

Public Library Purpose

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1. Origin of the Concept

Public library is an institution which offers to people free access to information¹. The origins of public library services are lost in antiquity. With the first recording of human thoughts took birth the concept of a system or an institution which could preserve thoughts for future use which gradually came to be referred by the term library. Ever since, the essential functions of all libraries remained the same—collection, preservation and dissemination of knowledge.

The concept of public library to a large extent is related to the principle of access rather than to the size, content or organization of the collections. The history of public access to libraries is also a long and continuous one. Hence the theory that free public library service is a recent phenomenon is erroneous.

2. Free Access for the people

The principle that libraries are for all existed from very ancient times. Even academic libraries of the ancient days were open to all people. Evidences of public access to libraries are there from the earliest period of human history. In seventh century BC Assyrian king Assurbanipal established a very huge well organised collection at Nineveh.² The plan of the library, the specialized equipments, staff and the liberal provision for the use of stock were far advanced than that of most of the present public libraries. According to Assyriologists, that king had expressly organized the large collection for the purpose of instruction of his subjects and his library was open to all the people. This is only one of the many

instances in the past which shows that ancient governments were well aware of their responsibility to provide library services to the people.

Pliny in his natural history tells us about the public library services maintained by Asinius Pollo in 39 BC. Asinius Pollo had made men's talents and mental powers a public possession.³ The principle that libraries should give free access to all was popular during those ancient days. In Alexandria; in third century BC Ptolemies established a library with a magnificent collection of 700,000 volumes. Scholars like Aristophanes and Callimaches headed that library. It allowed free access to all. In Rome the idea of a public library meant for common use, with large ex-haustive collection covering all fields of knowledge first found practical realization in the time of the last Roman Emperor Augustus who ruled upto 14 AD.

3. Ancient Indian Libraries

India has a very long history of providing library services to the people. The great libraries at Nalanda, Taxila and Pataliputra, even though attached to academic institutions had more free public library character than any of the present day public libraries.⁴ Thousands of people from all over the world took hazardous journeys to use the huge collections of our recorded knowledge arranged in the most logical order in those libraries.⁵ They were open to all irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Even free boarding and lodging facilities were given to the people who went there from far off places.

4. Library Profession

In those ancient days librarianship was considered a specialised and esteemed profession. Only scholars and highly educated persons are allowed to work as librarians. The persons who managed ancient document collections should have knowledge about the thought content of the documents. They were expected to be equal to the scholars who came searching for the recorded knowledge, to help and guide them in this

search and also explain the thought content of the collections if it became essential. So the quality of library and information service offered in the ancient days was far superior to that we could imagine in our present day situations.

5. Modern Definitions

All that discussed above make it clear that the concept of public library and the aims and objectives we ascribe to that institution existed throughout history and were the same and recognized ones for thousands of years. Dr. S.R. Ranganathan accepted and strengthened the ancient concept when he defined public library as a library open to the public free of charge, and maintained and managed by government.⁶

Unesco manifesto for Public Libraries proclaims public library as an institution which is the principal means whereby the record of man's thoughts and ideas and the expression of his creative imagination are made freely available to all.⁷ The manifesto also states that it should be an institution established under the clear mandate of law, maintained fully from public fund, offering all its services free of cost and open for free and equal use by all members of the community irrespective of their age, sex, religion, language, status or level of education.

Government of India's Advisory Committee on Libraries with Dr. A.P. Sinha as Chairman has defined public library as a library:⁸

- * which is financed for most part out of public funds.
- * which is intended as an auxiliary educational institution providing a means of self education which is endless.
- * which houses learning materials giving reliable information freely and without partiality or prejudice on as wide a variety of subjects as will satisfy the interests of readers.

6. Objectives

The objectives of public library as enunciated by Dr. S.R. Ranganathan are as follows:⁹

- * to help the lifelong self education of one and all,
- * to furnish up-to-date facts and information to one and all,
- * to distribute in an unbiased and balanced way all shades of recorded views and thoughts to one and all as a help in the discharge of their political functions in respect of local, national and international affairs,
- * to contribute to productivity drive by informing top management of the latest trends in diverse enterprises by ploughing back into the minds of researchers, scientists and technicians every piece of relevant new thought promptly and pin-pointedly,
- * to provide to one and all a harmless and elevating use of leisure.
- * to preserve the literary remains of humanity for posterity, as vehicles of culture and as a source material for antiquarian research, and
- * to work for the continued social well-being as the agency in charge of all socialised recorded thoughts.

According to the standards for public libraries formed by American Library Association, the objectives of public libraries are:

- * to assist people to contribute to the growth of knowledge to make such use of knowledge as will promote personal and social well-being.
- * to develop their creative and spiritual capabilities to be more capable in their daily occupations to discharge political and social obligations to become better members of home and community.
- * to keep pace with progress in all fields of knowledge and to educate themselves continually.

