

National Library of India: A Historical Perspective

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Ancient Records of Knowledge

Right from the days of antiquity, Indian culture, philosophy and religion occupied a place of pride throughout the world, and the neighboring countries were all under the magic spell of its splendor and magnificence. Thousands of scholars from all over the world undertook hazardous journeys across the rough seas, burning deserts and snowbound mountains to gain access to the treasures of India, the land of marvels, especially the treasures of its wisdom. In the ancient days, of course, their journeys were real epics of devotion and endurance. They on reaching India stood dumbfounded before the huge collections of the country's recorded knowledge arranged in the most helpful sequence in its ancient seats of learning. It took their whole life to overcome that spell.

India's ancient seats of learning like Nalanda, Taxila, Pataliputra, Benaras, Kanchi, etc., then had excellent collections of rare hand made books and the light and fragrance of the Eastern thought contained in them attracted renowned scholars from far and abroad. There they mingled with scholars from all over the country and exchanged thoughts and ideas. Many renowned foreign scholars right from Megasthenes to Max Muller lived and worked in those institutions for most part of their life and returned to their native land with caravans or ships full of translations as well as copies or originals of recorded knowledge of India.

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In ancient India right up to the period of Muslim invasion libraries were treated as the most important centres of learning. Ancient Indian libraries with the most helpful information storage and dissemination systems in the traditional manner have got a spectacularly respectful position throughout the world in those days. In spite of severe limitations in the media and mode of communication, ancient Indian libraries were put to their maximum use. They were open to all irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Neither the boundaries of the provincial kingdom nor the mountains and seas, which separated Indian subcontinent from the rest of the world, became barriers to the use of its ancient libraries. They were open to anyone from anywhere in the world for any length of time. Even free boarding and lodging facilities were given to the needy users from far away places, for the period during which they used the collection.

National Character

Those libraries had shown far more 'national' character than any of the present day libraries in the country. They rose high enough becoming 'international' in character in respect of their use. No such institutions were found elsewhere in the world in those days. But that were all glories of the past when India was a country, where the relation of man and man, and of man and the State were so fair and humane.

With the onslaught of militant Muslim invaders, the most striking feature of India's ancient culture and civilization - its humanity perished. Unfortunately ancient Indian libraries and centres of learning existed in temples or monasteries and the Muslim invaders were against all written documents except their own holy book. So when they poured into the land with fire and sword at the beginning of the eleventh century, their first act was to raze to the ground the temples and monasteries which in their eyes favored idolatrous worship. All notable libraries and educational institutions of India were destroyed along with their parent religious institutions. Nalanda was burnt down and most of the inmates were put to death. 'Smoke from the burning manuscripts hung over the low Nalanda hills like a dark pall for days together'. Most of the temples cum ancient seats of learning in India met with

the same fate. Major portion of India's cultural heritage was, thus lost forever and the remaining documents were taken away by its foreign rulers from the west, or lost due to people's unpardonable carelessness.

Attitude of Rulers

For the subsequent eight centuries of foreign domination that followed, native rulers of India were fully occupied with their incessant wars. So they could not spare any time for educational or cultural activities. Even then foreign rulers like Akbar and Curzon placed due importance for the preservation of the country's recorded knowledge and promoted its use. The king of Baroda who really ruled for the people set up a very efficient library system in his kingdom. Sri S.R. Ranganathan who developed ancient Indian systems of organization and dissemination of knowledge was accepted throughout the world as the largest contributor to librarianship. His methods and techniques are being used in many of the modern libraries in the world and were proved to be the most efficient systems available. A nation with such a glorious library tradition in the past, has now failed to build up a good National Library or Library system for the country even after the three decades of independence. No government can give any justification for such a fault that causes disgrace to the nation and degrades it in an age in which knowledge is the most essential requirement for the material and intellectual development of its people.

One who searches for the causes of this failure will get a very simple answer. The causes are there in the differences in the attitude of the country's past and present rulers towards their subjects and towards knowledge. In ancient days people were the important element of State. They were looked upon as children for whose welfare the head of the State was responsible, and to whom he owed a debt, which could only be, discharged by good government. Charity, kindness earnestness and sincerity were the characteristics of the ancient rulers. For the rulers of the past, material and intellectual developments of the subjects were their prime duty whereas for the present rulers intellectual well being of the society they serve is none of their business. They are even afraid of a freethinking society.

