The National Library of India must act fast

Subhas C Biswas
337 Hauz Khas Apartments, New Delhi 110016, E-mail: subhas.biswas@gmail.com

Continuous downhill slide of the National Library [of India] over the last sixty years or so and the main causes of it are identified. This has to be stopped by initiating a few positive steps that are to be taken by the stakeholders immediately so as to allow it back on the rails. The two recently produced documents: NKC-WGL recommendations (2006) and NACONAL, 2006 on Indian library services, with proposals of its future role and growth pattern are critically examined. Some significant moves taken by the management of the British Library (national library of England) during this period to cater to the needs of its vast users are referred, as examples. Propose some specific actions to be taken by the Government of India, National Library Advisory Board, senior management and the professional organizations of librarians, viz. implementing the National Library Act, 1976 (with some modification); make an immediate move to fill up the sanctioned posts of senior professionals and Director; conduct a comprehensive survey of the users and their present and future requirements; revise the Delivery of Books Act 1954, merge of CRL with the National Library and take initiative with full responsibility for creating the Digital Library of India.

Introduction

The National Library (NL) in Kolkata is now in a state of flux and rudderless. It is true the Library is visited daily by a large number of local readers and academics together with a handful of outstation research scholars. Many of the local young readers are using this as a library of first call. The rich and varied collection of the Library is the mainstay of most academic pursuits in Kolkata. In the interest of social inclusion, the Library follows a simple admission procedure. The continuous down-hill slide over the last sixty years cannot be stopped as no one is there to hold the rein and infuse required impetus and directions so as to put it on the galloping mode with strong determination of making it to act as the hub of the nation’s library and information services and systems.

To set the recovery process on, one has to go into the roots to identify the causes of this poor state of the Library. It would be unfair to point a finger only towards the Department of Culture for their inconsistent policy guidelines and slow implementation machinery, nor the staff associations of the National Library for their involvement by overstepping in management issues with socio-political twist. The other party directly associated with the Library is the senior management who also must share the responsibilities for bring the NL to its present state. At the same time, one must not ignore the mute role of the library professional organisations and users groups of the library, who by acting as lobbyists with some support from the media, could have kept a watchful eye and bring moral pressure on all the stakeholders. If we look at the management structure of any developed country, having an effective national library system, one cannot miss the point of noticing their national library has acquired the recognition of being the apex body for national knowledge storage and handling systems and a guiding factor for all research and developmental activities related to library and information services. Sadly enough this is not what our library professional think tank is considering for India’s National Library.

The National Library is the weakest link within Indian library systems. The most recent thoughts on Indian library and information services are being reflected in the ten Recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission (2006) which presented a programme of actions with 2020 as the projected target schedule for achieving the goals. Its Working Group on Libraries (NKC-WGL) did not focus on the role of the National Library, in the proposed library network development. For some reasons, best known to the Group, it avoided dealing with the National Library exclusively. There have been many national and international conferences and seminars held over the last few decades, organised by the National Library and by other organizations on topics closely
relevant to it. Follow-up actions, if any, on the long list of resolutions or recommendations adopted in these academic forums. Though have not been checked. Only very recently the Library organized a National Conference on the National Library\(^2\), (NACONAL, 2006) and brought out a voluminous publication of the papers presented at the conference. This publication and the NKC-WGL recommendations gives us some idea of the trends of thoughts of the library professionals. The National Library and the Indian library professionals—individuals and groups - must act together to pursue the policy makers for implementation of many of these recommendations within a reasonable time schedule.

Rajiv Gandhi, former Prime Minister while laying the foundation stone in 1989 of Bhasa Bhavan, the latest building complex added to the National Library [of India], expressed his desire to see the National Library at par with other national libraries of the world, keeping in view of its massive information flow, its storage and retrieval. Dr Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India declared the formation of National Knowledge Commission at the CII Partnership Summit, 2005 at the National Library campus on 12 January 2005. He emphasised that the National Knowledge Commission would be a catalyst in setting ambitious knowledge targets and enabling agencies to attain them. The first of the five specific agenda items he stressed was, ‘to increase access to knowledge for public benefit. It is nearly three years since the Chairman of NKC submitted a set of ten specific recommendations to the Prime Minister on 7\(^{th}\) December 2006, to act upon for the up-gradation of library and information services.

