

Historical Perspective of Libraries and Higher Education in India

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Abstract

There is a rich tradition of libraries in Indian educational system set up since ancient period. The libraries took formal shape gradually during a long span of time when written teaching and learning process started. In this paper an effort has been made to describe the journey of Indian libraries in abbreviated form.

Keywords: Historical perspective; Higher education; India.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions have since their inception, depended on libraries. The role of the library in supporting education has assumed greater importance and new dimensions today due to a variety of factors specially the phenomenal growth of knowledge. As a result of increased research activity, knowledge is expanding at a tremendous pace at the present time. The expansion is so great that we have coined the expression 'the explosion of knowledge' to refer to it which signifies a state of confusion arising from it. The distance created by it between what we are apt to regard as the recent past and our present

times makes it no exaggeration to say that a person living in the middle of the last century was nearer to ancient times than to the young men and women of our larger cities today.

According to a report¹, nine out of every ten scientists who have ever lived, are alive today, eighty five out of every hundred prescriptions dispensed in a pharmacy today did not exist before world war II, more than half the energy used during those seventy five years of our present century, and half of the papers in the field of Chemistry, and even more of Physics, that have ever been written have appeared within the last fifty years. Out of these, at least a quarter already need to be revised as a result of new discovery.

These statements vividly indicate a measure of the tremendously accelerated growth of knowledge which necessitates response on the part of educational institutions. It is estimated that in the course of 7 to 8 years the total quantity of available knowledge almost doubles itself. This great expansion of knowledge tends to place a heavy load on the curriculum which has to reflect in some measure at least the existing state of knowledge. The

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implication of this is that the present day student has to acquire a much larger quantum of knowledge than his brother or sister student some years ago. What is called for in this situation is the provision of facilities for self study by the students to a much larger extent than hitherto by establishment of well equipped libraries and their closer integration with the teaching program. Education has thus rightly been described more as a process of learning than of teaching, signifying the self efforts to be put in by the student. It is the library that he has almost solely to depend on for this purpose. The only way to check the fall in the standard of education, it seems, is to recognize this positive educational role of the library and equip it for the purpose.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF LIBRARIES IN INDIA

The growth and development of libraries in modern India can be seen in the historicity of knowledge dissemination activities. It is, thus, historically linked to the technological strides on the one hand, and to the overall philosophy of life on the other. An historical perspective of libraries in India, therefore, draws upon the history of libraries in general. It involves the understanding of the process through which the original conception of a library took shape in the human mind, and gradually came to have an organized form, and eventually grew and developed in different ways at different places. This attempt at historical evaluation has to consider human history and its evolution and the consequent growth and development of libraries in different parts of the world. Such an attempt will obviously require the consideration as to how human societies, in their own differing environments, contrived to inscribe their graphic records and preserve them in that very form in numerous ways in different periods of their history and civilization.²

For the story of the growth and development of libraries marches along the essays of mankind in keeping records of events, activities and achievements, ultimately seeking to represent them in writing.³ Although much of such history is now lost, we are fortunate in that some of the earliest writing produced by the human kind were put on such durable materials as stone, bone, shell, baked clay, that have survived thousands of years of weathering and can still be examined. Evidence made available by researches in epigraphy, numismatics and sigillography suggests that the form in which records, have been inscribed by the human hands has changed from time to time.⁴

The technique of writing and printing has not only passed through a series of considerably significant and strikingly different phases of development but also depicts scenarios of the ramifications of human knowledge and advancement. There has been a sea change from the early collections of the baked clay tablets in Assyria and Babylonia, of Papyrus in Egypt, and of palm leaves, birch barks, silk cloth, copper plates in India, to the kinds of libraries one finds today. Obviously a catalyst in such a change has been exigencies of cost and the compulsion of the large scale utilization of written records, as they comprised the early libraries, was not only time consuming but also very expensive. The present form of the printed book, with which we are so familiar today, is only the most recent form and this too, it seems, is likely to face further transformation. So, from the early rock books, clay books and books of many other kinds to the present day conceivable forms of presenting knowledge in a 'readable' form, runs the story of the evolution and development of libraries.⁵ The different spheres of intellectual, physical and geographical world have not only increased human dependence on the library, but have also necessitated the creation and development of public libraries for the common man, and of special libraries for scientists, academicians and other specialists, and efforts to redefine the objectives and functions of libraries.⁶

HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Even from the Upanishadic times, India had evolved a system of education, which could stand comparison, in so far as the essentials are concerned, with similar organizations of the west, known as 'City Schools', 'Sladium Generale', 'University', etc. In course of time, that system was found prevalent in the 'Ashramas, Mathas and Viharas'. The essentials of a university were present from the time of Buddhist institutions which flourished mainly at Taxila, Nalanda and Vikramshila dates back far before the Christian era, it did not reach the stage of glory before the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, at the beginning of the Christian era. During the Vedic period, the pupils were required to reside with the teachers in the ashramas which provided them opportunities to live in close contact with their Gurus. A systematic collective higher education developed during the Buddhist period when students from all over the country and abroad, e.g. China, Japan, Tibet, etc. flocked in the 'Viharas' or the centers of higher learning in those days.⁷ Diffusion of knowledge during the Muslim

period is found in a three tier system of Maktabas and Madarasas, Mosques and Monasteries and private houses denoting three forms of education, viz. a) University/Higher Education with undergraduate and post-graduate courses, b) Secondary education as in Grammar Schools, High Schools and Private Academies, and c) Primary Education imparting elementary knowledge.⁸

When young men and women enter a university or college, they are confronted with three important changes. The first change is the medium of instruction from the mother tongue to English, though there has been a very strong trend in favour of teaching through the mother tongue. There are, however, many universities and institutions of higher learning which still continue to teach and examine through the English medium. Even if in the near future all institutions of higher education decide to switch over to the regional medium, English will continue to be the library language. Nearly 60 per cent to 70 per cent of the books and periodicals in our libraries are in the English language and a student who wishes to acquire competence in his subject will have to use this material. Besides, English as the principal language of the world provides a window on the world outside and is a treasure house of the ever increasing universe of knowledge. Both teachers and students have to draw heavily on books and periodicals in English if they wish to keep up-to-date.

The second change that students have to face is the method of instruction. Whereas at the high school stage they were spoon fed by the teachers, at the college or university they have to be more self-reliant. In the course of 50 or 60 minute lectures the teacher can give the students a broad outline of a subject. To get a deeper and comprehensive knowledge of the subject the students have to go to the library and glean from tomes and treatises the required information, the classroom lectures like any other lectures can, at best, serve as signposts and the task of real learning will have to be performed in the library with the active assistance of the library staff.

The third change that the college going youth experience is the nature of the courses of study. These are at once more varied and comprehensive than those at high school. The approach to learning has to be more book centered; and not only text book centered. The aim of higher education is surely to lead students from one or two books, namely the text books into the wonderful world of other related books and thus expose them to

a wider, deeper and more diversified treatment of the subjects. This approach might well goad some of the more intelligent students to make new discoveries, modify existing notions, or attempt re-interpretation of old ideas in the light of modern developments. In other words, the exposure of the young minds to books would arouse the critical faculty among the students and enable them to reach heights of learning as well as to delve deeper.

The importance of libraries in higher education cannot be over emphasized. Unfortunately most of our university libraries, in their book resources, organization and services do not reflect this important role of the library. There are various deficiencies in the library set up in the field of higher education today. It is essential that they are removed and libraries in higher education are enabled to perform their role effectively. What is essential for this purpose is a proper appreciation on the part of all, of the important educational role of the library. A rational and sound policy for the development of the libraries is bound to follow as a corollary of such appreciation, leading to libraries being elevated from their present position as store houses to a position as dynamic instruments of education and research.⁹

CONCLUSION

Summing up From the above discussion it may be assumed that library systems prevailing since the ancient times. The standard of an institution may be gauged on the parameter of library services provided to the users. Today any institution cannot survive without well equipped library and no one can deny the importance of the library in effective learning and teaching process.

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