Shameful present

Most of the rulers and missionaries who came to India from the West were great scholars and men of good caliber. Even before their arrival they had a very good knowledge about India and its cultural heritage. Even after settling in India for various other purposes their leisure time was used to acquire more knowledge about the country. In this effort, they also left an indelible mark in India's literary and cultural history. No Indian can ever forget a Gundert, Caldwell, Wilson or Pargithar.

Such a group of persons who came to India could never think of a system without modern library systems as that existed in their country. They acquired as many collections of books and manuscripts as they could acquire and organized them in libraries established under their initiative. But those libraries were not intended for the use of natives especially the common people.

Most of the collections established by foreigners were, when they returned from India transferred to their country where they are still preserved and used. They gave importance to such collections because they knew that the civilization that they have encountered in this alien land was far advanced than their own in many aspects. They understood that India's ancient sciences especially medicine, astronomy, etc. were very highly developed and they wanted to learn more about them. It was as part of their effort to learn those subjects thoroughly, and do further research that they established libraries for collecting and organizing Indian books and manuscripts. But the natives generally lacked such devotion for knowledge generated in the country and that has led to the failure of India's national library system. An average Indian is ignorant of the true value of the country's records of the past or its cultural heritage. Most of the present rulers and administrators of India are no exceptions.

Contributions of the Europeans

The credit for conceiving the idea of establishing a collection of Indian documents, or establishing an institution or library specializing in Indian topics for the first time in modern period goes to Sir William Jones. He

started this work in 1784. After that, other Britishers built up numerous similar collections.

In 1835, J H. Stocquel, the editor of a local daily drafted a scheme for the establishment of a public library at Calcutta. In the next year the scheme was implemented. Even though at the beginning it was intended to provide recreational reading outside office hours to the English knowing public, the library collected a lot of important manuscripts and other documents on India during its existence up to 1891.

Public Libraries

Soon after the starting of this library, a number of other small public libraries were founded in different parts of Calcutta taking it as a model. These tiny libraries, which collected books on Shivaji, Napoleon, Russo, French revolution, and the religious and cultural history of India, fostered the growth of nationalism. They became the centres where firebrand young Bengal assembled and discussed the national problems. The British rulers became uncomfortable. After the first war of Independence in 1857, the foreign rulers could no more tolerate the spread of knowledge and revolutionary ideas, which threatened their unjust continuance in India. There were many restrictions and hindrances from government for the functioning of public libraries. The public libraries were forced to curb their activities. The public library at Calcutta had also almost ceased functioning.

At Calcutta, the then capital of India, a lot of Government libraries also existed. Home Department Library, East India College Library, and the Library of East India Board were the most important government owned libraries. In 1891 they were united to form the Imperial Library. But its use was restricted only to government officers.

In 1899 Lord Curzon visited the Calcutta Public Library. He was impressed by the valuable collection. But he found the library in very pathetic condition and understood that unless something is done immediately, the collection will be lost forever. So he amalgamated it with the Imperial Library by purchasing the shares of that Library.

Imperial Library

The Imperial Library Act of 1902 states that the Imperial Library "should be a library of reference, a working place for students, and a repository of materials for the future historians of India, in which so far as possible every work written about India at any time can be seen and read". In 1903 Lord Curzon threw its doors open to the public and said "The general idea of the whole library is that it should contain all the books that have been written about India in popular tongues".

The concept of national library has not developed as now in those days. But the above statements regarding the Imperial Library defines the basic and most important functions for which, any modern national library should strive for. Up to 1947 the Imperial Library has pursued the aims and objectives set out by its authorities in 1903.

The British rulers left to the people of India a very fine collection of national documents. It would have become a good base with which India could have built up an efficient national library without much effort. When the collection development and conservation practices carried out by the Imperial library are considered, it was more satisfactory and national in character than the Indian libraries that preceded or succeeded it in modern period. But unfortunately the Imperial Library never cared about its service aspect. The library remained unapproachable to an ordinary citizen. It was useful only to some officials and the nobility of Calcutta. But we cannot expect anything more from an alien ruler. Regarding the Imperial library what they have done is the maximum that any colonial power would have contributed in such fields for a subject nation.

