

Academic Librarianship in India : Towards Exploring Strategic Intent and Core Competencies in the Present Era

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Abstract

Academic libraries will remain central to the management of scholarly communication. In the present era of computer mediated information storage and retrieval system, there is a need for a proper strategy for managing the libraries. LIS professionals with deeper understanding of esoteric sources of information as well as research and investigative experience are required for user oriented services.

Introduction

Academic libraries (AL) in India are mostly attached to universities and autonomous research institutions. Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals working in these establishments holding higher positions play an active role in the scholarly communication that take place between a library and the user community. As a part of the academic institution, they support teaching, research and extension programmes of the university through various ways. In their classic work, Wilson and Tauber have succinctly described the functions of a well administered university library:

“By accumulating and organising books, manuscripts, journals and other materials, the University Libraries serve as an invaluable aid in the conservation of knowledge and ideas as an active force in the teaching, research and extension programmes of the University. Through direct assistance to the members of the faculty and research staff as instructional officers, the University Library participates in the interpretative function of the university.” (Wilson and Tauber, 1964).

Needless to say, in the changing IT scenario, ALS are also redefining their role. A reference librarian is seeking refuge in ‘digital reference’ which refers to a network of expertise, intermediation and resources put at the disposal of a person seeking information in an online environment. A professional sitting on the

reference desk is providing human touch in a complex or intimidating computing system. Several organisations are questioning the need for libraries given the wide range of online resources that are readily available. For instance New York Public Library’s website can show the book jackets from the 1920s through the 1940s’, portrait images from 16th to 19th centuries, photos of early automobiles, postcards from World War I, Wilt Whitman manuscripts, books scanned by Google – and all that is just for starters. One can truly get lost in this site and it is worth considering when one has some research to do and does not know where to start.

A librarian with a positive attitude and academic rigour would emphatically say that in this new age of assembling and disseminating information, there will still be a need for special libraries and librarians. In many libraries, particularly in social sciences and humanities there are certain hidden treasures – or a set of documents that researchers often overlook. A skilled intermediary is required to exploit these materials.

Keeping this in view, the paper tries to identify the importance of ‘strategic intent’ in the management of affairs of university libraries and ‘core competencies’ of librarians working in academic institutions. The paper argues that close familiarity with esoteric sources of information as well as research and investigative experience is important for LIS professionals.

Academic Libraries: Recent Developments

In an academic institution, library will remain central to the management of scholarly communication. It fulfils the traditional role of information supply or document delivery. Recent developments in the field of IT have had an impact on libraries. Now, they have to adopt the possibilities of technology application and prepare for new tasks in the process of scholarly

communication. The library is fast becoming an information centre providing access to information that is available not only locally but also nationally and worldwide.

Major shifts identified in AL are:

- from Ownership Model to Access Model
- from Print to Electronic Media
- from Libraries as Archives to Libraries as Access Points
- from Information Collection to Information Analysis and Repackaging

Libraries were once thought of as buildings with books, periodicals etc in physical form. Now they have evolved into a decentralised network providing services and resources not limited to what they have. ALs are now in an environment of change characterized by:

- (i) greater access to a range of learning resources
- (ii) increased speed in acquiring information
- (iii) constantly changing technology, and
- (iv) lack of standardisation of both hardware and software etc. (Glibert and Klugkist, 1998).

This implies changing role and responsibilities and libraries have to find their ways of justifying their future existence. In fact, a library is part of a larger entity i.e. university and has to contribute to its results. The library has to be highly visible and it should be considered as essential to the teaching, learning and research activities of the university.

AL spend a sizable part of their budget on periodicals or scholarly journals on various subjects. Researchers/ academicians use journals as a way to communicate with each other in order to keep up to date with the progress of others and to avoid duplication of efforts. The speed of sharing thoughts – even manuscripts has increased dramatically in this present era of the internet. And if we focus purely on communication, electronic journals may appear superior to print and possibly less costly. Secondly, journals filter scholarship in two ways. They play an important role by concentrating the results of research in specific disciplines into the narrow areas represented by each journal title which lowers scholars' costs of information searching. Moreover, editors and reviewers of journal articles provide a means to filter out unacceptable submissions. (Meyer, 1996).

