THE FIRST EIGHTY YEARS OF FID AND INDIA'S PARTICIPATION IN ITS ACTIVITIES — A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The history of the International Federation for Documentation has been told and retold by many experts on different occasions. The outlines of this history are fairly well known to all. Even then each account usually offers something new, something fresh and there is no abatement in the attempts to narrate this history again and again from different points of view and with different emphasis. Apparently, the history of the FID has an appeal of its own.

In 1975 this great institution completes the first eighty years of its useful existence. Surely, this is an appropriate occasion to review once again the objectives and ideals for which the FID has stood and the stress and strain of time through which it had to pass and the tremendous versatility it had exhibited in many of its changes. Boyd Rayward in one of the brilliant reviews has said, "... the history of the organization is a sequence of expansions and contractions, of structural adjustments by which, despite two world wars, a long period of English indifference, and American suspicion, it was able to survive as an important international bibliographic force" [2]. The same source also mentions, as important issues, the nature and extent of FID's dependence on the energies and finances of individuals such as the founding fathers and also its relations with the then international organisations. To begin with, some of these points and issues may be taken up for discussion.

FID considers 1895 as the official year of its foundation although preliminary work started earlier. The first meeting in 1892, of the two founding fathers Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine, at rue de Florence, blossomed into a life-long bibliographical partnership. It is providential that bibliography brought these two jurists together. It was again bibliography that changed the course of life of both the two pioneers and they in turn were destined to change and guide the course of bibliography for nearly the next fifty years.

Some preliminary bibliographical works in the Social Sciences by Otlet and La Fontaine since 1892 convinced them of the need for comprehensive subject indexes. It is said that more than the actual work in the bibliographical field, their 'intuition saw...'


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the problem and also the key to its solution. They were convinced, so far as the solution was concerned, that subject indexes were essential and to prepare universal subject indexes international cooperation was essential. The initial spade work of the founding fathers was entirely devoted towards the realisation of these objectives. They were successful in calling an international conference in Brussels on 2-4 September 1895. This conference gave birth to the Institut International de Bibliographic (IIB).

With this sprang up another establishment, namely, the Office International de Bibliographic (OIB) whose objective was to organise, publish and maintain a bibliographical World Catalogue, or the Repertoire Bibliographique Universal (RBU).

Both, in the compilation of the RBU, that immense dinosaurian card catalogue, and also in the organisation of bibliography internationally, the need for a device or mechanism which could combine organically by means of graphic marks all things that deal with one subject, one thought, one thing, or one impression, regardless whether these be books, pictures, or musical scores was felt. This is how the search for a good scheme of classification started. Otlet and La Fontaine had heard about Melvil Dewey's Decimal Classification (D.C.). It would be quite queer reading for us, who are going to celebrate next year the centenary of publication of this scheme of classification, now used throughout the world, that it was quite difficult at that time to get a copy of D.C in Europe. A copy had to be brought all the way from the U.S.A.

This precious copy of the DC was used for the classification of index entries, the 'classification marathon' of 400,000 entries in less than two months time. The adaptation of DC, and finally the publication of the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) in 1905 are all too well known to need any repetition here.

All accounts of the formative years of the FID, or the IIB as it was known then, usually draw our attention to one point again and again. It is the institute's intimate relation with a scheme of classification, that is the UDC. Looking at it now, from such a distance in time, it appears that the IIB attached undue importance to the development of the UDC, which was after all going to be just a device or a mechanism for organising bibliography. This lopsidedness is all the more apparent when we remember that the compilation and maintenance of the Repertoire Bibliographique, for which the DOC was primarily going to be used, was actually a responsibility of a different establishment altogether than the IIB. However, one has to remember also that one of the founding fathers, namely, Otlet was involved with both the establishments.

It is only in recent years that some experts have started probing into the alleged preoccupation of the IIB with UDC. It is quite a curious thing to observe that some people have complained that it is primarily due to its preoccupation with the UDC, that the IIB did not become a truly world organisation. Aloofness of the USA from active participation in the affairs of IIB for a long time was ascribed to this. At the same time the pioneers believed that UDC was to contribute most significantly to the realisation of a world bibliography with international cooperation. It was even thought that the UDC was the most important 'intellectual attribute' of the IIB.

Impartial study would certainly establish that on final analysis the UDC and the RBU were both characteristics of their times. They precipitated from their immediate historical context. The concept of universal bibliography was still alive in Europe. However, there was some changes in the concept since the days of Konrad Gesner.
The emphasis had shifted from books to much more prolific items of information, that is, articles in periodicals and from printed volumes of bibliography to card index. This was evident in the Royal Society's Catalogue of Scientific Papers and similar ventures. Hence, the RBU as a 'hydra-headed bibliographic monster' had quite an easy acceptance in the then bibliographic world of Europe.

