

NATURE AND USE OF LIBRARY HISTORY

R RAMAN NAIR*

1 INTRODUCTION

When one is proposing to spend much time reading and writing library history it is only simple and reasonable to be asked: Of what use have your studies been? There is no simple answer and the question will also take us to a more basic question: What is library history?

In history of libraries we are concerned particularly with the purpose and content of libraries and with the social background which produced them; in consequence we become involved in the history not only of scholarship in its narrower sense, but of human civilization, culture and literacy.¹

Three particular achievements marked the first appearance of human civilization in early times. One was gathering of men into cities with all social organization that belongs to urban life. Another was the growth of the religious idea expressed by means of holy places which served to bind the urban population into a unit. A third was the development of the human communication with which man has conquered both time and space.²

Man's conquest of time by the art of writing enables him to hear the words of his forefathers through untold generations and to speak to his children in generations to come. His conquest of space carries his words over land and sea so that a scientist at Trivandrum can discuss his problems with a scientist in Tokyo or seek information support for his research from a librarian in New York, a tourist in Varanasi could chat with his family in Frankfurt and the farthest east could talk to the farthest west. Where indeed man travels in the wide world, the written word can travel too and the only effect this modern science has had on this marvel is to increase the speed at which a message travels. The history of libraries is in brief the history of man's conquest of space and time.³

* Librarian Grade I, HH the Maharajas' College for Women, Trivandrum 695 014.

2 LIBRARY'S ROLE IN DOING HISTORY

No civilization got entirely destroyed. Some previous achievements have survived all the vicissitudes of rising and falling states: the knowledge of the making of fire and light, the wheel and other basic tools, language and writing, agriculture and the family, social organization, and the use of teaching to transmit the lore of the family and the race. These are the elements of civilization and they have been tenaciously maintained through the perilous passage from one civilization to the next. They are the connective tissues of human history and are maintained through time and transmitted by institutions or groups that collected, organized and preserved recorded knowledge for the advancement of society. These institutions gradually came to be known as libraries or library system.

If education is transmission of civilization, we are unquestionably progressing. Civilization is not inherited, it has to be learnt and earned by each generation anew. If the transmission should be interrupted for one century, civilization would die and we should be savages again.⁴ Transmission of civilization is mainly transmission of knowledge. So all advanced civilizations consider expenditure of wealth and toil for collection, organization, preservation and dissemination of information as their finest achievement. This has been done excellently in the ancient world which as a result contributed the geniuses of antiquity.

The heritage we can now more fully transmit is richer than ever before. It is richer than that of Pericles, for it includes all the Greek flowering that followed him, richer than Leonardo's, for it includes him and the Italian Renaissance, richer than Voltaire's, for it embraces all the French Enlightenment and its ecumenical dissemination.⁵ If progress is real despite our whining, it is not because we are born any healthier, better, or wiser than infants were in the past, but because we are born to a richer heritage, born on a higher level of that pedestal which the accumulation of knowledge that is our heritage which led to the invention of recording knowledge and in the birth of the library which is to collect, store and disseminate the whole accumulated knowledge of society for its members.⁶

3 PROBLEMS OF LIBRARY HISTORY

Historical study of libraries and librarianship has been encumbered by a number of problems which at least make that study disfunctional: problems of definition of history, of its relationship to the social sciences, of its place in education for librarianship, of its values and uses and

the way in which history is done. Historical study in all fields of human activity faces these problems.

Definition is the principal problems. It is central to others. The use of history, its ascribed values, the way in which it is done all derives from definitions of history.⁷ As history has been defined by all kinds of persons there are thousands of definitions, most contradicting each other. But an ultimate definition is yet to be done.

4 DEFINING LIBRARY HISTORY

Dictionaries will define history as a narrative, a systematic and methodical record of past events. This suggest two interpretations to library history; that it is a story and that it is a form of knowledge methodically and systematically arranged as scientific knowledge is. Library history is something more than a summary of evidence about the past: it is an analysis and an interpretation for the present.

