KNOWLEDGE AS STOCK-IN-TRADE OF LIBRARIANS

A P SRIVASTAVA
University Librarian
Delhi University
Delhi

UNIVERSE OF KNOWLEDGE

French philosopher, Michel, Foucoult, published in 1980, his book, "Power/knowledge". In 1982, he published "Is it really important to think"? Before and after these works, he had brought out a number of other important publications. Foucoult, was one of the pioneers of "Modernism" and "Post-Modernism" schools of thought. One of the most important concepts of his was about knowledge and power. This theme suits the libraries the most because knowledge is their stock-in-trade. Foucoult also emphasised, "Knowledge cannot be produced independently of its use".

Libraries are institutions which deal with utilisation of knowledge. Earlier, in 1973, Daniel Bell had published his classical work, 'The coming of post-industrial society', which heralded the dawn of the Information Society and gave the librarians and libraries an upward gradation. J.F. Lyotard came out in 1984 with his work, "The postmodern condition - A report on knowledge", which pleaded that it is only 'local knowledge', based on time and culture, that was being used largely, and emphasised that all forms of experience lived' must be incorporated to widen the use of this kind of 'local knowledge'.

The community of librarians has always viewed knowledge as global in character, synthesised in structure, and utilisation as its sole objective. Bliss, Ranganathan, Shera, and others all have attempted this style and approach. H.E. Bliss wanted knowledge for social use, Ranganathan emphasised that 'knowledge' can lift the mankind to higher order, and Shera pleaded for 'putting knowledge to use'. While Shera was a contemporary of Foucoult, Daniel Bell, etc., both Bliss and Ranganathan were their predecessors.

KNOWLEDGE AND LIBRARIES

Ranganathan was the first in the world to prescribe a course on 'Universe of Knowledge' at the graduate level for librarians in order to give them an insight into the various aspects of knowledge. Librarians have always believed that librarianship is the management of knowledge from its generation, exchange to its utilisation (KGEU).

A group of scholars, from all over the world, has developed the concept of Knowledge - Generation, Exchange and Utilisation, (KGEU) and produced a comprehensive monograph under the same title. The group also publishes an international journal on the same subject. The latest book by Alvin Toffler, 'The power-shift' (1991), includes all information data, images and imagery, as well as attitudes, values and other symbolic products of society, etc., under the umbrella of knowledge. May be his intention was to escape the definitional quicksand. What Toffler pleaded in 1991 has been the librarian's endeavour for decades. Melvil Dewey, Bliss, Sayers, Ranganathan and others have emphasised similarly on this aspect. Ranganathan's works, 'Five Laws of Library Science' and 'Reference Service', on each page, deal with these facets of knowledge for their generation, exchange and utilisation through libraries and librarians. The concept of Knowledge revolution is accepted by librarians for the use and multiplication of knowledge by readers. Librarians have always been on the front line of KGEU activities and knowledge revolution. The author of every worthwhile book published today, acknowledges his thanks to a librarian for the assistance given by him. There cannot be a greater proof of a librarian putting the knowledge to use, exchange and further generation.

Librarians have always believed that if a society wants to progress and move towards growth, its first attempt should be to acquire information and knowledge. This is where libraries come into the picture and play a vital role. The librarians have succeeded in their mission. The task of libraries, to a challenging level, is also to moderate the impact of the unhealthy elements of the eternal-past on the life-style of people and to eradicate the outdated thoughts of unsound metaphysical nature from their minds. The libraries through dissemination of knowledge, have helped in viewing myths and superstition in a country in
their proper perspective in the light of valid knowledge. The enlightened people have reviewed the age old concepts like eight hundred thousand cycles of life and death, untouchability, natural phenomenon surrounding people from birth to death, and the belief that the salvation of the individual is attained only after death, and certain other fossilised aspects of belief. Knowledge through libraries has helped the people in the growth of their personality without any attempt to commonalise the unique. The profession dealing with knowledge utilisation is bound to give due importance to such thoughts and movements.

Wherever libraries have not existed, the phenomenon of re-interpretation of concepts, from time to time, in the light of new knowledge, has failed to manifest. It is through self-education via libraries that a person inquired into uncongenial ideas practised by the man over centuries. In human thought, each generation, certainly in each century, experienced ever shifting frontiers of the “truth” and the “reasonable” and the libraries have helped an adult citizen to see such changes and modify his/her invalid older attitudes.

Majority of people are unable to refuse living totally in the past because they are illiterate and ignorant. It is necessary that the knowledge is made available to them to make them rediscover, re-interpret and synthesise their concepts and values. It is essential to harvest the gains of cumulative efforts of the whole humanity and help organise the crude heap of localised facts to extend their perceptions globally.