In India, UGC and the Ministry of Human Resource Development have provided access to electronic versions of a large number of scholarly journals through their consortia based subscription programmes INFLIBNET and INDEST. The present scenario in ALs is the maintenance of a core collection of printed serials directly accessible on open shelves and facilities for remote access to more specialised serials through consortia agreements.

Academic Libraries: Strategic Intent

A strategy can be defined as thinking about the future in a different way. It allows a person to try to shape the future beyond simple extrapolation of the present. Strategy is about interpreting general trends, developing capabilities in generic areas and taking action. The benefits of strategy come from generating a distinction that sets the organisation apart from others recognizing a problem before others and moving to distance the organisation from risks and costs. (Divanna and Austin, 2004).

Several organisations particularly those in the corporate sector are questioning the need for libraries as there are so much data or information now freely available on the web. ALs, fortunately, do not fall under this category. Because profitability is not a criterion and because the service provided by them are difficult to assess, libraries often develop some bureaucratic characteristics of public agencies. A part of the public nature of human service systems (including libraries) is that most of the users have practically no choice in deciding which system they will use. In fact, lack of competition make many human service systems rather complacent about the quality of their services as there is never any feedback in terms of reduced demand. Normally, AL are guaranteed a client based and need to do little but provide a minimum level of service in order to maintain themselves, (Goodstein, 1980) in contrast to organisations in the business and industrial sectors where survival requires market place demand for quality and effectiveness.

There is an urgent need for a 'strategic thinking' on the part of senior LIS professionals to improve services in AL. A new report available from the company Outsell in USA says that library managers must stop thinking of marketing only in terms of marketing communication, i.e. brochures, staff training, fairs etc. They must broaden their marketing efforts to include their understanding of users, stakeholders and communication channels and how they can be of benefit. Also, they need to take bold steps to integrate their presence within the inner corridors of the organisation – they need to jump into the middle – making contacts providing assistance and becoming known as valued partners. (Report Suggests Strategies and Tactics for Marketing Libraries, 2009). Now, libraries are judged by their overall relevancy to the people in their domain; much like Google's approach to calculating the relevancy of search results to individual search queries. They need to continually assess the relevancy of the features and functions they provide to the people they serve. (Frey, 2009).

A study on service quality management at a prominent university library, i.e. Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) has suggested that the library is required to improve responsiveness and communication. The students said that they do not know about the existence of some of the services. Therefore, adequate publicity should be given to the services and assistance

provided to access them. Information seeking is a function not only of awareness of possible existence of documents but also their availability and accessibility. A quality service is about helping users to define and satisfy their information needs, building their confidence in using the retrieval systems and making the whole activity of working with library staff a pleasurable experience. The service should always be tailor made to accommodate the needs and wants of the customer. Quality means conforming first to customer requirements than to standards and specifications. (Sahu, 2007).

Academic Libraries: Core Competencies

Business organisations define core competence as a bundle of skills and technologies that enables a company to provide a particular benefit to its customers. For example, at Sony that benefit is pocketability and the core competence is miniaturization. At the Federal Express, the benefit is on time delivery and the core competence at a very high level is logistics management. Experts say that competence building represents more cumulative learning than great leaps of inventiveness; and it is difficult to time compress competence building. A core competence is what its name implies; an aptitude or a skill; and to be recognised as a core competence, a skill must meet the following (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994):

- (i) *Customer Value*: it must make a substantial contribution to the customer perceived value. The 'Skill Set' enable a firm or an organisation to deliver a fundamental customer benefit.
- (ii) *Competitor Differentiation*: to qualify as a core competence, a capability must also be competitively unique. However, this does not mean that to qualify as core, a competence must be uniquely held by a single agency.
- (iii) *Extendibility*: Core competencies are the gateways to the tomorrow's markets. An array of new products and services can be abstracted from the core competencies.