The word 'history' is derived from Greek which means; enquiry, research, exploration or information.⁸ Aristotle defined history as an account of the unchanging past thereby holding that it is an account and the past is by its nature incapable of change. Ernest Brnheim suggests that history is a science which investigates and presents in their context of psychophysical casualty the facts determined by space and time of the evolution of men or their institutions in their individual as well as typical and collective activity as social beings or institutions. It is a science because it embodies systematised knowledge based on realities. The main job of library history is also to search, investigate and explore these facts with the intention of presenting them in their proper context. But the more important task is to explain their casualty, find out the root of the problem, examine the issue in its depths and interpret the phenomenon from the origin to its final end. The origin lies in the combination of mental and material factors determined at a particular point of time and in a particular place. The facts that are thus investigated relate to the progress or change in the position of man so far as his individual activity is concerned. Bernheim's definition has touched on all fundamental activities of historical pursuit.⁹

Two fundamental principles can be identified in most of the definitions of history. One is of history as a past which is known and needs only to be explained. The other is history as a method of study. In the former it is assumed that history is a finite entity presented by the past. It means historian does not make history. The second principle is exactly opposed to that view in the assumption that only historians make history by writing it. This viewpoint entails a characterisation

of library history also as a way of learning or as the creation of a usable past.

5 NATURE OF LIBRARY HISTORY

The affairs of man and the systems and institution he builds up are constantly in motion. Library systems are no exception. Consequently there has been a radical change in recent years as to the proper nature and scope of library history. In the past it was merely a catalogue of events serialised in a descriptive manner. We have now to study library history in a critical and scientific way.

Historical activity involves three different types of functions which should be performed simultaneously. The first is to get at the truth to know the entire past as it actually happened, and to be sure that solid facts are at hand. The second job is to interpret the facts, to assess, to evaluate and to explain their significance. The third task is to present them clearly.¹⁰

The standard of values which a historian applies to his study of the past is determined by the general, social philosophical, religious and economic ideas of his age. So, it becomes necessary for library history also to be rewritten from time to time. The past events are to be revalued in the light of later development and new ideas.¹¹

Some historians think that history repeats itself whereas others refute this idea. But both are partly true. History repeats itself in the sense that things to the world are the same all the time but the ways are different every time. The forces that influence the human mind and shape, the course of action are uniform all over the world. They indicate that the events that occur are not merely in an order of time and sequence but also have a link in a chain of cause and effect and are related to one another in a systematic and permanent manner. Although historical events do not occur in the same order and in the same place, they have a basic unity, and conform to a pattern which is basically discernible on closer study. In the absence of this basic unity, historical laws could never have been drawn. As history is related to man and as man is helpless at the hands of his own nature, the actions that follow would have a common pattern. A study of the history of the library movement in any part of the world can indicate this. Likewise in the pages of history we always discern the operation of the same values repeated again and again.¹² Theory of occultations in evolution is related to thing. Status of library profession in different periods of history can be cited as good example for this.

Those who oppose the view that history repeats itself contend that change is the law of nature and even if apparently two events seem alike, they are not really the same. If historical events are repeated the problem of growth, development and progress would not arise. But the truth, is history does not repeat itself in the sense that historical facts are not identical. It repeats itself in the sense that similar facts do occur.

Evaluation, assessment and verdict are all very vital ingredients of history. A library historian would also be failing in his duty if he is indifferent in drawing proper conclusions. History can be used to interpret the past with the intention of predicting the future.¹³ Thus the nature of history is very complex.

6 APPLICATION OF PRINCIPLES

By now in all fields of human activity it has been well established that history is not merely a descriptive catalogue of past events, but is a critical and scientific study of the past developments in that field. But still library history suffers from the rigid limitations of many centuries of conventional chornicling which were only quantitative descriptions and the foundations of library history and not history in any enlightend modern sense.¹⁴ As an exception recently we find in James Thompson, Kathryn McChesney etc champions of its liberation into full dignity of recognition as an expression of social forces. With them we can believe a new phase has dawned for the study of library history.