On 8\(^{th}\) October 2004 Bhasa Bhavan was declared open to the public by the then Minister of Culture. This additional space of over 40,000 sq. meters is surely of great help to the Library to widen its activities by providing more shelf space to house its valuable reading materials and some additional reading space for the users, in a more comfortable air-conditioned environment. But over the last few years all its developmental and modernization activities have come to a stand still due to critical shortage of staff at every level. About 50% of the posts are lying vacant due to superannuation and other reasons, but there is no new move by the government to fill up these vacancies. The post of Director is not filled up for over a year now. An acting Director is dealing with the routine matters by sharing his time between his parent organization and the National Library.

This critical staff situation of the National Library is not known to many people in rest of India. There were of course a few protest marches with banners and loudspeakers on roads of Kolkata, a few editorial comments in a few locally published library professional journals which failed to create any ripple within the Ministry of Culture. National print and electronic media, have little time and space to cover the activities of this cultural centre of both historical and national importance. Indian cinema and television, both documentary and entertainment channels have totally neglected the world of books and libraries.

It is also perhaps right to point a finger at the library and information professional organizations whose primarole is to act as a watch dog but consistently failed to take up these national issues seriously with the bureaucratic and political decision making process at the national level.

One must also bring out the present crisis faced by another library - the Central Secretariat Library, New Delhi (CSL), the second largest library under the direct control of the same Ministry. CSL is also over 100 years old that holds another valuable collection of research materials. This library has lost nearly half of its sanctioned professional staff over the last ten years. No attempt has been made so far to fill up these vacancies and the library is being asked to ‘carry on’ by hiring a few short-term trainees with fresh LIS background, at regular interval. Now with the recently introduced strict security regulations, CSL has lost most of the regular readers and research scholars who are ‘not central government employees’. The Ministry has to seriously consider moving this Library out of the Shastri Bhavan complex. Perhaps it would be better still, if this library is merged with another local reference library whose collection and users group would ideally complement each other.

The recently published volume containing papers presented at the NACONAL 2006 by the National Library\(^3\), listed a few papers worth serious follow up actions particularly by the Library management and professional organizations. There is however, some move by the Ministry of Culture by organizing a meeting of the stakeholders on 8\(^{th}\) February 2009 with the purpose of setting up the National Mission for Libraries (NML), as
recommended by NKC. The minutes of the meeting are yet to be made public.

By organizing NACONAL, 2006, the Library attempted to obtain different viewpoints and suggestions, on its future course, from a large section of library professionals in the country, and to have close interactions with them, is surely a positive move. To supplement this, the Library must look at the large amount of documentation available on web sites of different national libraries of the world, followed by directly interacting with some of them on specific issues of mutual interest. This vast back up information resources will help the National Library to prepare a draft action plan, both on long (20 years) and short (3 years) term, indicating projected targets and goals to achieve under separate Heads of activities.

It is true the Library is presently short of quality management personnel. The Board of Management of National Library must get a new Director at the earliest. The Board should also consider of hiring services of some recognised consultancy agency who could be asked to conduct a comprehensive survey of the Library users’ groups, their pattern of use, what they want and their expectations of quality and level of services. This may sound unprecedented to many of us. Of late, several central government organizations are involving private professional groups and individuals for some specific services for their specialized management skills. Armed with this the Board may assign a group of management experts to prepare a blue print on ‘New Policy and Planning’ which needs to be widely circulated.

If a strategy is needed for the National Library to meet the demands of the 21st century we must take some calculated drastic measures that will justify investment of resources provided by the taxpayers. Recently the British Library launched a major consultation with its users i.e. New strategic directions for the British Library. There were over 5,000 responses, which largely endorsed the themes of working in collaboration and partnership, increasing the understanding of users needs, widening access to collections and services and accelerating the Library’s e-strategy. But to get a pan-India sample of 5,000 users for our National Library is a different matter altogether because very few outstation users visit or get any direct service from the National Library. There is a huge gap between what the National Library is expected, compared to its present coverage, and why no remedial action has been taken to reduce the gaps has never been questioned. Moreover, it is not that we are not aware of these shortcomings in services of the National Library as there are several government appointed committees’ and commissions’ reports spelt them out with suggestions for improvements.

Role and strategy

It is perhaps because of this uncertainty the National Knowledge Commission, Working Group for Libraries avoided to identify the distinctive role of national library of India within Indian library and information systems and services. Question may also be raised by a few, why go for another report on the National Library? This proposed study is to be based on real life users’ survey undertaken and conducted under direct supervision of the National Library; not imposed upon it by some ‘eminent scholar / bureaucrat’. The most recent report on the National Library is of a high-powered committee headed by Prof Satish Chandra (1994-95). The revised National Library Act of 1976 (not implemented) also included many significant modifications to improve its management. The most significant reason is that with the passage of time and pace at which information and communication technologies are influencing information storage, access and retrieval, The National Library must make the right moves after clearly defining its role and identifying the means to reach its goal. Rapid and significant developments are taking place in all three segments of librarianship over the last four decades – (i) Collection development of information resources, (ii) Customers services (including cataloguing, education, reference services and inter-library loans) and (iii) Management and marketing. The Library has to be active on all the fronts and needs a little push and encouragement from all of us.

