

THE ANTIQUARIAN LIBRARY FUNCTIONS AND THEIR APPLICATION IN CONTEMPORARY LIBRARIES OF PAKISTAN

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Human beings are the only species which, during the course of its evolution, has developed the ability and mediums to store the information outside its brain. The libraries, since ancient times, have been housing and maintaining this extra-somatic information. Throughout the recorded history of mankind they have been instrumental in preserving and transferring the intellectual memory to succeeding generations. Libraries have connected us with our ancestors by collecting, organizing and preserving all types of knowledge resources. This has enabled us to live in a world of cumulative awareness to further build on it, instead to reinvent the wheel again and again. One could well term it as a perpetuation of dialogue between the ages. Shera (1970) described:

Society needed libraries in order to make the records of human adventure available over the long period of time....Therefore they must be essential to the development of a sophisticated, and one might say even to a relatively primitive society....we must regard the library as an important element in the total communication process both in the individual and in the society. (p. 44-45)

Thus, through the ages, acquiring and maintaining collection has been the core activity of any library and its Traditional functions may be defined as follows:

Protecting the Sacred and Precious Possessions

The literature on the history of libraries explored that the mechanism of recording the human communication and its preservation was the first step towards the manifestation of

libraries. The collections consisted of clay tablets, papyrus roll, and codices created and housed with great care in rooms adjacent to temples. Harris (1999) mentioned:

The origin of libraries... is not known, however, the beginning of libraries came after the end of the prehistoric era, *since the preservation of the written records is considered to have begun the historic era* [italics added]. Conceivably it should be possible to decide just when and where the first library existed, but all we know is that at certain times and in certain locations early libraries existed. Before that, there were undoubtedly collections of graphic material approaching the form of libraries, but specific details are more difficult to pen down.... One of the purposes of writing was to preserve human communication.... *Early written materials were considered sacred, which was another reason for their careful preservation* [italics added]. (1999, p. 1)

Early writings were considered sacred because the ancient world was divided into two: the celestial and terrestrial. The former was sacred while the later was profane. There prevailed the legacy of considering written records sacred— texts related to the celestial world— perfect, complete and eternally valuable. Their significance would never cease. To trivialize their importance by discarding them would be to consider them either redundant or obsolete. Therefore, those texts had to be preserved and their sanctity be maintained. As a result, libraries would perform sacred duty by collecting, maintaining and preserving recorded knowledge sources.

Preserving collection was considered the ultimate function of any library— an end in-itself. The explicit aim of libraries followed this belief: *Collections are too sacred to be lost*. This sacrosanct function was modified only in the last century in the developed world, when libraries realized that they need to help

users in the *use* of already built up collections instead of mere taking care of them.

The scarcity of graphic records was another reason to consider them precious possessions. To acquire them for libraries was very difficult in olden times because they were produced manually in a limited number. Under the circumstances libraries would take all possible measures to prevent them from any damage or loss. We find mention of chained books even in the post-classical period. They were accessible only to a few privileged and official or unofficial scholars.

The use of library material was so restricted, in the ancient times that books in the Roman public libraries would not circulate outside the building as a general rule. It is apparent from several classical references that influential people did have the privilege to borrow them for home use. Different libraries had different rules however one aspect was common that the rules were devised for the utmost protection of the collections considering them precious assets. The underlying thinking was to house them with maximum care to protect their sacredness and worth forever.

It is obvious that the tradition of protecting and preserving information and knowledge sources is and will remain part and parcel of managing library collections. A great deal of library literature is being produced on the need and problems of protecting and preserving collections in the contemporary libraries.

Nonetheless, the aim of preserving them has been altered as the preservation of material is not for some divine reasons or an aim in itself but a mean to an end: preserving for utmost *dissemination* of the intellectual heritage to the present and succeeding generations through their *use*. As Lynch & Brownrigg (1986) stated that libraries have been a repository for artifacts of the printed word. Today, it is taking on a more

dynamic role as both a repository and a distributor of *information [as distinct from artifacts]* (p. 379-382).

Collecting More and More Knowledge Artifacts

The legacy of growing the size of library collection to the possible extent has its roots in the ancient times when to raise the size of recorded sources was an admirable characteristic of any library. Ancient libraries would collect all kinds of material extensively, e.g., clay tablets, papyrus, parchment, vellum, palm leaves, cloth and paper. The emphasis would be on growing the size of collections because it was considered the sign of greatness of a library and a pride for the owner. The reason underlying this mindset of the society was again the same — sacred and precious status of graphic records.