Library history should enable those in the field to respect the antiquity of our calling, to appreciate the gradual advance and sometimes decline of various movements and systems and to base our future on sound foundations. We can take advantage of past experience and learn from the mistakes of others instead of repeating them.

So long as the timespan covered by libraries and the rules and laws related to that institution that it must follow that the main principles of library movements are now exceptionally well established.¹⁵ Only the most ignorant individual would in professional terms set out to reinvent the wheel.⁸ Conversely, it also follows that any person active in library field even in apparently the most contemporary situations will always benefit from a return to earlier principles.¹⁷ It is after all a fact that we base our lives on previous experience, and can predict our future only on the basis of past performance. All good workers appreciate that they stand on the shoulders of other. They are grateful

for what their most primitive predecessors have done and could perform their own tasks more intelligently and efficiently if they had studied the stages in the development of their art.¹⁸ Lawrence Thompson goes as far as we consider library history as an invaluable aid to future generations in their attempt to avoid errors of the past.¹¹

While it remains true that librarians must build upon the experience of their own past, it is unfortunately equally true that the development of libraries has not been some kind of evolutionary process whereby these have grown better and better. Some primitive predecessors were very much more effective in what they did than many of their successors and it is not only from the errors of the past that the librarian can learn, but from the neglected and unacknowledged triumphs also. It appears often as not that our predecessors in their own terms knew the true path. This viewpoint is expressed very clearly by DM Norris. The term history suggests rather an evolutionary or gradual development, but such is not the case with knowledge dissemination systems. The ancient were proficient in the art as we are today, but their methods were different.²⁰ So it is throughout the ages and therefore it is not a history, but a survey of the different concepts, systems and rules.

7 OCCULTATION IN EVOLUTION

A more perceptive view of the historical analysis of library systems and concepts is offered by E A Savagé in his theory of 'occultations'. Observing that since the technology of library systems is limited and narrow, an enthusiastic librarian diligently searches for new ideas, but rarely discovers any.²¹ The open shelf is the oldest of ideas. The chief concepts of library technology undergo periodical occultations. They emerge again, the brighter for the eclipse and shine upon us for a time and fade again into obscurity. We loose ideas, regain them, fight against them, yield to them and forget them once more.

The professional status assigned to librarians during various periods can be taken as a good example for the theory of occultations. In the ancient world librarianship was considered an esteemed profession. In Alexandria great scholars like Aristophanes and Callimachus headed the library established in third century AD by Ptolemies. The Government was totally aware of the importance of information for the benefit of the people. Result was that the quality of teaching - learning process and life was of a higher level at that time than we could think of in the present days. In the educational institution of ancient Kerala only great scholars were appointed as librarians.²² The collections were mostly specialised collections and the librarians were

expected to be thorough with the thought content of the documents kept in the library. So only the best teacher of a subject was considered for the position of librarian to manage a collection specialising on that topic. The copper plate of King Trailokyamalla the Chalukian ruler tells us the dignified and honourable position the librarians had in the educational institutions of his period in eleventh century AD. Qualifications, status, service conditions and salary of librarians in ancient India were equal to that of teachers in the medieval period.

The importance which our ancestors gave to the library services supporting education and research contributed to the academic excellence of those times. Our research works could never attain the quality of books written during those ancient days. For centuries afterwards library services were pushed back into unimportant position in educational institutions. Staff who was not fit for any other work was posted for managing libraries in educational institutions. But again during the second half of the present century government realised the importance of libraries in education. University Grants Commission has recommended higher academic qualifications and status for librarians again bringing them at par with teachers as in our ancient days. Eventhough many could not digest this attitude, UGC considers the quality of library professionals an important factors in improving the quality of higher education very much like the quality of teachers.

