

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN INDIA



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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the assumption that the future of academic libraries is in our own hands. It further emphasizes the need for change in academic libraries in the context of the emerging knowledge economy. It underlines the mandate of the National Knowledge Commission and gives the present scenario with regard to higher education and access to knowledge and information. It also highlights the impact of ICT on, and paradigm shift in academic libraries Appreciates library consortia, institutional repositories, and open access archives as strategic response to the paradoxical situation of growing digital documents and declining library budgets. Emphasizes that more important than the name of a

library (traditional or digital), is the mandate and the context of the library. It also enlists the challenges and opportunities facing the academic libraries. The paper concludes that the future of academic libraries is in our own hands.

KEYWORDS : Knowledge Paradigm, Paradigm Shift, Academic Scenario, Library Consortia, Open Access Archives, Institutional Repositories, National Knowledge Commission.

INTRODUCTION

The Knowledge Paradigm India is world's second largest populated country and it has "550 million people below the age of 25" (NKC, 2007, i). The 2001 Census indicates that the literacy level in the country has gone up to 65.38 per cent from 52.21 per cent in 1991 (NKC, 2007, 8). India is increasingly viewed as an emerging global power that will contribute in shaping global balance of power in the present century. For this, education has a major role to play in building the knowledge economy of a nation. "The World Bank ranks India at the 101st place in the Knowledge Economy Index based on our Economic Incentive and Institutional Regime (EIR),

Education and Training, Innovation and Technological Adoption, Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) Infrastructure" (Edge 2008 At a Glance: 31). In fact, the progress of a nation depends less on the capital but more on its intellectual capital. Hence, human resource development should be the main focus of India, if she wants to establish its leadership in the emerging knowledge economies. It has rightly said in the report of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) that, "The ability of a nation to use and create knowledge capital determines its capacity to empower

and enable its citizens by increasing human capabilities. India today stands poised to reap the benefits of a rapidly growing economy and a major demographic advantage that will see the country having the largest pool of young people in the world in the next few decades. In the words of our Prime Minister: “The time has come to create a second wave of institution building and of excellence in the field of education, research and capability building so that we are better prepared for the 21st century” (NKC, 2007, 1).

It is with this broad task in mind, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) was constituted on 13th June 2005 with a time-frame of three years, from 2nd October 2005 to 2nd October 2008. As a highlevel advisory body to the Prime Minister of India, the National Knowledge Commission has been given a mandate to guide policy and direct reforms (NKC, 2006, 1). Its prime focus is on its five key areas of the knowledge paradigm – access to knowledge, knowledge-concepts, knowledge-creation, knowledge application and development of better services (NKC, 2007, 1). The Commission is basically focussing on three main areas of expansion, excellence and inclusion in higher education in India. But these three dimensions of NKC’s focus must be supported by an efficient and effective academic library system.

According to Report of The Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education under the chapter entitled The Idea of a University, “A university is a place where new ideas germinate, strike roots and grow tall and sturdy. It is a unique space, which covers the entire universe of knowledge. It is a place where creative minds converge, interact with each other and construct visions of new realities. Established notions of truth are challenged in the pursuit of knowledge” (UGC, 2009, 9). In fact, a library is not merely a place; it is rather platform to fire the imagination of innovative minds to facilitate progress. Present Scenario The National Knowledge Commission has recommended opening of “1500 universities nationwide, to enable India to attain a gross enrolment ratio of at least 15 per cent by 2015 and establish 50 national universities as multi- disciplinary exemplars with admissions on an all India basis” (NKC, 2007, 43). It is an obvious journey towards second wave of institution building as stated by the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. That would mean a beginning that was made in 1857 by establishing only 3 universities in India has to reach an ambitious target of 1500 universities by 2015. Over the last about 151 years, India has established 413 universities only, but now she intends to take the number of these universities to 1500 during the remaining six years. During 2008, “India had 413 universities – 251 of which are state universities, 24 Central universities, 100 “deemed” universities (i.e. they do not offer degrees themselves, but are affiliated to larger universities for awarding degrees), five are institutions established under State Legislation and there are 33 institutes of national importance established by Act of Parliament. In addition, there are now 20,677 colleges including 2,166 that are women-only colleges” (Prem Chand, 2008). Profound improvements are needed in the higher education system in India. There must be a shift from rote learning to resource-based student-centred learning. “The 11th plan recommends reorientation of the higher education system to make it vibrant, competitive, meaningful and relevant, and to enable its growth, both in terms of quantity as well as quality.

