



# Library and Information Centres: Concept and Social role

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## 1. Introduction

In the modern information society, libraries and information centres have a new role to play. This is due to increasing use of web-based information sources and electronic services. Libraries are also being managed in a more democratic way due to flexible communication system and efficient work organisation. Their services are also user-centric. In this lesson, we will discuss the role of libraries and information organisations in the society. We will also study the significance of libraries in education, culture, and recreation.

## 2. Objectives

1. Define a library and an information centre;
2. Describe the purpose and functions of a library and an information centre;
3. Explain the role of libraries and information centres in modern society;
4. List areas of activities of libraries/information centres;
5. Explain the significance of libraries in education, culture and recreation; and
6. Explain the role of libraries as repositories of knowledge.

## 3. Definition of a library

The word 'Library' is derived from the Latin word "libraria" meaning 'a book place'. It originates from the term 'liber' which means 'a book'. According to the *Oxford Companion to the English Language* – "Library is a collection of books, periodicals and/or other materials, primarily written and printed." Harrod's Librarian's Glossary and Reference Book defines 'Library' as:

1. A collection of books and other literary material kept for reading, study, and consultation.
2. A place, building, room or rooms set apart for the keeping and use of a collection of books, etc.
3. Several books issued by one publisher under a comprehensive title as the 'Loeb Classical Library', and usually having some general characteristic, such as, subject, binding, or typography.
4. A collection of films, photographs and other non-book materials, plastic or metal tapes, disks and programs.

In view of the above definitions, a library is defined as:

- a. A place in which literary and artistic materials, such as books, periodicals,
- b. newspapers, pamphlets, prints, records, tapes and artefacts are kept for reading, reference, or lending.
- c. A collection of such materials, especially when systematically arranged.
- d. A room in a private home for such a collection.
- e. An institution or foundation maintaining such a collection.

The library, thus, is a social organization and a necessary unit of the society. It is organized for transmitting knowledge and experience of society to individuals. This is done through books and other material like the maps, charts, phono-records, microfilms, etc. Dr. S. R. Ranganathan, father of library science in India, describes the library as a public institution or establishment charged with the care of collection of books and the duty of making them accessible to those who require to use them. Therefore,

it could be derived from the above definitions that a library is an organization of records of human thought. These records are in a physical form, i.e., human thoughts embodied in the form of useful manuscripts, books, periodicals, audio-visual records, microfilms, graphs, charts, etc. These are arranged, stored and preserved in a physical functional structure for effective utilization by the potential users in future.

#### **4. Purpose and functions of a library**

The purpose and functions of a library are given below:

##### **4.1 Purpose**

The purpose of establishing a library is to serve the society through the records of human thoughts, ideas, and expressions by making them available to all.

##### **4.2 Functions**

The functions of a library are given below:

- Collect and provide books as well as other non-book materials to help the people to become aware of the thinking of others and to think and act independently.
- Foster and promote the spread of knowledge, education and culture;
- Provide facility for formal and informal life-long self-education in the community;
- Preserve the literary and cultural heritage of humanity for posterity as vehicles of culture and material for research;
- Provide reliable information for all kinds of users irrespective of age, caste, creed, colour, religion, sex, etc.;
- Collect resources in order to promote an enlightened citizenship and to enrich personal life; and
- Facilitate advancement of culture in the community.

In view of the above, functions of a library can be broadly grouped into following four areas:

##### **(a) Education**

Libraries provide means for self-development of the individuals and groups at various stages of education. This closes the gap between the individual and recorded knowledge. As an educational centre, the libraries support and promote all types of education, i.e., formal, non-formal, adult and life-long. This is achieved by stocking of books and other reading material for the community.

##### **(b) Information Dissemination**

Libraries help to provide accurate and current information to individuals and groups, particularly on the topics of their interest. The scope of information services is extended to include information on socio-economic needs of the society. A library has to serve as an information centre or referral centre for specialized sources of information. The employment opportunities, public utility services, social awareness programmes undertaken by various departments are essential areas of information. Information about these areas is collected and stored by libraries for dissemination to the general public.

##### **(c) Promotion of Culture**

Libraries act as one of the principal centres of cultural life and promote participation, enjoyment and appreciation of various arts. Promotion of culture has two aspects- firstly, reading and thinking, that widens mental horizon and develops creative capabilities of the individuals. Secondly, the library has to contribute to the cultural enrichment of the society by organizing extension activities like lectures, seminars, symposia, book exhibitions and cultural gatherings.