8 ANALYSIS OF LIBRARY MOVEMENT

Some recent library histories done in India applied the scientific methods and attitudes about library history and traced out the waxings and wanings of at least the major principles which have characterised library systems and library legislation in India. Good principles are seen to be good principles on the basis of comparative analysis and factual evidence. Like this bad principles are equally and similarly identified. In a study on Kerala's Library movement we find that in Kerala the movement for library development has followed too far a wrong path which is an odd twist given by an organisation, a dominant force which led the movement. Everywhere it is a remarkable fact that despite current and former occultations the essential principles of library movements emerge unambiguously and uncontrovertibly from our long history.²³ For a healthy and useful growth, library development should follow directions of proved advantage.

91 LIBRARY AND SOCIETY

Library being a social institution, the development of libraries and the traditions, customs, rules and laws related to it are inextricably

related to the social and cultural development of man. In all the phases of socio-cultural development of man library; the knowledge disseminating institution was present. The success of an institution that serves the community depends on three main factors; it must have purpose and its objectives clearly established, it must have a sound administration to determine its priorities and the method of putting them into practice and after the methods have been agreed they must be put into effect by capable and conscientious executives.¹⁸ The survey of the history of library development in Kerala also indicates the existence and evolution of these factors in all ages. In socio-cultural development there have been different ages and libraries likewise have developed through different ages.²⁵

92 LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA

In the analysis of the historical evolution of library systems and customs, traditions and laws related to that in Kerala is was recognized that there were five roughly divided overlapping periods or phases.²⁶ Social conditions and formats have changed over these periods but not the basic function of libraries to collect preserve and disseminate the knowledge accumulated by society to its members for the ultimate benefit of the society.

In Kerala during the first phase this basic function was actively present and access was provided to all members of society without any restrictions. In the second phase Kerala came into contact with western ideas of education and libraries. Influenced by British administrators and as a part of educational reforms, States established and maintained public libraries, and made rules, orders and laws required for them. In the third phase people became aware of the possibilities of this institution in political and social reform and as a result a people's library movement took birth. Government while continuing its own library development activities supported the people's movement and both got inspiration from each other. In the fourth phase the peoples library movement which is headed by political and social activists who had no interest or expertise for development of library and information systems on scientific lines, structured the movement into an organization very much like a strong political party.

In the beginning of the fifth phase the State came into contact with the research and development on library and information dissemination system going on in India and abroad. State accepted its responsibility for the establishment of library and information system for the people and attempted to establish such a system. Here the people's movement

came into conflict with the government. The vested interests of the organization; Kerala Granthasala Sangham that headed the people's movement resisted the government's attempt for reform and intervention in the field it wanted to dominate. This delayed for more than four decades government's moves to enact a library legislation in Kerala.

Due to people's indifference and ignorance about modern library systems and their possibilities, and wide support obtained by the Kerala Granthasala Sangham against Government through its mass appealing programmes, government was forced to make a conciliation with this movement. Result was enactment of a defective library legislation in Kerala.

921 SEQUENCE AND EXTENT OF PHASES

The conceptual phases found in Kerala are not clearcut chronological divisions. Existence and development of a particular concept cannot be divided by clearcut chronological boundaries. The same phase may continue to exist in some aspects or places even after the birth of the next phase. Each phase may overlap the other at both ends. In Kerala even after the government has initiated the fifth phase the Kerala Granthasala Sangham remained in the fourth phase and opposed the fifth phase.

Human society has never shown uniform development. There have been focal points or areas of rapid growth while other parts of the country remained relatively stagnant. So the different regions may not be under the same phase at a time. For example when we take India as a whole; the fifth phase starts in 1930 when S R Ranganathan introduced the Model Library Act at the All Asia Educational Conference convened at Benaras. The system suggested by him was far advanced than any library system existing anywhere in the world at that time. But in Kerala the phase starts in 1947 when the State requested S R Ranganathan to prepare a library bill and development plans for Kerala. Some other States still continue in the earlier phases.