To Otlet and La Fontaine the RBU and the UDC were so much inter-related and integrated that they could not think of any one without the other. They had imagined the RBU as providing the 'rallying point for documentary work anywhere', and the UDC as presenting a 'general scientific tool for achievement of the much desired internationalisation of methods and general standardisation of results'. It is said that in UDC, one is able to find even a happy blend of ideas from encyclopedists, philosophers, and linguists for the organisation of knowledge. Otlet must have seen 'in his mind's eye a great, dynamic, global encyclopaedia, with tributary streams flowing into it and swelling it from every country in the world'. Without an international language like the UDC and a device to combine organically through notations all things that deal with one subject or one thought such global encyclopaedia was not possible.

Recently, Professor H Arntz has drawn our attention to one aspect which provides a new point of view to IIB's attitude towards classification. He says, "it is significant that FID has never attempted to return to the year 1876 and Melvil Dewey's classification, since Dewey created a means for systematic arrangement in libraries, whereas Otlet and La Fontaine transformed the means into the instrument of documentation" [1]. This observation is quite significant when we compare this aspect of the work of the IIB with that of the International Catalogue of Scientific Literature. It may be recalled that in the same year as the IIB's foundation, that is 1895, another international conference was held in London to discuss and make the final arrangements for the launching of the ambitious International Catalogue which was to record the literature of the 20th century. At this conference considerable attention was given to the question of using a scheme of classification. Finally, it was decided to devise a new scheme for the Catalogue. Thus they preferred to go back to the days of Dewey. But the story at Brussels was quite different. It was decided to adopt and modify Dewey's Classification and this happened in spite of the fact that many of the delegates were actually common at the London and Brussels conferences. That this was a decision of immense consequence is borne out by the simple fact that the classification scheme of the Catalogue died with it but the UDC is very much alive to-day, long after the discontinuation of the RBU. UDC is surely the most well-known and permanent contribution of FID.

The above may appear more as a history of UDC. But this is inseparable from the history of the IIB. As has been said, "At the outset the UDC was the instrument and later for decades the activity of the FID". One more aspect of the activities of the IIB need be mentioned here. Otlet could realise the possibilities of the microfilm in libraries. He even designed a small reading apparatus and drew the attention of librarians to its use through a paper published as early as 1906.

It is extremely unfortunate that the IIB had to face the devastating World War I within the first 20 years of its foundation. Like many other institutions and ideas of international cooperation the IIB also suffered losses. After the cessation of hostilities when the time came for dusting off plans and proposals and start work again, it was found that the bibliographical world itself had changed considerably.
and with it the attitudes and ideas about bibliographical control had also started changing. It appears that for the IIB this shaking-off time was a little longer. However, the decade from 1920 to 1930 was mainly a period of rethinking. There were hardly any other activities of significance. The beginning of the decade was marked by the IIB Congress at Brussels in 1920 and it culminated with the changing of the name of IIB to Institut International de Documentation (IID) in 1931.

The above change was not just trifling with names, it was of profound significance. This was a clear indication of the passing away of the old order of bibliography giving place to the new concept which was 'more extended in its purpose, more realistic and dynamic in outlook, and more rapid in its advance' which came to be designated as documentation. This very important change in the course of the Institute was brought about deliberately and correctly by its founding fathers during those eventful years in the eddies of which many were caught distressingly floundering. Only they were able to rise much above and see bibliography in its total and changing form. The effect of the devastating war is clearly indicated by the fact that as efforts were going on in Brussels for the reorganisation of the IIB, the sponsors of the International Catalogue of Scientific Literature decided in London to abandon the project.

Even though the IIB was changed to IID in 1931 and assumed a new character, it appears from all accounts that it could not take up or carry through any programme of great significance. Financially, the Institute was in a very bad shape. At one point, perhaps in desperation, financial aid from the American Library Association was sought which it did not receive. It is significant that the idea of developing national centres which could pool their bibliographical contributions towards international bibliographical activities and could also act as bulwark and keep on the activities at least at the national level in times of belligerent events, was first mooted out in the thirties. Surely, this was a pertinent lesson that was learnt as a consequence of the events of the First World War. This was true not only for international bibliographical cooperation but possibly for any type of intellectual cooperation. However, this new idea required considerable time, preparation and cooperation from various agencies for its implementation.