India’s major problems are over population, stagnant economy and inefficient use of natural resources. The etiology behind all these problems is ignorance and non-use of the modern knowledge by the people due to absence of libraries and committed librarians. Even scholars, politicians and authorities have not been able to utilise the knowledge in these areas. In absence of proper utilisation of new knowledge perhaps doomsday is not very far off. In addition to educationists, the professional librarians-cum-informaticians have put the modern knowledge to use by the largest number of people through various libraries and other media, in various parts of the world.

**MERELY ORAL COMMUNICATION**

In the third world countries there are highly complicated (at times unproductive) life-styles, ideas, aspirations and values which continue to survive only on the word of mouth as the mode of communication. They do not incorporate new knowledge from time to time. In the last four to five hundred years the greatest gain of the mankind has been the development of social and scientific spirit (not at the cost of other spirits) and its intense cultivation over a wide area of human activity.

Within the third world the developments in social attitudes and scientific spirit have not been percolated to masses, because of lack of public libraries. These libraries, through extension services were bound to educate even the illiterates. The educated classes were made to limit their efforts to a classroom or a laboratory project because free public libraries were not there for life-long learning. Therefore, unproductive values, myths and blind faith continued to rule the people.

The present age has witnessed the emergence of most profound scientific discoveries and social attitudes. Since these discoveries did not reach the masses through the medium of libraries, the faith and the interest of the masses continue in myths and ritualism. The third world societies have not yet taken new knowledge as the resource for mental development and as an equipment for effecting profound transformations in the context of new life. The minds have not been duly fashioned to properly receive the concepts of social welfare state and the technological civilisation in proper perspective because knowledge was not gathered in libraries for use.

Modern science and other social concepts have not become cultural modes to permeate the whole of society. Proper learning seldom takes place even in the educational system in absence of libraries. The reforms and transformations on the needed lines are not going to take place in the desired speed unless knowledge is put to use by libraries.

In the developed countries, for centuries, people have been learning through libraries all their lives. In the third world, in absence of public libraries, even a graduate relapses into a kind of practical illiteracy at the earliest opportunity. People, therefore, continued living without information. For example, Flora and fauna, matter and energy, and substance, etc., have been around us for ages. What was not available with us was the proper information about them. So it is the information that is more important for the mankind.

“Information is more fundamental than matter or...
energy”. It may appear to be idiosyncratic but it is very true. What the mankind, including people in the third world, needs is the information. University graduates in these societies have to acquire information and in turn disseminate it to the masses. Librarians and informaticians have vital roles to play in this movement.

The quality of the third world life remains the same in absence of constant review of social and metaphysical thoughts and practices in the light of at least a generation’s growth in the knowledge, which never reaches the people. The new knowledge acquired by the mankind over the centuries in many areas and contexts goes unnoticed by the masses of the third world because it is not disseminated to them. The masses cannot afford their own books. The lapse is due to the least use of books and other materials through the normal institution of libraries and information centres. The community of informaticians, to which the librarians belong, by virtue of their profession, has vital role to play in developing the information services through libraries in backward countries. Libraries are vital for developing a knowledge consuming and knowledge producing society. If the libraries are that important, the importance of the contribution of librarians cannot be underestimated. Ranganathan, and others lived under this faith.

KNOWLEDGE BROKERS

The phenomenon of multi-dimensional growth in knowledge has deprived the learner of his ability to deal directly with new knowledge. Now, it is not possible for a scholar to know at his own the total output of knowledge, say, in a year or two, in his specialised field of academic interest. One has to accept this statement. Even a noble laureate is dependent on an informatician for a comprehensive bibliography of literature in his field. Elbow support of a librarian is essential in generation and utilisation of knowledge.

It is very unfortunate that due to computerisation and closed access, a scholar cannot even directly see the collections of his interest in a documentation centre or a library. In numerous cases, the shelving of documents is no more in a filialy subject-classified sequence. Materials have been organised on the basis accession number or some other criterion. Access to materials in such cases is not possible without the help of a reader’s-adviser, a reference librarian or a documentalist, who, through conversation, identifies the exact requirement of the reader, pinpoints subject-headings and operates his computers or punched cards and then gives the list to the user. These trends reveal that a searcher of knowledge has to stand on the shoulders of an informatician, whatever be his/her exact designation, for using the knowledge in modern times.

The whole research activity of the world can come to standstill if, abstracts and indexes like, chemical abstracts, economic abstracts, humanities abstracts, etc., do not appear. It is the profession of informaticians which is behind the preparation of these vital secondary sources. Even tertiary sources have emerged as the output from librarians and are of vital use in initiating academic projects. The partnership between the scholar and the librarian is a phenomenon which shall become more thick in decades to come.