93 BARODA'S LIBRARY SYSTEM

In Baroda the fifth phase was present from 1900 immediately after the second phase, and it reached its excellence when the Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III built up an elaborate public library system for his people. The Maharaja, an enlightened ruler had in 1906 initiated a scheme of compulsory primary education, the first government in the country to sponsor such a progressive measure. He was of the opinion

that the State aided free public libraries are absolutely essential for continuing education. Money spent on few years of compulsory primary education would go waste unless there is an adequate provision for follow up work as a life-long process.²⁷ Only free public library service can keep masses literate after their formal education is over. Maharaja linked up primary education with a free public library system as a matter of rule.

The library movement in Baroda started in 1906 when primary education also was made free and compulsory. Maharaja invited Mr W A Borden, an American Librarian in 1910 to introduce a scientifically organized library system. With the assistance of Borden, the Maharaja established the State Central Library and a planned network of free public libraries throughout the State. A separate department of libraries was also established. He introduced open access system for all libraries. First library school was started in 1910 by Borden to train the professionals required for running these libraries. A library science journal was also started in 1912. The results of these activities are visible even today in these regions. Even today 85 per cent of the people of Baroda have library facilities. Study of these periods in Baroda can surely help the educational planning of any region..

Maharaja was very much like S R Ranganathan, a man ahead of his time and our time also. It took exactly 42 years of struggle in this modern world for Kerala to enact library legislation. Even then it could not envisage a system as efficient as Baroda did in the beginning of the century. But after Sayajirao Gaekwad, Baroda was forced to return to an earlier phase which we can identify as the third one, which continued its usual course. Baroda is a good example for the theory of occultations.

94 USE OF LIBRARY HISTORY

If history teaches us anything it is that life is a constant succession of turning points, each in some sort a legacy of the past and none of them more decisive in reality than any others.²⁸ Library history helps us to understand how the library and information dissemination systems developed. It links the present with the past and enables us to see how man has discovered better information systems and the infinite possibility that exists now for the collection, storage and dissemination of information. So library history is the quintessence of our experience in the field and it makes us wise by teaching us what is good so that it may be adopted and what is so that it may be avoided.

Library history has one main function to perform. It is to offer

broad principles and generalisations of historical truth. Cicero called history a vital magistrate who passes the verdict according to the canon of truth and reason.

History offers a mental discipline which helps to meet new problems soberly and intelligently. A knowledge of the past as to how man has suffered because of his mistakes may help humanity to correct itself and thus library history can fulfill pressing needs in the field.

History promotes the power to imagine circumstances and conditions other than our own. A wise man learns from his own experience, but a wiser man learns from the experience of others too. History tells us that human progress has been made possible through three important factors; skill, organize himself into societies and through cooperation and by having right ideas and beliefs man has marched on the path of progress. By adopting the same principles we can reach better situation in which information access will be easy, efficient and full for every one.

Library history is essential if we are to understand current library situations and technology, and how all has come to be what is now. Also, library history offers us a contrast which enables us to appreciate the present systems by a study of the past. Before we begin to understand or improve any system or idea the first thing we have to do is to find out the history of that system or idea. The present is the child of the past and has grown out of the past. Existing library systems like our present social, political and economic conditions are the result of factors that precede them. So a knowledge of what has happened in the past is essential if we would progress into the future, avoiding the mistakes of our predecessors, adopting methods that have proved successful and pursuing paths that have been blazed for our guidance with the object of extending them further towards our goal.

95 CONCLUSION

Among the historians of libraries and librarianship in India, there has been a tendency to work from the first definition of history, to view events of library development as closed and finite phenomena which may accumulate in the passage of time but which will not change. Public library service in India has been studied usually as a social development with emphasis on the factors contributing to the movement for library service rather than on the order in which events occurred or the specific advances were made. The order of events and advances does much to define the nature of movement; but it can be ignored in a study in which assumed order is known. Similarly,

the search for causes of the public library's origins is much simplified if it is assumed that the history of an institution is known and needs only to be explained in the light of some interpretive theory for the causes to become clear. Large number of histories of libraries and librarian-shop in India may be judged as having failed to meet the authors' purposes. The concept of history as a reduction of what is known leads to interminable sequences of summaries of the record of particular institutions. The other definition of history is liberating. The concept of history as a way of learning opens opportunities for expanding ones' knowledge of any subject. Rather than a search for a pattern; the historical study of a subject may be demonstration of variations from patterns. The history of public library movement in Kerala which we cited as an example illumines a characteristic of history as a way of learning; one which springs from a live concern, deals with life, serves life, for there is apparent in it the national and social movements and the concern to demonstrate it to the public library movement and the function of the peoples' library movement as a training ground for political leaders.

