

Paradigm Shift in Public Libraries in India: Study of Present and Future

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries in India could not perform as good as public libraries in other countries in the world. Change in technologies has brought reforms in the public libraries as domain in the world as well as in India. Internet and Communication technologies have brought remarkable changes in the Indian Public library system. Present paper focuses on the paradigm shift took place in the public library system in India, with reference to its reasons and factors responsible for the same. This study also explains changing role of public library system in Indian context and how it will affect the culture and society at large.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, public libraries were primarily understood as public institutions and memory organizations providing access to organized collections of printed books to guarantee that the information resources were available openly and free of charge to ordinary people. The Internet revolution challenged this development and significantly contributed to a rethinking of the societal role of public library. In recent years, the issues of supporting users' information seeking by means of the new ICTs and the problems of managing knowledge have become central when the services of public libraries have been developed. The other mega trend that gave stimulus to recent discussion of public library is globalization, that is, the increasing global interdependence and interactions that poses new challenges for public libraries serving as local centres of information and as knowledge exchanges. This is also how globalization and informatization relate to each other.

One of the basic issues that relates to both globalization and knowledge society is the democratic dimension of the formation of the emerging new form of society. From this perspective, public libraries can be seen as a key institution of our time. This is reflected, for example, in the *Glasgow Declaration* (IFLA, 2002) issued by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). According to this document, libraries are "gateways to knowledge, thought and culture", and they "contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard democratic values and universal civil rights ...and provide uninhibited access to information". Naturally, these issues are connected with the ways in which public libraries adjust themselves in the new demands of the global knowledge-based economy. Public libraries in India have a long way to go to meet the information requirements of society in ever changing landscape to act as a complete social institution. The paper will throw some light on areas which can make public libraries in India vital centre for information, knowledge, culture and economic development.

2. Automation of Library Operations and Services

Since we are all aware with the pathetic condition of our public libraries through out the length and breadth of the India, we need a more pragmatic, logical and systematic approach to make them local knowledge dissemination centres in changing landscape. Therefore, first prudent step would be to automate basic library operations on war footing basis with help of some central or local agencies who should supervise the project completion in a more professional and timely manner. With the availability of open source software for library operations and management, this should not a big ask considering sizeable proportion of IT knowing professionals available with online help. Once this is done it will further lead our mission to higher goal of seamless networking and consequently "one India- one library" dream.

3. National E-Consortium for Public Libraries

The development of national level consortium for public libraries is must for their development in cyber age. Considering majority of new, regularly updated information resources are available through World Wide Web. Therefore, access to greater range of resources to public can be provided through out India. The benefits of e-consortium at a glance are:

- Expanding electronic network within the public library system;
- Facilitating nation wide cooperative purchase of access to networked information resources;
- Creating 24 hour library service;
- Investigating opportunities to transform service provision to the disabled;
- Focusing on development of multi-lingual services and databases
- Implementing a gateway to provide future unified access to catalogues and digitized resources of academic and public libraries of the country.

The consortium may also partner with academic and special libraries in sharing of resources and technical know-how to make it more effective and economical.

4. Looking for Partners

We are conscious of the fact that India being second most populace country in the world and reaching out to entire population with limited access points (around 30,000) and poor budgetary allocations would not be possible. According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) standards, there should be one public library for every 3,000 people. Thus, with over one billion people, India needs more than 343,000 public library units. Thus, alliance with organisations and agencies with similar objectives and broad network would be wise step for the welfare of nation. There is nothing wrong in cooperating with other organisations as it would make public libraries more accountable and professional in their day in and day out operations.

Evolving such ties is need of the hour, we have seen in last few years mushrooming of IT Kiosks, Common Information Centres CICs and Common Services Centres mostly in countryside where libraries facilities are scarce. So collaboration with these centres can expand utilisation of information resources purchased by national e-consortium. In so doing, justifying need of national public library e-consortium to policy makers and various stake holders, that in turn can act as lobby for the cause of public libraries.

5. Filling Digital Divide

The digital divide is not an apparent single gap that divides a society into two groups on the basis of financial prowess. But also possess various undercurrents like rural population, physically challenged, females, lower performance computers, lower quality or high priced internet connectivity, absence of adequate technical assistance, and less access to subscription based resources. Worst to that only 7.1% of Indian population are using internet (Internet World Stats, 2009) and just there are 4.38 million broadband subscribers (Times of India, 2008). Furthermore, 25% of India's population is living below poverty line and around 69% population still lives in countryside (The World Factbook, 2009) where access to cyberspace is too little.