When the Britishers left, the Indian Government simply renamed it as national library and forgot about the duties and responsibilities of a national library. So even after having a democratic government for the last four decades it has really done nothing to extend national library's services to the people. Still the national library, like its predecessor remains approachable to a minority. Even in maintaining the quality of the collection or in conserving and organizing for use; the documents that reached the national library Government failed to continue what was being done by the Imperial

library. Why? Is it due to the lack of self-respect or due to the ignorance of Government about India's glorious heritage or can it be attributed to the failure of people to select a Curzon or Bentick from among them to govern them? All these would have contributed their own share. What else can be said to be the cause for this inaction and indifference.

Concept of a National Library

"Libraries which irrespective of their title, are responsible for acquiring and conserving copies of all significant publications published in the country and functioning as a 'deposit' library, either by law or under other arrangements may be called National Libraries. They will also normally perform some of the functions like; production of national bibliography, collection and conservation of a large and representative collection of foreign literature including books about the country; acting as a national bibliographical information centre; compiling union catalogues and publishing the retrospective national bibliography etc. Libraries which may be called 'national' but whose functions do not correspond to the above definition should not be placed in the 'national libraries' category". This definition given by UNESCO in its recommendations concerning the International Standardization of Library Statistics can be accepted as the most authentic and complete definition of a National Library.

But no national Library now existing in any of the developing countries including that in India will come up to the expectations envisaged in the above definition. For a third world country with its limited financial resources and technical power such aims are beyond their reach. If a library takes the whole universe of knowledge as its area of coverage, to achieve completeness of collection and to keep it up to date would be practically impossible. It is not even necessary. The complications and problems that so arise will degrade the national library's services. Libraries of US Congress, British Museum or Leningrad can function with such aims. But a Third world country duplicating them for its National Library will not only fail to build up such huge collections, but also in organizing them for use. In those efforts it will also fail to fulfill the basic responsibilities of a National Library.

Need for limiting Area of Coverage

India's limited financial resources and technical power necessitates the country to mark certain limits for the area of coverage of the collection, and activities of a National Library. Without these limits the Library will fail to concentrate on, or even forget its basic functions for which there exists no other substitutes. A developing country like India should adopt a more moderate policy for its National Library in which its activities are limited to the basic functions. A system in which the same ends for which the Library of Congress or Leningrad stands, can be achieved without collecting everything at one center but with cooperative efforts and sharing of the information activities between the national library and other libraries existing in the country.

Information explosion has made its mark on ever increasing production of literature in unmanageable proportions and their acquisition, organization and dissemination has become a more difficult and complicated task. So the only way for a Library to achieve comprehensiveness of its collection is to limit the subjects for coverage in order to keep the collection always up to date and useful. A National Library cannot be an exception to this.

The main characteristics of a national library, which distinctly delineate it from other types of libraries is that, the national library takes a particular geographical area as subject for its coverage. So a national library need not be one that duplicates all documents available in other libraries; but it can build up a national collection by cooperating with other libraries in the country.

A national library should achieve the maximum comprehensiveness in the collection of documents it is expected to collect. The important requirement of any of the library user is a particular piece of information. The cooperation of the national library with other libraries in the network enables the user to select his library according to his specific requirements.

Subject Specialization and Decentralization

For a third world country a division of the works of a national library between different institutions becomes necessary. The duplication of work between

these institutions should be avoided and cooperation between them should be established to achieve maximum efficiency with minimum financial commitments. On a country like India, even the sharing of the national library's basic duty of acquiring and conserving the national documents with other libraries will become necessary. Without such a division and cooperation the extension of national library's use up to the boundaries of the nation will not be possible. So when one attempt to define the national library of a developing or underdeveloped country these limitations and problems should be given due consideration.

A national library can be defined as a library or group of libraries working together, and commanding national character both in matter of resources and use.

A national library need not be a single physical entity located at a place. It can be a group of libraries, if the existing condition of the country so requires. But totality of the functions of this group of libraries working together, like the interconnected parts of a machine, should attain the goals of a national library. So the national library is itself a system and an important part of a system of interconnected national library network.

National library is expected to collect the whole documents produced in its country and the recorded literature of the country produced elsewhere in the world irrespective of any other consideration.

As the collection and preservation of this recorded knowledge is for use, their organization in a useful manner is as important as its collection and preservation.

The national library should have a national character in the use of its documents. So a national library's collection should be organized in such a way that the people throughout the length and breadth of the country can use it without any difficulty. Unless a library stands for the whole of the nation, and all the citizens of the country get easy access to it, it can never become a national library.

