

A HISTORICAL STUDY OF LIBRARIES OF MEDIEVAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Writing the history of libraries in India has not yet received the attention it deserves. Unfortunately, even the library schools in India have also not given due importance to the study of library history. The pathetic scenario obtains in sparse literature available on this area and the students of Library and Information Science also have not taken serious studies in this regard. The present paper is an earnest attempt in filling this gap and traces the genesis and growth of academic libraries in ancient, medieval and modern India.

Keywords: *Library, Library History, Growth of Libraries, Academic Libraries, University Libraries, Committee, Commission, Higher Education*

INTRODUCTION

Research in library history in India has remained largely neglected area which has resulted into availability of very limited and scanty literature. Commenting on the status of library history in India, Donald G. Davis, Jr. of the University of Texas at Austin, writes that “although a core literature on Indian library history exists, it has many imbalances and gaps. The scholars are very dispersed in their interests and their geographical location. With one person rarely contributing more than one work. There is little pattern to existing research efforts.”(Davis,1989)

In this context, the role of historian happens to be much more crucial and significant to make an assessment of the growth and development of libraries in India, the factors responsible for their development and the impact of those factors on the library progress. Rajgopalan, in his 1987 presidential address to the Indian Library Association rightly said,

“it is generally acknowledged that our libraries are underutilized in relation to investments being made in them. Non-use and low-use of libraries amount to wastage of facilities being made available. Maybe the literacy rate, lack of reading habits, etc., are the causes for low use from the side of patrons... User education programmes must be organized by libraries in a way that libraries are fully utilized.” He further remarked that, “if library historians would address the roots and trends of library issues, they would provide a valuable service to the profession and society.” (Rajgopalan, 1989)

The Father of Library and Information Science in India, Padmashri Dr. S.R. Ranganathan while giving a radio talk in April 1956 said, “an account of the libraries in the first four periods (the Vedic, the Buddhistic, the Medieval, and the Muslim) must necessarily depend upon the historical research. This has not yet been done. The library profession is too small in India to spare a person to fill up this antiquarian gap. Those trained in the scientific method of tracing history are too

preoccupied with dynastic and political history to spare sufficient time for cultural history in general and library history in particular.”

(Ranganathan, 1956). Thus, an historical study of the growth and development of academic libraries in India, is a desideratum, the fulfillment of which should go a long way in removing the imbalances and gaps, mentioned above. Such a study becomes significant not only in view of the tremendous activity concerning the growth and development of libraries in India, but also because their growth has been shaped in the first phase by the phenomena that have shaped the historical course of this period and, secondly, the rise of library as an important instrument in the advancement of knowledge and socio-economic transformation.

SOURCE MATERIAL FOR WRITING HISTORY OF LIBRARIES

For the purpose of scientific writing of history of libraries, an understanding of the nature of existing source material and knowing the art of using it is essential. The sources for writing the history are available in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic, Persian and European Languages and most of them have been translated into English. These exist in various formats, such as Manuscripts, inscriptions, copper plates etc. They are either indigenous or foreign. The contribution of foreign travelogues such as Tibetan, Chinese, Muslim, Portuguese, English and other Europeans is highly useful. Some noteworthy foreign travelogues are Itsing, Fahien, Hieun Tsang, Alberuni, Ibn Batuta, Minhaj, Firishta, Badauni, Afif, bernier, mandelso, Manrique de Lara, Martin, Count Noer. In addition to the contribution of the travelogues, the contribution of historians like Henry M. Eliot, John Dawson, Stanley Lane-Pool, Ishwari Prasad, R.C. Majumdar, Jadunath Sarkar, V.D. Mahajan, Mohammed Muhammed Zubair, J.S. Sarma and N.N. Law etc. is also significant. Though scanty, yet there are articles written by the library professionals on history of libraries. A few efforts have also been made for conduct of research in the area of history

of libraries and such like works have been consulted for the purpose of writing this paper.