How to determine the core competencies of ALS? Traditionally, value addition in LIS has been in cataloguing (to provide a uniform record of document) and in classification (to provide a subject arrangement and a finding tool). These two techniques are employed by all libraries. LIS professionals are required to collect information in written, printed or electronic format; and also to activate their use with the help of indexing and reference work. Recent advances in IT have made it possible to store, analyse and disseminate information in various form and means of media on a local, national and international level. As a result, LIS professionals are needed to shift their attention from collection (the objects) and look at the special services based on user-centric approach. The widespread use of computer mediated information storage and retrieval system has made IT skill as 'survival skill' for the LIS professionals.

One can observe that people coming to AL are searching for data or information. Sometimes, they are on an exploratory mission with only vague notions of what they are looking for; other times they have a laser like precision in their search for specific data points. The core competence of a librarian lies with the ability to provide a 'functional approach to document' or 'problem oriented access' to literature in which documents are described not merely as being about such and such a topic but as being of likely use in an enquiry of such and such a sort (Wilson, 1983). It affirms academic role of librarians in information provision. A successful librarian is one 'who can coax his readers into an appreciation for the art of research simultaneously providing and contextualising the tools the readers will need to hone their research skill rather than teaching a process.'

Academic Libraries: Experiential Learning

In fact, active participation in scholarly communications that takes place between a reader and the library provides a suitable stage for experiential learning. And it also enhances the possibilities of developing core competence. This type of learning occurs when a person (i.e. LIS Professional) engages in some activity, looks back at the activity critically abstracts some useful insights from the analysis and put the results to work. It is basically known as inductive process proceeding from observation rather than from a prior truth. Following two examples show new information search activities take the form of learning experience for LIS professionals.

Example 1

Availability of Macro Level (All India) Data on Public Libraries – Researchers in the field of LIS often look for all India data on libraries. Perhaps no one has ever tried to explore the official data sources using various service and industry classification schemes that are employed by data collection agencies like Registrar General of India (RGI), Central Statistical Organisation (CSO) or its Economic Census wing, National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) which conducts nationwide sample surveys on various socio-economic variables has a large repository of data in electronic/digital form. It is interesting to note that the NSSO in one of its recent report (India, 2007) has indicated average household expenditure on the payment of 'library fees' in various states of India. Similarly one of the Census of India reports published in 1994 showed that percentage of small towns having public libraries decreased between 1971 and 1981 in many states of India (All India figures reduced from 74.76% to 57.93%). This Census of India special report (India, 1994) has escaped the attention of the LIS researchers in India. As a matter of fact, there are very few LIS researchers in India who have tried to explore official data sources to present a statistical view of libraries and archives of the country.

Economic Census (EC) published by the CSO has all India data on libraries and archives. The results of

this statistical operation, conducted in 2005 (EC-2005), is presently available in electronic form and by using the classification number 92311 derived from its methodological guidebook titled *Activity and Product Classification for MSME Sector (based on ASICC 2000 and NIC 2004) Volume 1 (group wise)*, district level data on libraries and archives can be derived. The main objective of EC has been to prepare a frame of all 'establishments' engaged in various economic activities which serves as a basic input for conducting detailed surveys pertaining to any specific activity of the economy. LIS researchers or those who are at the helm of affairs of public libraries (e.g. Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF) Kolkata) can make use of this data for future surveys. As a part of EC-2005, a directory of establishments engaging more than 10 workers has been compiled. In addition, unit level data can be made available to the researchers on request. According to EC-2005, the total number of public libraries (including archives) is 34,450, where as according to a survey conducted by the ORG under the aegis of RRRLF in the year 2003, the total number of public libraries in the country is 54000. This wide variation in number of libraries reported in two different sources can be investigated by the researchers examining the factors like concepts, definition, survey method, classification of units etc. used by the two agencies.

Example 2

List of Officers (in chronological order) who held the position of Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Government of India – In fact, compilation of a list of this nature appears to be simple non-academic or semi-professional activity. One would readily suggest getting hold of the file from the record room which contains copies of orders of senior appointments made in the department. One should note that record keeping or maintenance of an archive is not assigned priority in government agencies; and archival policy resolution which stipulates rules and regulations regarding record management and transfer of official files to the National Archives of India (NAI) is often flouted. It is always difficult to trace an old file in a government department.