##### **(d) Recreation**

Libraries play an active role in encouraging the positive use of leisure time by providing material for change and relaxation. Provision of scope for healthy or positive use of leisure time is an important function of a library. Books of fiction, magazines, newspapers, etc. facilitate recreational reading. Audio-visual materials such as films, television, radio, audio-video cassettes, etc. increase the utility of a public library. Various forms of performing arts may also be organized in the library to make them real community centres.

## **5. Role of libraries in society and education**

Libraries play an important role in the socio-economic, cultural, and educational development of a society. Let us now study the role of libraries in modern society and education.

### **5.1 Library as a Social Institution**

Library service is considered as a social necessity for the steady development of a person as a social being. Library as a social institution serves several purposes.

#### **(a) Library for raising Cultural Level**

Libraries enhance the level of intelligence and status of the common man in the society to a great extent. They also increase the quantum of common sense of the average man in the community. The library tends to increase the reading habits and change the reading tastes of the people by raising their cultural level.

To make the people erudite, civilized and cultured, an effective educational system largely dependent on abundant reading material is required. If reading materials are to be at the disposal of the whole population, libraries are inevitable. Libraries cater to all possible needs of the community, facilitate users to undertake research in every walk of life, provide recreation and information to all classes of the population.

#### **(b) Library – an Instrument for Creating Refined Citizens**

A civilized society is expected to have a literate and educated community fully aware of the value, importance and use of libraries. This is so because, wherever there is civilization, there must be books and wherever there are books, there are libraries. The library is, thus, a driving force capable of building a better society by its nature, variety, quality and extent of service. It is a support for all types of educational development of an individual. It enables every reader to access a wide range of reading material in order to broaden one's outlook, knowledge and ideas. The success of any democracy depends upon the educated and enlightened citizens irrespective of their social status. An informed and refined citizen tries to judge what is right and wrong. It opens the windows of the mind and enables the readers to solve their crucial problems in a reasonable manner.

#### **(c) Library Promotes the Desire for Books**

Being a social institution, library not only satisfies the readers by providing books but also promotes the desire for books. By promoting the reading habits of the people, the library makes them library-minded and enables them to love books. Demand for required books is fully met by librarians who make them available to the users. Therefore, the libraries play a vital role in the social life of the community. The growth in the size and stock of books, is made possible by the increased desire for books by innumerable readers, giving due importance to libraries in the cultural and social development of the society.

#### **(d) Library Facilitates Social Integration**

As a social institution and library allows its users to interact among themselves. This is carried out by organizing talks, lectures, films, discussions on current topics, book exhibitions, and some socially useful activities. A library provides a right forum for social get-together within its premises and makes it available on equal terms to all groups in the community.

#### **(e) Library Preserves Knowledge**

A library maintains archives of old and rare documents thereby preserving literary heritage for posterity. It stores the literary remains of humanity for antiquarian research in varied physical formats. Such collections help researchers to delve into historical aspects.

### **5.2 The Role of Library in Education**

Education and training of the individual is considered an essential means of stimulating economic and social development. To make the people erudite and civilized, the society requires an effective educational system. Without libraries there can neither be any good school, college or university nor can life-long education of adults be encouraged. It is believed that where formal education ends, informal

education begins and a life-long learning process is sustained with the support of adequate and proper library service.

**(a) *The Library as a People's University***

Education aims at imparting knowledge and skills to individual human beings for his/her self development and inculcation of civic and social responsibilities, so that he/she can play a positive role in the development of a society and a be considered "Universities of the people".

**(b) *The Library as a Centre of Mass Education***

Libraries in general and public libraries in particular, have a very important role to play in the fields of political awareness, socio-economic growth, cultural and educational enlightenment which are indispensable to the future development of any country. Library service to all classes of people acts as an intellectual catalyst by providing facilities for acquiring education, information, recreation, aesthetic appreciation and research, irrespective of age and sex for the welfare of the society as a whole.

**(c) *The Library as a Centre of Continuing Education***

People continue their reading habits with the help of libraries according to their desire, capacity or need. Being a centre of continuing education for millions of people, it develops their vocational, professional and learning skills thus facilitating individual and community problems solving. A Library informally provides life-long continuing education to individuals.