Harris (1999) stated that Assurbanipal (ca.668-c. 631 B.C.) accumulated a library of over 30,000 tablets at Nineveh. Under his personal direction, agents were sent to all parts of the Assyrian kingdom and even to foreign lands to collect written records of all kinds and on all subjects (p. 19). He took pride in his library which was built up by collecting material from all parts of the then known world. The Alexandrian library collected over 600,000 papyrus rolls. Thousands upon thousands of rolls were bought, copied, stolen, and compiled for its shelves (Harris, p. 45). Rubin (2000) noted that the comprehensiveness of the collection was beyond comparison for its time (p. 212).

Rome is reported to have a number of personal libraries. After the conquest of Greece, having a library became a status symbol. Dahl (1968) stated that a sizable book collection was as essential part of a prominent Roman's house...we have accounts of such collections comprising several thousand [papyrus] rolls (p. 30). Public libraries were also established and according to Harris the average temple collection must have been about 20,000 to 40,000 (p. 64) and in Constantinople, Theodosius II (474-491) is credited with enlarging the [Imperial] library to about 10, 0000 volumes (p. 72).

Pakistan, Bangladesh and India constitute the Subcontinent and have a rich history of culture and civilization. Ashoka is credited as the pioneer for using written records for official purposes. “The Ashokan inscriptions of 3rd century B.C. provide us a landmark in the origin and growth of library system” (Panda, 1992). Earliest reminiscences of ancient civilization found at Mohanjodaro and Harappa in Pakistan demonstrate that the tradition of learning and teaching was very rich in this region. The role of libraries was very similar to the other ancient civilizations. Archives were maintained by creating records for regular use of Buddhist monasteries, government officials and public use but, only selected elites could use them. Founded in 414 A.D. the *Taxila University* in Gandahra (Pakistan) was one of the oldest institution of higher learning in the world and its library included works on Hinduism, political science, literature, medicine, philosophy, and so forth.

The golden era of Muslim Reign (700-1150) received much admiration by historians for maintaining large collections in royal, madressahs, and personal libraries. Royal and madressah libraries in Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Cordova and Spain were famous for their large collections. Pinto (1929) wrote, “Among few peoples, however, has the cult of books and literacy tradition had such importance in the spiritual and cultural life as with the Arabs” (p. 2111). Al-Mamun made every effort to get the classical works from all over the world and get them translated in the library at Bait-al-Hikmat or House of Wisdom. Chishti (2000) produced a doctoral dissertation which elaborately throws light on the *Islamic Libraries in the Abbasid Period (749 A.D. – 1258 A. D.)*. Passion to seek knowledge galvanized Muslims to fall in love with books and maintain valuable personal collections. A number of eminent scholars (e.g., Hitti, 1970; Nicholson, 1962; Shalby 1954) have endorsed that view.

It becomes apparent that protecting the existed collection and striving to raise its size were the fundamental functions of any

library in olden times. Needless to say, they are still the same, however, certain advancement in this regard have occurred. In the developed world libraries are not geared merely towards building large physical collection *within the library* but, providing mutual access to collections remotely held in other libraries and in cyberspace. Modern libraries are more inclined to function also as a service organization for their users and not just as the custodian of a treasure.

When we look at the contemporary librarianship in a developing country like Pakistan we find that libraries, by and large, still inclined to the antiquarian mindset regarding maintaining library collections. They find hard to modify these long-lasting legacies according to the evolving trends. Our libraries are accustomed to protect collections by putting them under lock and key. Rules for writing-off the damaged or lost material have not been formulated and/or implemented for all types of libraries. The administration does not accept the theft or loss of library materials as a part of the whole business or a common practice all over the world. Management usually considers librarian responsible for this. If we talk about librarians, they think that their prime job is to serve as custodians of the intellectual heritage instead of facilitating humankind in the use of this treasure. They hardly serve as *mediators* between library users and graphic records but as *protectors*. This situation raises the question of providing effective library services to its present community.

The other function, raising the size, is also a central activity of our libraries. It is pursued to show the goodness and worth of a library. Our libraries tend to rely on the quantity of the collection, rather than its quality. In order to enlarge the size, on the one hand, they accept the donations of out-dated, damaged, and irrelevant books and journals and on the other hand, they do not weed-out obsolete and damaged materials (Kanwal, 2004). Consequently, the shelves filled with all sorts of books not only make it difficult to find the relevant material but the activity of browsing through the shelves also suffers. The studies of

library-use patterns demonstrate that humanist [user] is strongly dependent upon browsing as a scholarly, serendipitous device (Burchard, 1965; Brockman, 2001). They prefer browsing in certain situations rather than using the library catalogue or relying on the librarians for their needed information.

It demonstrates that libraries in Pakistan need to create a balance between above mentioned conventional functions and modern practices in order to effectively meet the information needs of the present and succeeding generations.

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