Role and Functions

Before setting out to define the aims, objectives and functions of India's national library, it is desirable to analyze all the suggestions concerning the national library put forward so far, by expert groups and persons and the present day activities of other national libraries around the world.

For the last thirty years, the subject national library was a very important topic of discussion in various international library conferences and seminars. UNESCO organized a world conference on this subject in 1975. Its recommendations, touching all aspects of national library's activities, will have profound influence in the future development of national libraries.

All the old national libraries are now beginning to reorganize their activities under the influence of present day demands and newly emerging progressive library conceptions. The modern national libraries have now accepted that a successful information service throughout the nation is possible only through cooperative effort of the libraries in the country. All of them have also democratized their practices for admittance of the library using public.

As a result of all this "the national library as a type is being modernized and its concept and typological indications are changing, along with that of other libraries. In determining the concept of national library, it is now necessary to take as a basis, not just one kind of function, but a whole combination of them and to examine the national library simultaneously, as both are constituent part of the whole library system of the country, and a complete system in itself where parts of are interconnected and interdependent,"

Attempts to Define Functions

The Regional Seminar on the development of national libraries in Asia and the Pacific Area (1964) after serious deliberations came to the conclusion that a national library should:

- Provide leadership among the nation's libraries,
- Serve as a permanent depository of all publications issued in the country,

- Acquire other types of material, provide bibliographical services,
- Serve as coordinating centre for co-operative activities,
- Provide service to government.

The meeting of the Experts on the National Planning of Library Services in Latin America (1966) suggested collecting and ensuring the conservation of national book production for which, in addition to other resources, it would receive copies of publications deposited under the copyright laws as the main function of the national library. It should furthermore ensure that copyright laws are enforced. It should also provide national and foreign readers and research workers with an adequate and efficient information service system, for which it will assemble the necessary general collections and reference materials, prepare a union catalogue of all the country's libraries and compile the national bibliography and any other bibliographies found necessary. Also it should organize the national or international exchange of publications, facilitate inter-library loans with libraries abroad, rationalize the acquisition of publications, including periodicals, among the libraries covered by the plan for the development of library services, and centralize the cataloguing and classification of publications and ensure the distribution of catalogue cards or catalogues published by certain categories of libraries. Also it should co-operate, whenever its own organization and the development of planning render it advisable in the extension and improvement of academic and public library services.

A British Librarian K W Humphries conducted the most important study in this field. He made a comparative study of activities of the largest national libraries of the world; the British Museum Library, the Library of Congress, the Lenin State Library, and the National Library of France, and categorized the functions, carried out by all these libraries into three heads i.e. required, desirable and optional categories. Among the 'required functions' he mentioned collection of literature published in the country, as complete as possible; storage of deposit copy of national publications, collection of foreign literature, publication of national bibliography, planning and co-ordination of bibliographic information carried out in the country; and planning a retrospective national bibliography. In the 'desirable functions' he placed;

participation in inter-library loan; collecting manuscript materials, and conducting research in librarianship. Under 'optional functions', he placed organization of international and national book exchange, collecting literature for the blind, training library personnel, and methodological aid to libraries in the country.

The Conference on national planning of documentation and library service in Africa (1970) formulated the following basic functions of the national library.

- To serve as the primary instrument for achievement of coordinated library development.
- To serve as a permanent depository for all publications issued in the country and to collect printed material concerning the country wherever published.
- To publish the National Bibliography.
- To organize the national and international exchange of publications and information.

I. P. Kondakev, the Director of Lenin State Library, from the experience of Soviet and other national libraries assigned four functions for a national library: national book depository, the largest public library, the bibliographic center, and the methodological and research center. The sum total of his estimation defines the modern concept of a National Library.

According to Nutalia Tyulina a library becomes a national one only when "it is the official depository of printed works; a general access library; an information and bibliographical center and a center of co-ordination, planning, and stimulation of the entire library system of the nation".

Basic Functions

All these suggestions despite the minor differences in them reflect a consensus in the basic functions of a national library. They conceptualize the national library as the chief depository of the printed output of a country, as a center having bibliographic control over all the collections existing in the

nation, and as a center which co-ordinates and directs all the library activities of the nation.