The next turning point in the history of the Brussels Institute came in 1938 when the first step towards the realisation of the new order to national centres as dependable base for international cooperation was taken. To mark the beginning of this new order the name of the Institute was significantly changed to Federation Internationale de Documentation or the FID. This was a deliberate renunciation of the centralistic institute and an attempt to strike a balance between nationalism and internationalism. One immediate response to this change was that the American Library Association became an associate member of the FID in 1939. However, the Second World War broke out with much more devastating effects to paralyse all activities of international cooperation till 1945. During this dark period the founding fathers, whose energy and vision had guided the course of FID for so long like a lodestar, departed from the scene for ever. La Fontaine died in 1943 and his life-long bibliographical partner in 1944.

After 1945, with the cessation of hostilities, a new era of intellectual cooperation began. Government began to show more interest in documentation. But, alas the FID was not prepared to take full advantage of this situation. Professor Arntz has pointed out in no uncertain words the unfortunate inaction and aloofness of FID during
this period. A number of agencies of the United Nations and other international agencies were now aware of the importance of documentation. A number of governments were now prepared to spend on documentation activities for preparing the proper infrastructure for the various reconstruction and developmental programmes of their respective war devastated countries. Conditions were just ripe to sell documentation. This opportunity was missed by the FID, otherwise its history would have been different.

Documentation was necessary for after-war reconstruction work but before that reconstruction and some rethinking were necessary in the highest institution of documentation itself. This, however, came around 1950 only. The message of FID started spreading beyond Europe and within Europe to countries which were completely aloof so far. Membership of three Asian countries, namely, Indonesia, Japan, and India in 1950, 1951, and 1952 respectively marked this period of expansion. The membership rose to 30 in 1960 from only 7 in 1938. The venues of the conferences also shifted to new places, such as Belgrade (1954), Washington (1958), Rio de Janeiro (1960) and so on.

The expansion of FID membership to more countries, especially non-European countries, helped the FID in an indirect way, in its own reorganisation. As the membership spread to more heterogenous groups, it was soon revealed that more and more member states were not satisfied with the plans and programmes of the FID. This dissatisfaction set into motion talks of reorganisation. A complete plan was prepared in 1958 and was presented at the Warsaw conference in 1959. Finally, the plan was published in January 1960 as the 'Outline of a long-term policy' (publ. 325). This can be considered as the new charter of the FID.

In the Introduction to the new charter of 1960, a realisation of the increasing responsibility of the FID is clearly stated. It says, "For a number of years it has become ever more evident that the FID must alter and strengthen its activities if it is to be the leading organisation of international documentation in a rapidly changing world... scientific documentation has developed rapidly and its use recognised in every field of intellectual and economic endeavour. The rapid extension of knowledge and the speed with which it is applied, demand however the development of still more effective techniques and systems of documentation to provide order and accessibility. These are matters which require consideration and action on an international level and clearly the Federation has a major part to play".

The major areas for consideration were also analysed and the tasks stated in the above publication. They have been constantly under study mainly through the various study committees of the FID most of which were constituted after 1950 and quite a few constituted or reconstituted after 1960.

The aim of FID was also sufficiently broadend at the same time and formulated as "to promote through international co-operation, research in and development of documentation which includes, inter alia, the organisation, storage, retrieval, dissemination and evaluation of information however recorded, in the fields of science, technology, social sciences, arts and humanities".

The 1960 policy formulation was a clear analysis of the then prevailing situation and it incidentally showed also the wide gap between what was required to be done and what the FID was doing. The areas of activities that were mentioned were to many.
It was not possible for the FID to initiate action in all those areas. Hence, it was necessary to determine priorities and formulate specific programmes keeping in view the financial and organisational capabilities of the FID. This was done in two stages - first, through the publication of the 'Statement on a New FID Programme to Meet Changing Information Patterns' in 1966, and then through a new programme approved at the General Assembly in 1970. The present programme covers generally the following fields:

1. Theoretical studies and research in documentation, librarianship and information science, terminology, applied linguistics, mechanisation, information networks, and classification;
2. Updating the Universal Decimal Classification;
3. Guides to information sources;
4. Information for industry;
5. Organisation of documentation in developing countries; and
6. Training of documentalists and education of users of information.

