library has to function as community information center, learning center, research center as well as formal education support center. In order to achieve the role of its own, the public library has to provide the various library services such as Document Supply Service, Information Service, Current Awareness Service, Reprographic Service, Services based on non-book materials, Services through Inter Library Loan and Consortia, Union or Shared Cataloguing Service, etc.

In addition to the above services, the public library has to also provide the modern services as given below :

1. Public library portals.
2. Internet access.
3. The services through digitized collections, E-books, hybrid-library etc.
4. Information literacy activities.
5. Providing commercial on-line data basis and bibliographic on-line data bases.
6. Network based services.
7. Specialized services for children.
8. Photo-coping facilities.
9. On -line catalogue facilities and
10. Resource sharing.

The modern society presently exists in an age of information. Therefore, the people living in the modern society must be information literate, so as to get an access to their desired information. The above modern services of the Public Library are an effective media for the people to get a prompt and accurate access to information.

7. Conclusion

The present scenario of Public Libraries in India is not that much satisfactory in respect with the resources available in these libraries; the resources like manpower, finance and other physical resources like building, furniture, equipments etc. The Public Libraries situated in the rural areas are again more weak than the Public Libraries situated in urban areas. Similarly, due to the inadequate resources as above, the modern services are not being provided by the Public Libraries located in rural areas. Since the Public Libraries play a vital role in the development of society/nation in regard with Economic Development (Industrial and Agricultural) and Social Development (Educational, Cultural and Human), these libraries should be provided with adequate resources as above so as to enable them to strengthen their in-house activities and programmes as well as the services to benefit the community.

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