All these suggestions have their roots in the situations prevalent in the advanced countries, like America, France or Russia where exists the largest national libraries of the world. They are the effectively functioning national libraries that can be taken as a model. But their success is due to the exhaustive coverage of whole documents at one place, their efficient acquisition, organization and dissemination. Due to this characteristic of those national libraries, the suggestions given by the experts should be in tune with their peculiar situations. But, it is not advisable for countries like India, with limited resources and powers to take these huge libraries as standard models for their national libraries. An effective organization and control of such vast fields of world's output of information at one institution is beyond the reach of developing countries.

So it is bounden duty to prepare its own plan for the national library by a country like India in accordance with its requirements, and existing political and geographical conditions. Simply duplicating any other country's national library will never help a country. From all the recommendations which have been discussed above, and from the activities in which other national libraries are engaged it is possible to demarcate the most essential functions that a national library need to fulfill.

From the sum total of the functions assigned to the national library, the collection organization and dissemination of information on all national subjects should be taken as the priority area in which India's national library should specialize.

Quality, but not the quantity, of service enhances the prestige and usefulness of a library. Unless the national library is allowed to concentrate on the above function, the nation will fail to conserve for posterity a complete collection of its recorded information. The studies, research and development on all national subjects will certainly deteriorate in their quality unless a country has a complete collection of information on that specific region and its ancient thoughts.

A national library is also the only center to which, normally all requests for information about the nation will be addressed not only from inside but also from outside the country. So a national library, which does not have accessibility to the complete collection of recorded information about the nation, will be a disgrace to the country.

All these facts show that a country like India with limited resources and huge collections of its own, recorded knowledge on all branches of knowledge should build up its national library only as a special collection on the nation. That is a complete collection of documents originating in the country and documents on the country, originating elsewhere.

All other functions can be separated from the national library and assigned to other libraries already existing in the country or which can be established for the purpose. National library, for other subject requirements can cooperate with such institutions. In such a system it becomes possible that each of this special collection can be built up as the most complete and reliable collection on the subject of its specialization. By coordinating the activities of all such special collections and acting as a center, where information regarding all the collections in the country are available, and through which any such special collections can be approached, the national library gets control over all the information stored in the country. Extensive coverage as well as efficiency in managing the information resources could be achieved through the activities of such coordinated groups of libraries. Quality of national library service will certainly increase with minimum resources.

So if when analyzed in the light of conditions existing in developing countries like India, the totality of functions assigned to the national library, the activities in which other great national libraries are engaged, the possibilities for sharing the national library's work with other special libraries of a country, and the methods to avoid duplication of work between different libraries, we can attribute the following functions for a national library in a third world country.

- To acquire and conserve the whole of the national production of documents utilizing the existing library facilities fully.

- To collect all the documents concerning that nation published throughout the world, irrespective of language of publication.
- To build up a complete collection, self sufficient on all aspects, of all subjects related to its country.
- To store information on the nation, minutely and fully catalogued; classified and arranged which should be capable of answering any enquiry about the country.
- To take the full responsibility for ensuring that a copy of the whole of national production of documents is preserved in its original form. It does not matter whether it is stored in one place or at different institutions. A national library is also responsible for compiling and publishing national bibliographies; current and retrospective, and coordinating bibliographical work in general.
- To provide facilities to enable a required document, an extract or information, translated into the regional language of a user if required.
- To extend its services to all the citizens of the country. It should be organized in such a way that people from all over the country find no difficulty in approaching it.
- To provide information about its collection and the ways of using it through all educational and cultural institutions of the nation.
- To enable the people to use the national library through all other institutions from any part of the country.
- To provide leadership among the nation's libraries. It should coordinate co-operative activities between the public libraries, university libraries and special libraries for dissemination of knowledge.
- To be responsible for ensuring that a country gets all foreign literature it requires, especially on the latest developments in the fields of science and technology without any time gap.

Recommendations

A national library should act as a center from where full information is available on all different collections existing in different parts of the country, and a center through which any document from any of these collections can be made available to a user.

The national library of India, which is maintained at the cost of very huge expense from the country's national budget, remains one, which can be approached only by very few persons mostly belonging to the surrounding locality of the library. The library's organizational set up does not consider the 99% of our population as coming under its expected users.

India's national library should not be allowed to continue as such any more. The government has an obligation to ensure that the national library fulfils the basic function of the acquisition and preservation of national documents for which it is established and maintained. The services of national library also should be organized in such a manner that it becomes useful and easily approachable to all the citizens of our country including those living in remote villages.

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