Under such circumstances, most reasonable attempt to be made by a LIS professional is to carefully scan certain obscure and not-too-friendly sort of official publications such as:

- (i) All India Civil List (IAS)
- (ii) Gazette of India, Part III Section 1
- (iii) Civil Service News
- (iv) Official Directory: a half yearly serial from the Ministry of Home Affairs (now a ceased publication)
- (v) *Allocation of Business Rules*

Only a clue based rigorous scanning of their contents could produce some results. One has to remember

that most of these publications have inexplicable format without any finding aid or index. A librarian has to carefully examine the contents to get the desired information. General awareness regarding the functioning of the government departments, rules and regulations as well as notifications issued from time to time can help to locate information. It may be mentioned here that the publication *Allocation of Business Rules (1961)*, which is revised frequently by the Ministry of Home Affairs enumerates spheres of activities of various ministries/ departments. The publication helps to trace the origin of a particular agency (e.g. Ministry/ Department of Culture); and its activities.

In order to compile a chronological list of officers who held the position of Secretary of the Ministry/ Department of Culture, Civil Lists of IAS were scanned by name. Some of the long serving officials of the Ministry could spell out the names of former secretaries. However, a few of these were from IAAS. As such, the Civil List of IAAS as well as official directory of the Government of India had to be carefully examined to ascertain the exact dates of assuming/ demitting office. The task became a bit difficult as in a few cases the officers were in charge of more than one ministry/ department. The reference query could be resolved after consulting certain other sources like:

- (i) Civil Service News
- (ii) All India Civil List (corrected as on 1st July, 1968).

A wide variety of sources of Government information provided a delightful learning experience. Most of these sources are perhaps still unknown to many Indian LIS professionals.

The purpose of citing these two cases of reference service/ research tool exploration is to support the viewpoint that one can make library home of highly relevant informational experiences where great ideas happen and people have the tools and facilities to act on these ideas. Such experience increases one's intuitive judgment and intuition depends on the use of experience to recognise key patterns that indicate the dynamics of situation.

Concluding Remarks

The present day IT scenario is fascinating for ALS as it is providing opportunity to shift from 'holding' or 'ownership' ideology to access strategy. This factor is more pronounced in cases of S&T collections. Social science research programmes are generally influenced by national trends and policy concerns of the national government. As a result, literature in this field is mostly region or country specific. Similarly, in humanities, local languages, culture and art forms are important for the researchers. ALS dealing with social sciences and humanities are required to have a close familiarity with the national literature in these fields.

On the basis of discussion/ arguments made in this

paper, the following issues deserve attention while planning new programmes and services in an AL.

- (a) Is there a possibility for designing an experiential learning programme for ALS primarily to sensitize them about the necessity to understand certain esoteric sources of information which do not fall in the category of reference tool in the strict sense of the term?
- (b) What should be the mission statement of an AL? The determinant factors for service quality such as responsiveness, individualised attention, reliability, physical facility and proper communication with the clientele do not get enough attention. Is there a possibility to bring them at the centre stage of library management?
- (c) Is it worthwhile to forge a research agenda for ALS which can enhance their knowledge about the national literature in various fields? For instance, Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi has supervised a Ph.D. research *A Social History of Tamil Book Publishing circa 1850-1938* (1994). Why a Department of Library and Information Science in India can not think of such a research topic?
- (d) In most of the ALs, reports/ proceedings from government agencies are arranged in classified order according to UDC, DDC, CC etc. University libraries can consider whether provenance method is more appropriate for the purpose of organising such material. This method is primarily used by historians for locating material in archives. According to this, information sources are organised according to the agency/ learned body that created the sources. Thus, all reports originating from the Ministry of Agriculture and its organs are arranged at one place so that LIS professionals can have a better understanding of the context, structure and publication policy of different organs of the government.

Needless to say, the internet has democratised research in many ways. It has reduced the cost of doing research and also improved access to knowledge. One should realise that it is only a complement to research and not a substitute for

research and learning for LIS professionals has to be by participating in research activity; and not merely by assimilation of sources.

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