The British experience

It is significant and also relevant to record that the British Library, and the U.S. Library of Congress have been constantly reviewing their role for updating the services. National Library has got some additional space (Bhasa Bhavan) after making demands for it in early 1960s. Though the 1976 Act was not implemented due to various reasons, the government took the opportunity of bringing in some changes in the administrative structure of staff at the higher level. Satish Chandra Committee Report fell short of identifying its future role in the research
information cycle and to outline its strategies for research in science, technology and medicine in higher education and industry; the social sciences in higher education and the practitioner communities; and research in the arts and humanities in higher education and the creative industries. There is a strong and urgent need to redefine its role and strategies. The British Library\textsuperscript{6} redefined its role in 2005, viz, “The Library must address and define the strategic priorities of enriching the user’s experience, building digital research library, transforming search and navigation, growing and managing the national collection, qualitative improvement of its staff and guaranteeing financial sustainability.”

There has always been a conflict of interest and in approach between librarian and management on utilizing grants from public funding agencies on the value of library – what return in real economic terms, the taxpayers get for the investment made on a library? Librarian’s answer, sometimes supported by the academic and research community, has always been subjective based on qualitative analysis – ‘it is a service to the public, like education, health care, sports, etc.’ There are a few recent case studies on some specific services of a particular library based on some analytical data to justify the viability of that service on monetary terms. The British Library’s recent publication\textsuperscript{7}, \textit{Measuring our value}, based on a survey conducted by designing a questionnaire is noteworthy. Data analysis was carried on a method known as contingent valuation method (CVM) exploited by the Nobel Prize-winning economists, Kenneth Arrow and Robert Solow to determine the direct and indirect value – economic, culture, social and intellectual – added by the British Library to the nation. Over 2000 people were asked:

- How much they would be willing to pay for the Library’s continued existence?
- What was the minimum payment they would be willing to accept to forgo the Library’s existence?
- How much they invested in terms of time and money to make use of the Library?
- How much they would have to pay to use alternatives to the Library, if such alternatives could be found?

The conclusions were that the total value each year of the British Library was in terms of British Sterling pound, 363 million (of which 304 million was indirect value and 59 million direct value); for every one pound sterling of public funding the British Library received annually, 4.40 pound was generated for the UK economy; and if the British Library did not exist, the UK would lose 280 million of economic value per annum. The survey helped the British Library to prioritize its strategies on their staff development. In 2004 the Library introduced a radical competency-based performance system which was intended to be eventually linked to performance pay.

There is no comparison between the services provided by the present British Library and National Library [of India]. Historically however, The National Library was established on the model of the British Library (formerly British Museum Library) and it continued to be providing similar kind of satisfactory service to the users till the end of 1960s.

\textbf{Action plan}

The National Library Act of 1976 proposed to declare the library as an autonomous body which was not acceptable to the employees of the library. In a recent paper presented at the NACONAL, 2006, Dasgupta (2006)\textsuperscript{8}, former Librarian / PLIO of the National Library came out with ten recommendations for the betterment of the Library. The first item of her recommendations is, ‘the National Library needs to be changed to …a more autonomous institution within the government structure’. Under the sixth item she recommends, “The major requirement is to actually make the library ‘exclusive’ in every respect.” It is not clear what this exclusiveness will cover. At the end of these recommendations she mentioned, “I must share … that these suggestions are not mine but that of the National Library staff who are now mentally and professionally ready to take on new responsibilities to make this Library a major institution in the region.” In NKC-WGL\textsuperscript{9} recommendations, she as chairperson, has not recommend any specific future role of the National Library within the total Indian library scenario. The reality is the Ministry of Culture, has taken some steps for implementing the first two recommendations of the NKC –WGL. Hence it would not be surprising if the National Library is left out of the loop of the future growth pattern of Indian library network. Dasgupta\textsuperscript{10} approved of the National Library’s new initiative to focus more on eastern and north-eastern states of India in terms of acquisition of resource materials and
to help in training library staff of the regions. This special initiative was taken under the instructions of the Ministry of Culture. This may be a strategic move but this is nothing more than a short sighted approach by the government.