History as a way of learning also can expand the students' knowledge beyond the confines of a discipline, a profession or an institution. History of a library reflects clearly the history of the community it serves. It is important for students of librarianship that there are no more than a few such studies of this development. The lack may be attributed in part to the supposed relationship between history and the social sciences. History is neither a social science nor a humanity, but the study of a subject by analysis of its record..

The subject of historical enquiry into a profession is the profession itself. It is necessary to discount the idea of history as a science. For nearly one and a half century, librarians have admonished to use history as an instrument to gain an understanding of the sociological beginnings of the library movement; to develop wisdom, to prevent mistakes, to solve practical problems, and to find new purposes for the library. History as a study of the profession, record may assist in the development of the necessary understanding, but only in the minds of the librarians who are free from the past. We will be free from the past when we understand that is history - the study of the record from the past - we serve our purposes, not the past.

REFERENCES

- 1 IRWIN (R). *Golden chain: a study in the history of libraries*. 1958. University College, London.
- 2 YOUNG (JZ). *Doubt and certainty in science*. 1951. Routledge, London.

- 3 LIN YUTANG. Importance of living. 1938. Grafton, London.
- 4 DURENT (Will and Ariel). Lessons of history. 1968. Simon & Schuster, New York.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 REICHMAN (F). Historical research and library science. *Library Trends*. 13; 1964
- 7 BUTLER (P). Introduction to library science. 1933. Phoenix, Chicago.
- 8 ONIONS (CT). *Ed Oxford dictionary of etymology*. 1966. OUP, Oxford.
- 9 SHEIK ALI. History : Its theory and method. 1978. Macillan, Madras.
- 10 MARWICK (A). Nature of history. 1970. Macmillan, London. |
- 11 STURLEY (DM). Study of history. 1969. Longman, London.
- 12 NORRIS (DM). History of cataloguing. 1939. Grafton, London.
- 13 ANDERS (ME) Development of public library service in south eastern states 1895 - 1959, 1962. Columbia University, Columbia.
- 14 THORNTON (JL). Selected readings in the history of librarianship. 1966. Library Association, London.
- 15 THOMPSON (J). History of principles of librarianship. 1977. Clive Bingley, London.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 SHERA (J). Without reserve: what historians has been missing. *Wilson Library Bulletin*. 40; 1966.
- 19 THOMSON (LS). Preface to Predeek's History of libraries in Great Britain and America. 1940. Grafton, London,
- 20 NORRIS (DM). *Op cit*, 12.
- 21 SAVAGE (EA). Introduction to Thoronton's chronology of librarianship. 1941, Clive Bingley, London.
- 22 RAMAN NAIR (R). Public library systems in ancient south India. *ILA Bulletin*. 27; 1991.
- 23 THOMPSON (J). *Op cit*, 15.
- 24 MURISON (WJ). Public Library: Its origin, purpose and significance. 1988. Clive Bingley, London.
- 25 OLLE (JG). Library history. 1967. Clive Bingley, London.
- 26 RAMAN NAIR (R). Library legislation in Kerala: A historical and comparative evaluation. Dissertation for MLISc submitted to BHU. 1989. BHU, Varanasi.
- 27 DESHPANDE (KS). Library legislation in India. *In Rout, Library legislation in India*. 1986. Reliance, New Delhi.
- 28 SHERA (J). Literature of American library history. *Library Quarterly*. 15; 1945.