Thinkers of today have to conceive about ‘Multiple - Transformative Capacity’ on societal level, particularly in the third world. The aim is to work for allround resource mobilisation. For this, a Complex Process of Social Learning and Communication with a Multiple Time-Space Perspective requires to be promoted. The 1970s and 1980s were witness to the emergence of global, planetary and international social movement, which provided the slogan ‘Think globally and act locally’. Library as an agency, and librarianship as a profession, should be on the top of the list for developing multiple-transformative capacity on societal level, particularly for use of knowledge in the third world. India cannot ignore having pilot project of developing public libraries, in rural and urban areas, for dissemination and use of knowledge in a ‘post-industrial information society’ in which the country has already landed.

As honest brokers of knowledge and information, librarians have to deal with the great minds as generators and the masses as users. Apart from the specialised and technical knowledge required by specialists, general concepts, and information about them are required to be taken to all. A list of publications embodying seminal knowledge that should be taken to people in various forms (including oral form), particularly in the third world is given in Appendix A:

KNOWLEDGE AS POWER

Contemporary thinkers have pleaded for people’s empowerment, for effecting social change and development. This can come exclusively through knowledge dissemination and use. The Western librarianship has been doing it for about fifteen decades in an effective manner. The famous description of developing 'selective rationalisa-
tion' by Habermas, 1982, depends largely on 'concentration of information' in libraries for lifting the masses. Consciously or unconsciously, the librarians have been doing nothing but concentrating, organising and disseminating information/knowledge for use. The law, 'knowledge/information is for use', shall always remain the guiding force.

Today, the concept of property has various forms. The most important form of 'property' is knowledge. A particular piece of knowledge can be a property to provide prosperity to many at the same time, while property of a particular piece of land or a bank balance can help only one specific owner. This feature of property is not properly appreciated both by capitalists and socialists in various countries. While fields and factories as forms of property, are exhaustable, the knowledge as a form of property is inexhaustable. Knowledge gets collected, organised, and disseminated from libraries. No body can afford doing these personally. Even the element of central planning essential for allround growth depends on KGEU factors.

Today, the top-down planners get more lies when they seek more data because of the poor quality of KGEU arrangements. Managers, bureaucrats, politicians, and even academicians operate without the required data/information/knowledge. It is only in the hands of libraries that KGEU services are of satisfactory standard.

The method for creating new wealth require enormous knowledge of various kinds, which cannot be obtained by the process of merely the centralised planning. Mere vertical flow of information/data/knowledge cannot sustain modern day planning and administration. Horizontal and diagonal facets of KGEU are highly important to make the planning and economics successful. The modern automated libraries, with alert and qualified personnel, can provide KGEU, of vertical, horizontal and diagonal type. The value of vertical, horizontal and diagonal species of KGEU lies, as it has been proved in this century, in converting the hardware machine into the machine with knowledge. "Chips" have provided this characteristic to machines. Success of chips depends on knowledge culture.

Mikhail Gorbachev surrendered in the rings in 1989, when he said, "we were nearly one of the last to realise that in the age of information science the most expensive asset is knowledge." [quoted by Alvin Toffler In Power Shift, N.Y., Bantam, 1990, p. 406]. The third world cannot ignore this phenomenon. KGEU becomes less expensive if selected libraries, in an organised manner, perform the tasks as national project of high importance. Globalisation of knowledge is going to take place because the mankind in the future, like in the past, has to live on some finer values. Homo sapiens cannot live like dogs, fighting constantly for ever. They have to share knowledge which has so far grown only through sharing. Libraries and Librarians have, therefore, clearly, demarcated their roles and responsibilities on their shoulders in times ahead.
Knowledge generated in the following works is to be disseminated by libraries and the librarians to masses

1. Rachel Carson: Silent spring (1962);
2. Barry Commoner: Science and survival (1966);
3. The Club of Rome, report;
4. Meadows et al: The limits to growth (1972);
5. Dubos and Ward: Only one earth (1972);
6. Maddox: The doomsday syndrome (1972);
7. Goldsmith et al: A blueprint for survival (1972);
8. Foley: The energy question (1970);
9. Allaby: Inventing tomorrow (1976);
10. Allen: How to save the world (1980);
11. George: How the other half dies (1976);
12. P Harrison: Inside the third world (1979);
13. Brandt et al: North-South - A programme for survival (1980);
14. Heilbroner: An inquiry into the human prospect (1975);
15. Higgins: The seventh enemy (1978);
16. Schumacher: Small is beautiful (1973);
17. Dickson: Alternative technology (1974);
18. Cooley: Architect or bee? (1980);
19. David Collingridge: The Social control of technology (1981);