

INFORMATION SERVICES TO THE LEGISLATORS

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1. Information : Crucial Resource

Information support is the vital factor, which helps each profession to fulfill people's expectations on it by acquiring efficiency, dignity in performance as well as clearly identified goals and ideals. Legislators also need professional expertise, commitment and moral imperatives. They can never be successful unless they have continuous, reliable information support.

Legislature is not assembly of representatives of different hostile interests like that of political parties or regions. It is a deliberative assembly of a State with one interest, which is that of the whole, where no prejudices or local interests should guide, but the general good resulting from the general reason of the whole people who choose a member. Edmund Burke has said that when a member is chosen he is not a member of a party or representative of a region, but is a member of the Parliament.

1.1 Information and Legislator

For a legislator, independent judgment and patriotic commitment to national interests are very important. A legislator has to make a clear and well-prepared presentation at the house to substantiate his arguments. Even when the matter raised is very important; unless the legislator is able to present all the facts and participate in the debate successfully, and has also necessary debating skills the point to be made may fail.

All these show that legislators require a very efficient, continuous need-based supply of information and documents relevant to

discussions or activities in which they have to participate on each and every day. Winston Churchill is one of the best examples for effective debating. His thrilling speeches are backed by his hours in library as well as the hard work his staff providing information services was forced to put. Even his severe opponents could not force their views in situations, which were against Churchill.

1.2 Information and Legislation

Legislature is the body of the people, which has the power to make and change laws. When laws are ill drafted and passed, the society suffers. Development will be hindered. Hence using the information systems that supports them, the legislators should study the pros and cons of each and every class of the laws proposed, and move amendments, correct grave mistakes, and contribute to the perfection of the Acts.

1.3 Information and Government

Legislature is the machinery that links people and government. Parliamentary government is considered as the government by discussion. This makes the people the ultimate masters. Government is answerable to legislature and legislature is answerable to the people. The strength of the legislature lies in its capacity to scrutinize the political and administrative actions of the government. This necessitates the timely availability of information on working of various departments of government. Unless the adequate supply of information is not there legislature cannot effectively oversee the administration.

2. Members' Right to Information

So legislature has unlimited right to obtain information regarding anything going on in the State. Beyond the legislature's library and information system which is to provide information and research support there are also many other devices like question hour, short notice question, half an hour discussion, adjournment motion, short duration discussion, calling attention, submissions, resolutions, motions, private members business etc. which are used by members to obtain information as well as bring important information to the attention of the assembly. The dependence of most of these devices on library for their success is an uncontested truth.

The above facts point out to the need for an efficient and modern library and information system in the legislature. Legislature has to cover each and every aspect of human activity. Better political, social and economic conditions as well as smooth and speedy development depends on good legislation. This makes the deliberations in the legislature as well the information support provided to the legislators for their effective participation in the discussions at legislature very important for development.

2.1 Nature of Information Requirements

A wide range of topics covering almost all spheres of activity come up for discussion before the legislature from time to time. Science and technology has provided amazing speed to development. The quantum of information generated on these developments is also huge, vast and varied. From this ocean of documents legislators should get in time relevant and upto date information on topics of their discussion if they are to make effective contribution to the deliberating and law

making. Engaged in various social, political and developmental activities they also lack time and so information should be given to them specially repacked according to their specific needs at each and every context.

Various sources are to be tapped to satisfy the information needs of legislators in each occasion. State is the greatest single monopolizer of the large portion of information a legislator or legislature requires. Hence they have to rely to some extent on executive departments. But there are chances that such information gets consciously or unconsciously biased towards views of the government.

Information that can be obtained from press, interest groups, lobbyists, etc. will also be much biased. Hence legislatures should have their own information systems, which can collect all views and versions and present them in a way in which the member can himself understand the truth. This points out the importance of library and information systems of the legislature.

3. Library and Information Services

Every legislature requires a modern library and information system with physical facilities, equipment, collection and highly qualified professionals. In these days of information explosion and the introduction of revolutionary methods and mediums for information storage and dissemination traditional systems as we have today cannot fulfill the needs of the legislators, or the objective of the system. Even a modernized library can never be self reliant to fulfill all requirements of an institution like the legislature.

So the legislature libraries need to be modernized with all required computer and communication systems as well as digital storage equipments. There should be

necessary provisions for accessing other legislature libraries and the parliament library, as well as other important collections of relevance to legislature existing in the State, country and outside.

3.1 Legislature and Statewide Library Networks

Legislature library can take the initiative for establishing a State wide information network. So the resources available at the State Central Library, universities and other specialized collections in the State will become accessible to legislature also. Being very close to legislators the professionals in the legislature library are in a better position to educate the legislators on need for library legislation as well as revision of faulty provisions in existing library Acts.

4. Digital Library Development

With huge quantum of documents that are on continuous need when the assembly sessions are going on, automation of legislature libraries and digitalization of continuously required or highly used content is urgent and very important for our democratic system of Government. While considering automation we have to analyze the functional divisions that a library and information system of the legislature should have and their activities. It will enable us to understand how for current information technology can be effectively applied in them. We will also have to consider the benefits that the other divisions of the legislature will get due to automation of the library. If divisions like editing, questions, etc. get automated that will in turn improve the quality of library services also. There are many areas of work in a legislature, which can be automated to save more than fifty per cent of the expenses presently incurred due to duplication or use of obsolete methods of work.

5. Automating Housekeeping Operations

Acquisition and technical processing is the work in a legislature library, which consumes much staff and time. Most of the legislature libraries are understaffed. Qualified professionals are scarce. This has resulted in wrong classification numbers and faulty catalogues in most of the legislatures. This hinders the timely retrieval of required documents. Any revising of these manual catalogues will require too much resources than what the government departments will normally provide for library development. Hence automation of these processes is the only cost effective way of rectifying that defects and making these functions more effective. Acquisition can be done using an available library software package and it will enable preparation of catalogue also without any duplication of work in data entry, for the same data used in acquisition can be transferred to the catalogue with necessary additions.