## **6. Information Centres**

The progress of civilization and advancement in science and technology resulted in tremendous growth of literature. The explosion of knowledge in multidisciplinary subjects was recorded not only in books but also in latest research periodicals, research and technical reports, patents, standards and specifications, trade transactions, circulars, reprints, off-prints, etc. The specialists not only needed books but also information contained in periodical articles and other material. Information centres were set up to cater to their specialised information needs.

An Information centre is defined as an organisation that (1) selects, acquires, stores and retrieves information in response to requests, (2) prepares abstracts, extracts, indexes of information, and (3) disseminates information in anticipation and in response to requests. Information centres are attached to highly specialised Research and Development (R&D) organisations. An Information Centre provides various services such as referral service, literature search, translations, bibliographies, abstracting, etc. to its users. There are varied forms of information centres viz. (1) Information Analysis Centres (2) Clearing Houses (3) Data Centres and Data Banks.

**(1) Information Analysis Centres:** They collect literature produced in a particular field, evaluate its utility and communicate to the specialists conducting research in directly usable form on request. The centre verifies the collected information for its validity, reliability and accuracy before dissemination. The reports of these analysis centres play an important role in strengthening research, pinpointing gaps in knowledge or shortcomings.

**(2) Clearing Houses:** They are set up either on a cooperative basis or by a national or international agency. They provide a single point of access to information originating from different sources, countries and languages. They compile bibliographies of particular disciplines and circulate them to the organisations interested in them. A copy of the available document, if requested, is also provided.

**(3) Data Centres and Data Banks:** Data centres collect, organise and store numerical data pertaining to specific subject field to answer specific queries. They collect information in anticipation of future requirements of its users. Data Banks are usually concerned with a broader subject field. They extract and process raw data from the collected data sources and relevant literature. They keep these structured files ready to provide right answers to user's queries.

These centres are managed by subject experts as well as library and information professionals who organise information to retrieve and disseminate for conducting research. Staff of these centres varies, but may include all or any of the following: Research officers, librarians, bibliographers, or trained

information officers. It may include the functions of a special library and extend its activities to include collateral functions such as technical writing, abstracting, Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) and library research for clients.

### ***6.1 Difference between a Library and an Information Centre***

A library differs from an information centre in many ways. Libraries provide macro-documents to their users whereas information centres provide micro documents. Library also differs from information centres in the types of documents stored, types and levels of users, provision of documents rather than information, rendering services to both, internal and external users. Apart from collecting, processing and disseminating information, documentation/information centres are also involved in analysis and presentation of information.

A major difference, thus, is that, a library provides only the document as a whole but an information centres provides not only the document but also the details of the contents of the document. For example in a library a book which contains particular information is provided, where as in an information centre exact information is provided not the entire book.

### ***6.2 Libraries and information centres of information age***

A society does not remain static but goes on changing. As a library is a social institution, social changes also affects the role of libraries. The present-day society has undergone transformation in almost all sectors. Several factors are responsible for this transformation. These are as follows.

- Political and social stability of the society
- Expansion of educational facilities and high rate of literacy
- National, regional and local socio-cultural traditions
- Urbanisation and globalisation of population due to migration
- Growth in trade and commerce, industry and business
- Encouragement from national, local and state governments
- High standard of living
- Influence of leaders and individuals in different fields
- Well established book trade
- Mass communication
- Computer and communication technology

These social, political and economic conditions have left a great impact on all aspects of the growth of libraries, by radically changing their conventional functions. It not only deals with books but collects information in multiple media for its clients. The modern library has undergone changes in handling the basic functions of a library viz. collection, processing, storage, retrieval, dissemination and utility of information. New information, communication and networking technologies have completely changed the functioning of the libraries. Information is collected, processed, stored, and disseminated using sophisticated technologies. Users are provided information at their own desks or even in their homes through Local Area Networks (LAN) and Wide Area Networks (WAN). There is no need to visit a library to access information and thus save time.

A library is regarded as a service institution. The advent of computer, communication, information, and networking technologies have posed a great challenge to the librarians. In order to render efficient services and assist the users to make effective use of the available resources, a librarian must understand, appreciate, and accept these changes. They must be willing to cope with the changes and adopt them for taking advantage of the same.

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