7. National Development

Most of the enunciations of the objectives of public library assign to it important roles in educational, economic, political, social and cultural development of the country. The explosive growth of knowledge and the direct relation of

information to developments in all walks of human life have elevated public library which is to give people free access to information, as the most important instrument in their life and progress. There is no other substitute to public library which is of such importance and which can undertake the vast and varied functions it is expected to undertake in the present day society the characteristic of which is tremendous and continuous development.

7.1 Personality Development

Public libraries enrich the personal lives of individuals. Individuals can become useful citizens and advance in their vocations and professions utilizing the information stored in public libraries.

As citizens who should participate actively in discussions on vital current topics, people need to develop their individual mental powers by reading and studying materials chosen on their own initiative on which to base their own thinking as preface and supplement to competent discussion.

Library services to the people with stress to individual needs involve great challenges. We claim that our purpose is to supply the right information to right reader at the right time. Yet the extra ordinary intimate and delicate transactions involved in readers advisory work are now conducted with only the shallowest understanding of why and how individuals are affected by what they read.

Unlike the mass media the public library seeks not to enforce the one idea upon the many, but to open to each individual user the unnumbered wealth of intellectual resources from which he can serve not another's ends but his own.

It should be a major objective for public libraries to recognize and aid the individual as such even though he is most easily reached through a group. It seems also incumbent on public libraries to discover and encourage those many gifted persons in and out of school, of every age and in every social and economic level, now largely ignored, who have the brains, background, ability, ambition, character and vision required for becoming tomorrow's leaders. Specific programmes for the gifted in public libraries and also in schools and colleges can

produce results. The public library can give as much by giving all the help possible to those readers who seem to have special promise and aptitudes. Someone in each library should be made specially responsible for this work. Reading is a necessity for the gifted child's intellectual development and no doubt this is equally true of adults.¹⁰

7.2 Human Adjustment

The speed at which science and technology is effecting changes in all spheres of life assigns to public library a role that it only can play. Advances in science and technology caused the emergence of new socio-cultural patterns with turbulent changes in goals, pursuits and priorities. Change is not a new phenomenon. We have been witnessing it since time immemorial. But now we are in a phase of exploding change with personal life torn apart, the existing social order crumbling and fantastic new way of life emerging on the horizon; asking the very largest question about our future is not merely a matter of intellectual curiosity. It is a matter of survival. In this new environment public libraries only can help the majority of our population; to adjust with the current trends, to develop correct attitudes and to be aware of the consequences of wrong policies.

7.3 Spread of Education

Public library service is a necessity for the preservation of universal literacy and for elimination of waste in all educational policies and programmes. We are spending crores and crores of rupees for making people literate. But literacy cannot be preserved unless it is continuously exercised. Universal exercise of literacy demands a free public library system. Democratisation of education was declared as the basic principle of educational policy in independent India. It means free access to education for one and all irrespective of geographical, economic, cultural or religious differences. But even after half a century has elapsed since the policy declaration, seventy five percent of our people are not in a position to get the benefit from our educational institutions maintained at huge

costs which they also are forced to bear. The formal education system which we have so far upheld has failed to go beyond a twenty five percent of our population. If education is to reach people beyond this privileged minority, we have to give more importance to nonformal education supported by and spread through public libraries which are the most accessible and free educational institutions of the people. Formal education also requires the support of public libraries which are to provide for the continued self education of people after their leaving the formal education institutions. Unless public libraries are developed in a way in which they can play these roles effectively, our educational programmes will go on serving only a privileged minority, our upper class.

7.4 Use of Science

If information created in the fields of science and technology is to become useful for socio-economic development of the whole population, the findings at the laboratory should reach the man in the field at the right time. Doctor serving in the village must get there upto date information on a disease unfamiliar to him which he comes upon there and the drugs to be administered for it. The farmer should get information on a manure, a pesticide or an agricultural equipment which he requires in some situation. To effect all these and to make science useful to society at large there should be some system that could reach the common man and satisfy the above requirements.

Public library only can bring to the common people accurate information quickly and in depth, particularly on topics of urgent concern. It has to offer the people materials and services that will help them to prosper in their respective fields of work. It has to support the people to get along in the present day world where inventions and discoveries are flooding everyday impelling them to have continuous education for professional maturity.

7.5 Political Awareness

Democracy will be impossible unless the citizens have free

access to correct information. Democracy needs accesses to all points of view and the progressive sharpening of intellect in one and all. It needs the sublimation of the lower emotions in the leaders as well as their followers. These are the foundations of safe political life and they form the necessary corrective power in the management of political affairs. Public library is the only impartial agency which can place before one and all a truly balanced information store on all points of view, all lines of approach and all schools of thought. This will help the people to know, defend and enjoy their rights and realise and discharge their duties in a free society. People of a country would never consent to the destruction of their liberties if they were informed and nothing would do more good towards making them informed than the establishment of a small public library; says Thomas Jefferson.