6. Conservation of Records

Conservation function is another area in which legislature libraries can apply information technology successfully. Most of the legislatures possess very old, rare books and manuscripts transferred to them from the earlier rulers or private collections. Kerala legislature has the proceedings of the first meeting of the legislature which was the first such assembly in India. Parliament library has the first draft of constitution and also thousands of rare documents. Such materials can be copied into electronic media and original manuscripts can be shifted to museums, archives or to the rare book collection of the legislature or parliament where facility and technology for conserving the originals are available. The electronic copies so prepared can be freely made available to the users so that

preservation of the originals without any defect can be ensured.

7. Information Services

Reference services can be automated. Some very important manuals like parliamentary procedures, Acts, ordinances and other documents can be kept on computer memory with suitable search mechanisms or computerized indexes. This can enable quick reference to concerned clauses of the Acts and rules as well as procedures and matters of precedence. Also book catalogues, journal indexes, etc. can be kept using database management systems like CDS/ISIS. This can enable offering CAS and SDI services to members of the legislature more speedily and efficiently.

Legislature libraries have to do various types of documentation services. Books, periodicals, reports, etc in full are generally documented. More than this, legislature libraries have to document their relevant portions that may serve as background materials for discussion of bills, etc. They have also to document records laid on the table of the legislature. They are to be suitably annotated and abstracted depending upon the importance of the material. Annotated abstracts and other materials serve as invaluable aids for further research activities.

7.1 Publication Activities

Some legislatures publish information from this documentation as indexing or abstracting periodicals. Database management systems can be used for all these documentation works so that most of the duplication of work can be avoided. The publications as well as customized services can be generated as byproducts of the databases prepared with all these requirements in view.

'Who is Who' of the members of the legislature is published for every legislative

assembly. If the legislature library and information system is automated this can be maintained in electronic memory in a standardized format in which photo or even audio and video clippings on members of earlier legislative assemblies can also be included. When a new assembly comes into being the new members can be added and records on earlier members who are still members can be updated. Master copy of the printed volume to be sent to press can be generated as a byproduct of this database. More than that, detail of any member of earlier legislative assemblies can be retrieved within seconds from this database.

8. ICT Application

The recording, editing, publishing, organizing, conserving, and making available for reference the proceedings of the legislature is another important area in which Information Technology can be applied in legislatures. According to the reports on research going on in computer science field, within a short while many user friendly programs will be available that will help us to generate printed text from sounds fed into the computer. So the discussions in the legislature can be recorded and fed into the computer to generate textual matter and it can be edited in the computer using programs for spell check, grammar check, etc. and final pages of the printed volumes of the proceedings can be produced for sending to the press immediately after each session closes. Presently, most legislatures use typewriters in typing proceedings from what was recorded in shorthand by staff of editorial section. In the place of typewriters computers can be used and editing and final page settings can be done in the computer.

8.1 Legislative Proceedings

One electronic copy of the proceedings of the legislative assembly can be kept in the

Automated Legislative Assembly Proceedings Database (ALAPD). The legislative proceedings become available for reference in the library from the day on which it is sent to the press so that any information from the proceedings can be retrieved for or by the members within seconds after typing a single word like the date, the name of member, or the subject of discussion. Various other methods also can be used to retrieve the required information. Few packages that allow these possibilities have already become available.

8.2 Multimedia Application

There is also scope for using multimedia technology for preserving information as well as for providing services and training to members. Legislatures can copy ancient paintings, as well as films and sound recordings related to former members of the legislature, historical events, etc. Also this technology can be used to train new members and staff of different departments of the legislature in application of IT in various process of the legislature.

As pointed out earlier no library can be self-relevant in these days information explosion. So legislature library also has to concentrate on ensuring to the members of the legislature access to maximum information than building up huge collections. Wellframed public library Acts can establish an efficient library and information system and network in the State. This can enable the legislature access the informatoin resources avialable in the state. Legislature library can also participate in other national information systems and networks.

8.3 Accessing External Information

Members will also require information of various kinds from Parliament and other legislatures. Parliament has already started the

works for automating its library and information services. Most of the legislature libraries will get automated within a few years. So legislature libraries can maintain a link with Parliament Library and other legislature libraries through electronic and communication networks so that they can share information resources available with them.

Parliament has an integrated library and information service system known as LARRDIS, which stands for Library Reference, Research, Documentation and Information Services. It can meet all the information needs of the members of both houses of Parliament-Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. Hence it is not essential to specially mention that LARRDIS can also meet most of the information needs of members of State legislatures if it becomes accessible to them.

Already initiative has been taken for establishing a resource sharing network of Parliament Library and libraries in State legislatures. The Parliament library will act as the central hub of the system in this network. This will also make accessible constitutional and parliamentary information from worldwide sources to members of our legislatures through participating in world wide networks of the libraries of parliaments and legistlatures of all the countries.

9. Vision for the Future

It is the availability of free and unbiased information that enables people's real participation in government. Parliamentary system is the guardian of democracy and the legislatures are the control systems of democratic governments and guarantor of the rights of the people. This reveals that the responsibility of the legislators is heavy. So, efficient information system that can present before the members of the legislature unbiased, relevant and timely information is important for their

performance and to enable them to rise above ignorance, indulgence, party politics and personal biases. Hence information systems of the legislature surely can contribute to shape the country's destiny. So the legislature should harness all possibilities offered by current information technology to maintain good library and information system and services for its members.

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