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN ANCIENT INDIA

In the Vedic age instructions were imparted “orally, without the medium of books.”(Agarwal, 1954) Taxila from 700 B.C. to 300 A.D. was considered to be the most respected seat of higher learning and education in India (Chakravorty,1954) but still there is no evidence found so far in the archaeological excavations at Taxila that there had been a good library system in the Taxila University. Fa-Hien noticed such libraries at Jetavana monastery at Sravasti (U.P). In 400 A.D., there came into being one of the biggest known universities, the Nalanda University, which by 450 A.D. became a renowned seat of learning, its fame spreading beyond the boundaries of India. Nalanda near Patna grew to be the foremost Buddhist monastery and an educational centre. Most of what we know of the Nalanda University during the 6th and the 7th centuries

A.D. is due to the accounts left by Hiuen-tsang, who lived in the institution for three years in the first half of the 7th century, and I-tsing who also stayed there for ten years towards the latter part of the same century. Information on the Nalanda University Library is also found in the Tibetan accounts, from which we understand that the library was situated in a special area known by the poetical name the Dharmaganja, (Piety Mart) which comprised three huge buildings, called the Ratnasagara, the Ratnodadhi and the Ratnaranjaka of which the Ratnasagara was a nine-storied building and housed the collection of manuscripts and rare sacred works like Prajnaparamita Sutra etc. The library at Nalanda had a rich stock of manuscripts on philosophy and religion and contained texts relating to grammar, logic, literature, the Vedas, the Vedanta, and the Samkhya philosophy, the Dharmasastras, the Puranas, Astronomy, Astrology and Medicine. (Mukherjee, 1966)

The University of Nalanda and its library flourished down to the 12th century A.D. (Ibid.) until Bakhtiyar Khalji sacked it in 1197-1203 A.D. and set fire to the establishment of Nalanda.

The world famous universities, such as, the Vikramasila, the Vallabhi and the Kanchi were coming up in other parts of the country during the period from the 5th century A.D. to the 8th century A.D. All these universities possessed rich libraries (*Pustaka-bhandaras*) and in the hall containing such books there used to be an image of the goddess Saraswati with a book in her hand. The Nalanda and the Vikramshila universities were under the control of the king Dharmapala. He founded the Vikramshila monastery in the 8th century A.D. It had a rich collection of texts in the Sanskrit, the Prakrit and the Tibetan languages. Regarding the library of the university, the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* informs us that there were great number of books on the religion of Hindus (Buddhists) there; and when all these books came under the observation of the Mussalamans, they summoned, a number of Hindus that they might give them information regarding the import of these books; but the whole of the Hindu community was killed in the war. Muslim vandalism caused the disappearance of the excellent collection at Vikramashila. (Ibid.).

The Jagadval Vihara in Varendrabhumi was also an important centre of learning with considerable collection of the reading material. It was established by the king Kampala, who ruled from 1084 to 1130 A.D. (Misra, 1979)

The provision of facilities for reading, writing, editing and translating manuscripts shows that this library was in no way less than its contemporary libraries in importance. Though not as large as the library of Nalanda, it abounded in private collection of texts. Likewise Mithila had been famous for its scholars since the days of Rajrishi Janaka and had a rich collection of various commentaries on the different branches of the Hindu *Shastras*. The library of its university played an important role in teaching and learning. A needle (*Shalaka*) was pierced through the manuscript on the subject of the student's specialization and he

was expected to explain the last page pierced. In this way the student's all-round mastery of the subject was tested. (Mukherjee, 1969)

Mithila continued to enjoy its all India importance in the field of learning till the end of the 15th century AD.

The university at Sompuri, like that of Vikramshila, occupied a significant position since the days of Dharampala (769-867 A.D.). Like Nalanda, this university also had its own library. Atisa Dipankar, a noted scholar, lived there. He with the help of other scholars, translated into the Tibetan the *Madhyamkaratnapradipa* of Bhavaviveka. This university was destroyed by fire in the middle of the 11th century A.D. (Misra) Efforts were made by the monk Vipulsrimitra to renovate the university but it could not regain its past glory. At a time when Nalanda was famous for its *Mahayana* courses of study, the Maitrakakings (475 to 775 A.D.) provided their patronage to the Mahavihara of Vallabhi. This university was famous for its *Hinayana* studies. The fact that this university had a good library is supported by a reference in a grant of Guhasena, dated 559 A.D., wherein a provision was made out of the royal grant for the purchase of books for the library. This important seat of learning at Kanheri, on the West Coast, flourished during the reign of Amoghavarsha in the 9th century A.D. The library occupied a significant position within the establishment, and the donors provided money to buy books for the library. (Misra, 1970)

The last of the famous seats of learning in Eastern India was Navadwipa in Bengal. It reached its height of glory from 1083 to 1106 A.D. as a centre of intellectual excellence as well as its rich library facilities, when Lakshman Sen, a king of Gauda, made it his capital (Majumdar, 1960).