In a democracy every one enjoys sovereignty and if democracy is to be a participatory one then it becomes essential that everyone should be educated and informed about what is going on around him. It is only then that he will be able to exercise his franchise wisely, and effectively play his role in all development activities of the nation.

7.6 Social Development

Public library has a great role to play in social education to prepare people for social adjustment. It has to offer materials and services to the people to understand the social phenomena and thus live a successful social life and avoid social evils. It provides opportunities to the people to understand social evils and the methods to control them.

7.7 Economic Development

Country's economic development also depends on information to a large extent. Economic growth is not possible without extensive use of scientific and technical know-how embodied in books, and other mediums. Access to right book or information at the right time for scientist, engineer or agronomist could have multiplier effect on the economy.¹¹ It is also to be remembered that industrial revolution took place

mainly through new knowledge disseminated through public libraries. Now also we are living in a period of rapid technological advance and the spectrum of skills required at each stage of production is wide. If the developing countries are to survive they have to contribute their energies on imparting such skills to workers and the most effective instrument for that is the public library.

Public libraries play an important role in the realm of agriculture too. It familiarises the farmers with new agricultural practises and improves production. Public library is also a partner in the successive implementation of plan programmes. It brings key issues to the attention of the public, initiates discussion and elicits their inputs in the form of votes. Public library makes successful the domestic and international trade by supplying the manufacturers with information regarding the sources and nature of raw materials, means of transport, methods of management, costs of production, market and agents for distribution etc.

7.8 Culture and Leisure

Public libraries help nation's cultural development in more than one way. It can promote a keener participation, enjoyment and appreciation of all arts. It can play a vital role in collecting and preserving the cultural heritage of the locality and make it readily available to the people to enrich their cultural awareness. It attempts to reduce the cultural lag—the time taken for the developments to become integrated into society. Public library is also a recognized agency for providing harmless and elevating leisure.

8. Aims to be pursued

The current approach of public library should change from the nineteenth century role to fit itself in our changed society.¹² Aims and objectives the public library should pursue in the present context and possible future situations can be summarised as follows:

- * Should shift attention from elaborate organization to reaching and serving the majority of population which still does not read or use books in any substantial way through programmes that could extend services.
- * Should get vitalized to play a more active role in the community as an intellectual power house and rallying point. The essentially passive library cannot be allowed to continue undisturbed in its inertia.
- * Should see that the individual is reached and served perhaps through his group connections to encourage him in his self chosen thinking and endeavours, to help him draw from recorded thought, the inner strength to meet and endure the pressures from society around him, and to carry out ideas from which he may derive satisfaction.
- * Should equip itself for serving more effectively the student engaged in formal and nonformal education seeking help for study; for libraries of academic institutions are not likely to have the variety of materials which public library has. Also academic libraries will not be open for students as many hours as public libraries are open.
- * Should discover and help the talented and gifted at all age levels and in all stages of their growth and progress and should show how public libraries can help them.
- * Should co-operate with all other constructive educational agencies towards higher goals and as a secondary function to capitalise on the educative values of mass media because public library is primarily an instrument of self-education.
- * Should become service centre which is more than mere store house and should provide information and news on the existing conflicting ideas for all the community to weigh and use; for information, self development, enlargement of knowledge, appreciation and enjoyment of life and the attainment of high ideals.
- * Should combat all attempts at censorship, thought control, authoritarianism and race or religious prejudice, and should encourage the open mind and respect for individuals regardless of their status.

To fulfil the above objectives public libraries should esta-

blish or form part of resource sharing networks, recruit trained manpower and should build up strong need-based collections. Service points should be spread all over the country. More specific standards and evaluation methods must be evolved. Increased emphasis should be given on efficient methods of finding information. Co-operative bibliographic enterprises and automation should be introduced to accelerate the recording and rendering of more detailed information needed by specialised clients. Public libraries should see that they in all aspects of their planning try to keep abreast of current problems and the needs of society and the community.

9. Engine of Progress

Information is the most important resource for progress and so libraries which collect shares and make it available for use can be considered as engines of progress. The information needs of society become greater and complex in the present context of economic, social and cultural development. So it is the prime duty of government to identify the information requirement of the country and ensure that it is satisfied as fully, promptly, cheaply and conveniently as available resources allow. In this context despite all changes that are taking place, introducing new institutions and information storage and dissemination systems public libraries have their own unique role to play. They only can ensure availability of information, access to information and effective use of information to all. A country which attempts to develop educational systems without the basis of strong public library systems builds castles on sand.

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