There is an urgent need for broadening access to higher education by expanding it and by making it affordable” (Edge, 2008, 32). We need to develop independent learners and critical thinkers. For that radical reforms are required to restructure and revamp the higher education system in India. It has been reported that “In a major step towards reforming higher education in India, the government is learnt to have granted inprinciple approval to the creation of an overarching regulatory body that will subsume all existing regulators, including the UGC, All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), National Council of Teachers’ Education (NCTE) and Distance Education Council (DEC)” (The Tribune, 30 August, 24). But before taking such decisions, the issue must be discussed at length at various platforms to carry people

along. Education may be the cutting-edge of capability building, but it cannot give its 100 per cent without the supporting-edge, i.e. the library and information system (LIS). Unfortunately, library and information infrastructure is the weakest link in the chain of capacity and capability building. Paradigm Shift Conceptual access to knowledge is heart of the matter. But before that, knowledge seekers must have bibliographical, physical and language access to data, knowledge and information. Taking cognizance of this fact, the NKC has constituted a Working Group on Libraries (NKC: Libraries, 2007). Based upon the brainstorming of the Working Group, the NKC had made radical recommendations to make the library and information system in India efficient and effective.

Academic libraries are the libraries attached to colleges and universities. Preservation of and access to knowledge and information is their main mandate while supporting the mission of the respective colleges and universities. Information and communication technology (ICT) has made a deep impact on all types of libraries. Today we are talking about digital and virtual libraries. At the same time we are very much worried about the future of libraries in general and academic libraries in particular. But we would like to emphasize that the future of academic libraries is dependent both on external and internal changes. The ICT is providing the library and information professionals (LIPs) with both opportunities and challenges. There is a paradigm shift from standalone libraries to library and information networks; from printed publications to digital documents; and from ownership to access. This transition is the result of the impact of ICTs, the Internet and the web on different types of libraries. Strategic Response The organization culture, library leadership and trained library personnel play a pivotal role in determining the role and status of academic libraries. LIPs are faced with a diametrically opposite situation with growing electronic resources on the one hand, and declining library budgets on the other. This has led to a paradoxical situation of paucity in plenty. There is a lot of information on the web in the public domain. But LIPs are required to learn the art of finding needle from the hay stack. Information literacy is the way out to manage chaos on the web and end-user satisfaction. Shared subscription, library consortia, institutional repositories, and open access archives are the outcome of our strategic response to deal with the challenge of declining library budget. Instead of worrying about the future of academic libraries, we must learn to do the gap analysis and the SWOT analysis.

We are required to put a question to ourselves. The question is “Why the end-user is going to the Google by leaving behind the library?” Perhaps we have failed to come up to the expectations of the end users. The effectiveness of library service lies at the point where the horizontal and vertical lines cross each other. In other words, where there is the perfect matching of end users’ information needs, and library and information professionals’ competence to meet those needs. Are we doing that? We must put this question to ourselves, and we will get a perfect answer to our worries about the future of academic libraries.

It is a traditional library or a digital library, the mandate of the library remains unchanged. It is preservation of, and access to knowledge and information to facilitate progress. The role and reach of library is expanding. In fact, we are on the long tail of the web. Library is no more a physical place alone. It is rather a gateway to world’s knowledge and information.

Information is available to the stakeholders round the clock. But the main issue is not facilitating end-users access to pertinent information; rather it is to develop critical thinking skills among the information seekers.

That is the essence of Dr. Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science. The only thing is to replace the surrogate book with the concepts of knowledge and information. Context is more important than the content and the format. In other words, the content and the format must be personalized according to the information needs of the end-users. It is necessary, as information needs vary from person to person, place to place and time to time. We must sensitize the LIPs about this and focus more on

customization and personalization in the digital context. Generation, acquisition, processing, storage, dissemination, and use of knowledge and information are the six stages of information/knowledge life cycle. Barring the first and the last stage, LIPs are directly concerned with the other four stages of knowledge and information.

Library as a social institution is going to sustain sine die. Only its role will expand and format will change.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES-

With the ascent of digital documents and digital libraries, library and information professionals' role has expanded and challenges have increased many fold. These challenges relate to collection management, knowledge organization, digital preservation, online searching, content management, knowledge management, and promoting the use of libraries and networks. LIPs are required to work as leaders, managers, and facilitators. The ICT and the Internet has thrown open the doors to the LIPs to many opportunities. Now 24x7 access to information is available round the clock and the traditional constraints of space and time stand collapsed. LIPs have the opportunity to provide global reach to the indigenous knowledge. Similarly, we can get access to world's knowledge and information through the Internet provided we have the will, skill, and the appropriate attitude. These opportunities and challenges can be handled effectively by competent library personnel. Sound knowledge base, pertinent skills and pro-active positive mind set are the essential components of a competent library and information professional. Do we have that? If not, then the future of academic libraries is certainly uncertain. If yes, then there is no reason to worry about the future of academic libraries.

CONCLUSION-

The paper is based on the assumption that the mandate of the academic library is intact, only its role has expanded and format has changed. With the impact of ICTs, we are having digital libraries, as well as library and information networks. Academic libraries need to respond to the growing and diversifying information needs of the end-users. Academic libraries must become a local gateway to world's knowledge and information. The biggest and critical issue is how to manage change in the academic libraries so that we do not suffer the destiny of dinosaurs. The future is uncertain but bright. We will have to create a relative balance of printed publications and digital documents. Our future library must be a hybrid library which must be user-centered and expert-assisted.

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