However, this library was also destroyed along with the centre by Bakhtiyar Khalji. Situated in South India at Amaravati, on the banks of the Krishna, the Nagarjuna Vidyapeeth flourished in about 7th century A.D. (Mukherjee). Its library housed in the top floor of the five storied building of the university had an enormous collection on the Buddhist

philosophy, particularly of the *Mahayana* school that Nagarjuna had founded, science and medicine. There is enough archaeological evidence that supports the existence of this 7th century university and its library. The enormity of the collection in this library is borne out by the fact that it not only had works on the Buddhist literature and the *Tripitakas*, but also works on several branches of scientific knowledge, such as, Botany, Geography, Mineralogy and Medicine. It was a great attraction for scholars from the different parts of India and from countries, like, China, Burma and Ceylon.

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

The existence of academic libraries during the medieval period of Indian history is not known, though the Muslim rulers did patronize libraries in their own palaces. A lone exception, however, was a library attached to a college at Bidar, (Gawan, 1463-82) having a collection of 3000 books on different subjects. (Mukherjee) Aurangzeb got this Library transferred to Delhi to merge it with his palace library. (Keay, 1918). During the medieval period, due to Muslim invasions and political troubles, the powerful empires and kingdoms of Indian rulers fell one by one. This affected higher education and the development of academic libraries as well.

LIBRARIES IN INDIA AFTER INDEPENDENCE

The actual process for the development of university libraries in India can be said to have been set in motion with the appointment of the University Education Commission presided over by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan (1948-49) and its recommendations, such as, annual grants, open access system, working hours, organization of the library, staff, steps to make students book conscious and the need to give grants to teachers to buy books. The section on libraries in Chapter 4 of the report opens with a powerful statement on the importance of libraries in university education and states, "teaching is a

cooperative enterprise. Teachers must have the necessary tools for teaching purposes in the shape of libraries and laboratories as also the right type of students." (India, 1949)

The Commission in the course of its study of the academic libraries, found that "libraries were hopelessly inadequate to serve the curricular needs of a modern university. They were ill-housed, ill-stocked, and ill-staffed and were totally lacking in standard literary and scientific journals. Service was in the hands of personnel that had hardly any notion of the objectives of university education. The annual appropriation for book purchase seldom exceeded the ten thousand mark." (Bashiruddin, 1967).

In addition, the annual grant for these libraries were not sufficient. Therefore, the Commission recommended that at least six per cent of the total budget of each academic institution should be set aside for the library. Only then will the condition of these libraries improve. (Subrahmanyam). It added that if institutions were not willing to allocate six per cent of their budget to libraries, they should spend Rs.40 per student enrolled. The Commission also suggested that greater attention should be paid to improve the reference services in the university libraries. Therefore, "documentation and bibliographical services must be developed in order to promote research among the faculty and students, make libraries proper centres for research activities, and to raise the standards of services." (Ibid. p.13). As far as the library staff is concerned, the Commission was of the view that it is very important to have well-qualified staff, including the Director, in order to provide excellent service in any library. The Director's qualifications must include Ph.D. in Library Science and he must have the rank and salary of a professor, capabilities of organization and management, and should have full powers of an administrator to run the library effectively. (University Education Commission, (1948-49). There is no doubt that the recommendations of the Commission "were based on the needs of the modern library services in universities for the promotion of research and creative

learning.”(Shrivastva, 1959). It was for the first time that such detailed attention was paid to the library matters by a commission on university education in India.

CONCLUSION

The glorious history of libraries can be traced back to the Ancient era when our forefathers learnt the art of communication and writing, penned the information, knowledge and wisdom in the form of texts and manuscripts which carried the legacy of traditions, customs and knowledge from one generation to another. The earliest knowledge hubs of Nalanda, Taxila learning centres spread the fragrance of knowledge, enticed the knowledge seekers across the terrestrial boundaries and quenched quests. The journey of libraries also flourished in the medieval era though the invaders annihilated major portion of our knowledge legacy but became awakened and curious to really know and learn the basics of knowledge paradigms.

The 20th Century was age of miracles for mankind, an era of full bloom of human ingenuity, the flowering of man’s intellectual, scientific, technical and cultural activities, which have been sustained throughout the preceding ages. It has achieved something unique in the perspective of a civilization, which has, in a short span of a few decades, showed a rate of progress unknown before. It has also seen two World Wars, devastation and destruction of unprecedented magnitude; yet it has survived these catastrophes, being born out of the ashes of its own being, building a more vigorous and purposeful life on the ruins and rubbles of old.

The growth and development of libraries, an area under study, has witnessed an enormous exuberance, to which so many diverse factors have contributed. The modern library is characterized by the growth in size, and we have been accustomed to count the book stock in millions and not in thousands. Such growth has been made possible by increased local and popular interests, by a general and official recognition of the importance of libraries in the educational, cultural and social life of a modern democratic society.

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