As such digital divide is more prevalent in our society than any other; hence onus is on every social institution to fill this gap, especially on public libraries in the country who are supposed to eliminate deprivation of information and provide information literacy skills.

In this scenario public libraries being the single largest social institution spread over towns and cities of India have special duty to fill this gap by conducting information literacy programmes, provide access to greater subscription information resources and faster connectivity facilities to one and all. While in doing so, we can advance the economy of the country on regional and global scale.

In order to generate necessary funds for such giant a venture, there are numerous funding agencies that can be the partners other than government on the basis of common goals. Some organizations (like *Save the Girl Child*) provide funds for the projects which improve the life of girl child in terms of education better access to networked resources and information literacy. Accordingly, international funding

agencies can pour in necessary funds for the education and socio-economic development by provision of information among slum dwellers.

Once fomenting such alliances we can have our share of private sector for providing more and better services to users of diverse backgrounds and information requirements.

6. Serving the Micro-Industry

There is no denying the fact that India is emerging very fast in macro-industry. But, it is loosing grip over centuries old arts and craft that were considered once the stronghold of Indian economy presently worth 100 billion and grows at the rate of 8.5% annually (Alpine handicrafts, 2009). The recent global economic meltdown has again wittingly or unwittingly made us to realise the importance of our arts and crafts in our economic development. Thus it would be in the fitness of things to revive these arts and crafts by providing necessary information support to make them relevant and demand oriented. The information support could be in areas like new designs as per market demand, availability of economical raw material and facilitating marketing. The marketing part has been discussed separately below. Public library being the social institution has wider reach is aptly suited for such an initiative.

7. Creation and Maintenance of Web Portals

We have seen libraries maintaining gateways to information available on internet. But with the changing time libraries will be expected to provide due publicity to local culture, arts and crafts for the benefit of the population it serves. Therefore, need of the hour is to take new role of acting as an interface between craftsman and buyer, tourism industry and tourist with the help of web portals. It would be a great service to the society and thereby increasing the economic index of the nation and as such justifying the existence of public libraries further.

8. Idea Centre

So far we have seen new innovative ideas and designs are pouring in from organised institutions and industries. But the tide should change now for better and public libraries can take a lead in creating digital repositories to host novel ideas and designs generated by the ordinary persons in the society. This would extended the channels of communication and to reach more and more people, while at the same time extract valuable ideas from fertile minds which otherwise go waste due to non availability of channels of expression for ordinary people in the society. These idea centres/repositories could prove a valuable resource to revitalise our economy, education and research and above all will give necessary confidence and appreciation to innovative minds in the society.

9. Creation and Maintenance of Library Gateways

We are all aware with the range of free and open information resources and services available online. Public libraries can organise all these resources through a well designed gateways for the benefit of general masses keeping

in view the information and requirements of the community. The special emphasis should be to organise information resources/ services available in the field of healthcare (telemedicine), micro-industry, environmental conservation, education and so on.

10. Local Cultural Centre

UNESCO Public Library Manifesto of 1994 consider public library important agent to disseminate cultural consciousness among people. This more imperative in the era of globalisation and cyber-age, when loads of information is online available on culture and arts of developed world that our public libraries act as a catalyst to give full publicity to our own rich culture and diversity of arts in India. Otherwise, in near future our rich culture may be last in oblivion. Public libraries can play an important role in making people aware of rich cultural heritage and can host range of resources on web of local art and culture.

11. Private-Public Partnership

The changeover towards a knowledge society is a very complex process requiring new forms of partnership and cooperation between public and private sectors (Kamel and Wahba, 2002). With booming Indian economy and corporate India getting richer and richer with passing time, there are some responsibilities of corporate houses towards citizens of the country in term of mobilising their human and financial resources for the welfare of the society. One such aspect of

their social responsibility could be to improve public library system in India. But to motivate corporate houses to invest in public library development lies on public library policy makers in India. Once convinced regarding the benefits of public library in the society, we could have two benefits from such venture;

- Financial resources'
- Technical know-how and better management skill for service organisation with ever-changing time.

12. To Overcome Social Isolation

People's obsession with the Internet is causing many to spend less time with friends and in social gatherings, which is a concern. According to Amatai Etzioni, a renowned sociologist from George Washington University, if people are spending more hours on internet, they are not spending time with other people---And people do form very strong relations over the Internet. There are going to be millions of people with very minimal human interaction". We are really in for some things that are potentially great freedoms but frightening in terms of long-term social interaction" (Stanford News Service, 2005). Here hybrid public libraries can play a very vital role by providing neutral space for interaction, sharing of ideas and get together for mutual benefit of the individuals and the society as a whole. It can keep society gelled together, while providing sophisticated services based on ICT.

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