As a follow-up to National Knowledge Commission’s recommendations the government (Ministry of Culture) recently called a meeting of the stakeholders of Indian libraries. From the introductory remarks of the chairperson and of discussions followed, one may soon expect the government to set up the National Mission on Libraries (NML) and take a formal move for creating the Census of Indian libraries as recommended by NKC. These are some positive moves while the rest of NKC recommendations may be left with the proposed NML to deal, and / or other developmental activities to enlarge the size and composition of library users in India. National Library shall be represented in NML, we guess. What is required of the National Library is to actively participate and take major share of responsibilities to help the Mission in fulfilling its task. It is expected that the Ministry will provide the requisite support by allowing the National Library to hire competent staff in adequate numbers.

It is necessary to start with a clean slate instead of bickering on the past. Things are to change sooner than later in making the National Library resources easily accessible to anybody at every corner of India with the newly available information and communication technologies. Fortunately, the Library has taken some positive moves to adopt these technologies, though at a very slow pace. Reasons for this slow progress are severe shortage of trained manpower and lack of appropriate focus at the management level. No resource is more critical to any library or information service than the personnel who serve in it. The quality of their training, the appropriateness of that training to existing and changing conditions, and the attitudes of those who serve can make or break programmes and provide satisfaction or discontent among those served.

Under the present system all the posts are to be filled up through UPSC and Staff Selection Commission only. This itself is a complicated long drawn process. With the implementation of the National Library Act of 1976 (with modification) and the proposed revised Delivery of Books Act, the National Library Board shall be the competent authority for hiring staff for the Library.

Another sensitive issue is the future relationship of Central Reference Library (CRL) with the National Library which is kept hanging over the last fifty odd years. Original proposal was to move CRL eventually to Delhi after a building is constructed at the proposed site earmarked in Lutyens’ Delhi, opposite to the National Museum. Government has finally given up the idea of shifting CRL or the National Library to Delhi under pressure from various corners and the new building under construction is Jawaharlal Nehru Bhavan on the site. It is meant for various units (including the departmental library) of the Ministry of External Affairs. CRL is ideally suited to act as the fully automated bibliographic division of the National Library thereby avoiding duplication of processing of books and other items received by the Library under the DB Act. National Library must come out with a concrete proposal of unification of CRL. The issue of seniority in hierarchies within the staff of the two libraries should not stop any longer of serving a larger national cause. This is not uncommon within the central government of merging staff of two units of a department.

It is hoped that the Ministry will do its best to get the revised draft DB Act passed by the Parliament very soon. If the present National Library Advisory Board could make a concerted effort to get over these two hurdles at the earliest with the help of the Ministry, only then National Library can be expected to bring out a fully automated online national bibliography of international compatibility in terms of service and standards. The impact of this will be noticeable in many sectors. Manpower wasted in cataloguing all the new Indian publications once by NL and again by CRL to bring out INB will be saved. Available technology will help in bringing out INB using the vernacular scripts at least for the title and author (in addition to Romanization), and English for the descriptive part of each catalogue entry. All libraries in India shall be authorized to download INB catalogue entries (annual subscription). This centralized cataloguing of all Indian publications in all the languages (in original scripts) shall save huge amount of manpower by the libraries that can be utilized for providing additional services to a wider readership. There are about 200 plus library schools attached to different universities producing over 10,000 professional librarians annually more than half of these are either unemployed or under-employed. The country will save a big amount from this wastage of young talents that could be diverted to some more productive employment channels.
Another vital issue the National Library must take up immediately is to set up a consortium for creating a comprehensive national digital library of Indian publications (new and old). This collection shall include rare materials of distinction, and current e-publications and other items both priceless and having unique qualitative value. One can add many others to this list. The main objective is to produce digitized and digitalized texts of library holdings of Indian printed and other resource materials that are worth preservation and make them accessible globally for research. Many Indian libraries are having their own digitalization units and / or subscribed / procured materials of research value in digitized format. In the field of science and technology there is some cooperative move by IITs, IIMs and IIsc to create INDEST and Vidyanidhi with UGC-INFLIBNET support. In addition, there are many other libraries, which are active in this area, including CSL and National Library. We also had several international and national conferences and seminars, workshops on this topic, including the big ‘Million books digital library project’ was held. But all these activities are not focused to a single goal of developing India’s own National Digital Library. This is an exclusive responsibility of the National Library; it must take the initiative and coordinate the whole project to avoid duplication and also avoid waste of taxpayers money. It may not be appropriate to leave this job of coordination to any other institution or library as is clearly demonstrated by the major national libraries of the world.

References