That brings us to the present period of FID's history. The aims and activities of this international organisation are all before us. One significant aspect of the present era is FID's increasing collaboration with other international organisations interested in documentation. FID has consultative relations with eleven other international organisations and is an affiliate of the ICSU. It is also a member of five other international agencies. The motivation clearly is 'not to loose contact with reality' again, as it did in 1940s. The international character of the FID is also revealed by the fact that it has now 62 national members, 3 international members and more than 350 affiliates, which includes 16 international organisations, 179 institutions, 14 countries not having the status of national member, and a large number of individuals. Out of the 62 national members, 16 are from Asia and Oceania, 7 from Africa, 24 from Europe, and the remaining 15 from the Americas.

It would be surely appropriate here to review briefly India's participation in FID's activities. It has been mentioned earlier that FID's activities were largely concentrated in Europe. The national membership was stagnant for quite some time and restricted to the five founding members. It is only after 1938 the membership started increasing slowly. In those days the only way to express faith or take part in FID's activities was to adopt the UDC. On UDC. depended the strength of FID. It is not known where and when exactly the UDC was first adopted in India for bibliographical work. But is is known that in some of the early bibliographical ventures, like the Irrigation Abstracts which started in 1936, UDC was used. The Indian Agricultural Research Institute was a very early user of the UDC. Paul Otlet had once called such agencies and services as 'amis inconnus', that is unknown friends. A few scientific periodicals also adopted the UDC for classifying the individual contributions published in them. The Journal of the Institution of Engineers (India) and the Journal of Meteorology and Geophysics are two important examples. Surely, Otlet's vision of 'tributary streams flowing into it and swelling it from every country in the world' was partially realised in such a practice.

India became a national member of FID in 1952. But even before that a unique link was established. Dr. S. R. Ranganathan was made the Rapporteur-General of the FID/ICA Committee on General theory of Classification (now reconstituted as the...
FID/CR). It may be recalled that this was one of the earliest Study Committee. In 1960 the Secretariat of the FID/CA was assigned to India. The FID/CA Reports that were produced from India by Dr. Ranganathan are considered to be the most authentic reports on the development of classificatory ideas. They have influenced all schemes of classifications in some way. The last report by him (FID/CR Report no. 12), published posthumously in 1972, was released as the Ranganathan Memorial issue. Dr. Ranganathan was elected Vice-President in 1953 and was also in the editorial committee of the Revue de la Documentation. He was elected as an Honorary Fellow, a distinction conferred on a few only, and only one from this part of the world.

It is well known that INSDOC has been representing India as the National Member of FID since 1952. One aspect is, perhaps, not so well known that in the establishment of INSDOC, the FID took some part. As early as November 1946, the FID invoked the good offices of the ISO to stimulate the formation of a national documentation committee in each country. This was communicated by ISO to the Indian Standards Institution in May 1947. About the same time the FID directly approached Dr. Ranganathan on this matter. All these culminated in the establishment of INSDOC in 1952 through the technical assistance of the Unesco.

India is now a member of the FID Council also. The Secretariat of the FID/CR has come back to India after a short period of gap. India is also a member of the FID/II (Information for Industry) Study Committee, FID/DC (Developing Countries) Special Committee, FID/CAO (Committee on Asia and Oceania), and the Working Group FID/SRC - Subject-field Reference Code.

The year 1975 has been specially significant for us as it started with the holding of the Third International Study Conference on Classification Research at Bombay. It is gratifying that such a conference could be held in India, the homeland of Dr. Ranganathan, whose energies and devotion nourished the FID/CR for a long time. The theme of the Conference was Ordering Systems for Global Information Networks. That indicates the vastly expanded scope and interests of the FID/CR. It was evident from the Bombay Conference that this extended scope was largely responsible for bringing in different groups of people interested in documentation. Surely, this is in line with FID's policy of 'public confrontation' pursued since the Warsaw Conference in 1958.

In a paper published in 1963, Dr. Ranganathan had expressed his desire that the FID should come closer to Asia and Africa to become a really international organisation. He said, "At present, the FID continues to be virtually a Western organisation in spite of the intellectual appreciation on the part of some of its members of the need for making it international in fact. The encrustation, developed during the last half century is difficult to break. The inexorable, unconscious though it be, permeation of prestige would naturally seek to prop up and preserve that encrustation. It may take a decade or two for the research tempo of Asia and Africa to acquire the necessary intensity to cause the painless dropping out of this encrustation." [6]

It may be said now that the above wish has come true. FID is now a truly international organisation. So far as India is concerned the formation of a very representative National Committee for FID in 1974 is a clear evidence of its faith and support in the aims and ideals of the FID. The present Seminar organised by the National Committee to mark the 80th anniversary of FID will surely be considered
an important event. Let us hope that India will be able to take more active part in the programmes and activities of the FID in the coming years.

References


