

# THE LIBRARY - THEN AND NOW

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## **The Library then:**

The development of libraries during the past hundred years or so has been very rapid. In the classical and medieval times learning was mainly oral and took place mostly in temples and monasteries. It is evident in historic traditions in both the east and the west that there were monks and learned scribes attached to monastic libraries. Oral repetition of stories and ballads continued however, to be the normal way of keeping alive the records of the past. It was oral tradition that preserved the Tripitaka of Theravada Buddhism until the 1st century B.C. when it was committed to writing during the reign of Vattagamani Abhaya at Aluvihara, Sri Lanka. The Gospels of Jesus Christ too were not recorded immediately, but were left for a considerable time to oral tradition. In the past "things said," or, tradition made up the sum of man's knowledge.

In ancient days books were respected and venerated. In Sri Lanka books were called "Poth Vahanse" and were mostly found in temples. The ordinary layman did not have access to them nor were there books for pleasure reading. All through antiquity a book was read aloud to the audience by a skilled person. In Sri Lanka the books belonging to the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods were mainly written to be read aloud.

Even when there were libraries with sufficient numbers of books in them people thought of books as a "dead and troublesome mode of communication". This attitude continued for a long period, but today the whole scenario has changed. Until recently the library was the symbol of an educated and cultured minority. Now, with the social and economic changes, more and more people enjoy the privileges of a library.

## **The library now:**

The library has progressively moved from the age of fixed location to an age of global dimensions. Modern telecommunications play a vital role in the dissemination of information. Today the information generation is so great that many types of publications both print and non-print are churned out very rapidly. Well organized sophisticated information networks and data bases are available for the customer/user for research and gathering of information.

## **Types of libraries:**

There are many types of libraries catering to their customers - national, public, school, university and special. Their services and resources are directly related to the users' needs. Everyone working in a library ought to understand and come to terms with the precise aims and objectives of their particular library.

The **national library** being a legal deposit library is where a country preserves its national culture and literary heritage. Some of the major functions are the publication of the national bibliography and other bibliographical publications including union catalogues of the resources of libraries within the country. It is responsible to provide information to the government policy makers and law makers. It acquires, organizes and preserves the nation's collection of literature: print, non-print inclusive of manuscripts. It is also its duty to make available library resources of the nation for the benefit of society. It provides leadership in the professional field.

The **public library** serves all sections of the community which makes it different from other libraries. It provides a liberal and comprehensive service to the user providing facilities for education and recreation. It plays a major role in the process of self education. While meeting the informal needs of the community it helps to enrich and further develop the personality of the user.

In no other library is found such a number and range of people of all ages, backgrounds, cultures, classes and educational levels, using the same services. It has always catered for those in the edge of society as well as those in the mainstream. It is the only public space where one can spend time without being looked at or having to buy something.

The **school library** supports the educational programme of the school and supplies all the essential resources to fulfil this role. It is a place where "study skills" and "information skills" are fostered in students.

The **university library** directs its activities towards the fulfilment of the functions of the

university. It is an active force in teaching and research and an important component of the university setup to meet the needs of its students and faculty. It is vital for a university to have a strong library.

The **special library** is a major source of information in the organization it serves. The emphasis is on collection, organization and retrieval of information for its users who are mainly researchers or specialists in the subject field.

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### **User services:**

Taken as a whole, any library should be able to provide a quality service which should be relevant to the needs of their community. The reader/user/customer should be able to view their library as accessible and user friendly; a place in which they can pursue their goals. The importance of ensuring that advice and assistance is available should be made known to the customer. Providing a professional service takes more than investment in technology. There should be genuine commitment on the part of the staff to the services. The marketing and promotion of library services is essential today.

This can be done through promotional publicity, literature, media coverage and the user. New and innovative approaches need to be explored and guidelines set up to cost-effectively develop targeted strategies.

It is important in a library to make certain that studies of users are based on what they need or require rather than on just what they say they want. In other words, these studies have to be of people in action and not static studies built around answers to questionnaires or meetings. The difficulties they come across in accessing information should be identified.

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It is important to remember that whatever surveys, questionnaires, meetings and interviews have been used to obtain the desired information, almost as valuable will be the information incidentally acquired about the attitudes of the patrons for whom they are intended. The importance of the user must at all times be predominant in the Director's/ Librarian's mind at all times.

It is a matter of great regret that users are reluctant to consult the catalogues and even discuss matters of importance to them and air their difficulties with the staff. This reluctance, I believe, is still there and needs to be removed. The principle of asking for and receiving help is a normal social act, and should be accepted as such. Discussions should take place between the staff and user, and these discussions should be held with the maximum informality so that the right atmosphere is created for questions to be asked and for information to be sought.

A modern library has to be sufficiently flexible to cope without a fuss the strains imposed by rapid changes in the world outside. The emphasis should now be on access to electronic information sources and electronic information networks. The users have to be introduced to the use of such systems. The time is now right to get Information Technology (IT) in front of the users and make them "technology-literate". The user now should be capable of finding information in their library and outside their own library, town or country. For this purpose children, young adults, and even researchers need guidance. The Director Information/ Librarian too needs to be trained in the use of E-Mail, CD-Rom databases, on-line systems as information systems are moving very rapidly in the world of IT.

Access to international networks like INTERNET in libraries will be very advantageous in the speedy procurement of current information on any subject anywhere in the world. In this manner, no one need be isolated from the rest of the world. A user could also have access to the most recent publications and papers and so be well informed. To have access to this great wealth of information would indeed be really wonderful. If the youth of today could have access to all this wealth they would surely be better equipped to face the future. This could result in a happy and contented nation. For all this to be successful there must be dedication and enthusiasm on the part of the staff. Their friendliness and approachability towards their clientele are essential for the overall effectiveness of the information infrastructure. If the information superhighway is strongly entrenched, it may even be goodbye to books and print media.

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