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Challenges for Library Professionals in India in the New Millennium

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Introduction

Information, as the saying goes, is power. The primary objective of libraries is to organize and provide access to information. This objective will never change, although the format and the methods that are used can change dramatically, providing new opportunities and challenges. Higher education, scholarship, technology and economics, which are all interrelated, play an important role in understanding the needs of libraries. In this paper, the term “technology” refers to computer technology, communications technology, and information technology. A librarian who is aware of all of these three technologies can face the challenges of the new millennium.

Like their colleagues everywhere, library professionals in India, particularly those serving high-tech institutions, are already subject to various challenges. The introduction of computers was a challenge to all librarians. New technology may call for organizational change in the traditional library. Librarians may have to function more like consulting information engineers than as the traditional, passive custodians of information and dispensers of documents, moving from a collection-centered model to one that is access- and service-oriented.

Ranganathan's fifth law of library science¹ tells us about the ever-growing nature of libraries. To support this growth, resources must be accumulated. The need for both resources and for the infrastructure to support them causes many libraries to face an additional budget crunch.

How to Meet the Challenges?

- *Resource sharing*

Keisler says, “the social efforts of computer networks may be far greater and more important than you imagine,” and modern technology will enable libraries to cooperate and create networks with speed and ease. New technology provides opportunities for delivery of services in which the role of the librarian will be that of entrepreneur, marketing information without waiting for users to come to the institution. Now we have a technology that will allow us to move from a holdings-oriented environment to that of an access-oriented one.

- *Networks*

Some of the important data networks are India's National Informatics Center's NICNET (home.nic.in/htm/bnicnet.htm), INDONET (www.indonet.net/ -- "a directory of India-related sites on the Internet"), and ERNET (www.eis.ernet.in/ -- the "largest nationwide terrestrial and satellite network ... located at the premiere educational and research institutions in major cities in [India]"). The library networks are CALIBNET (www.calibnet.org/ -- the Calcutta Library Network), DELNET (<http://delnet.nic.in/>) -- India's Developing Library Network, and INFLIBNET (www.inflibnet.ac.in/ -- the Information and Library Network Centre-- "an autonomous Inter-University Centre (IUC) of University Grants Commission [UGC-- www.ugc.ac.in/] involved in creating infrastructure for sharing information among academic and R&D Institutions").

- *Associations*

According to a survey of academic librarians, (Frank 1997) 78% of the respondents considered networking with colleagues to be a very important reason for joining professional associations, while 81% felt that the professional membership was important for retention, tenure, or promotion, and 84% used professional memberships to influence professional goals and to keep up with developments in the field through professional journals, and 74% used their association membership to speak or publish. Associations are seen as ways of getting and sharing information, as well as a way to make contacts with others. Information professionals recognize that they need relevant information to be effective in their positions and that practical up-to-date information is shared at association conferences and in association publications, listservs and websites. Association committees, interest groups, discussion groups, and round tables provide further informal settings.

In addition to hearing about the best and worst practices, the external environment, the activities of vendors and the movement of people within the profession, librarians in India, like their colleagues in other countries, are looking to make contact with those who are working in similar settings and have successfully worked through similar problems. It is through association activities that librarians can enlarge their network of contacts ensuring that they get the most current and practical information.

For new members of the profession in particular, these contacts allow them to be exposed to a variety of viewpoints, encouraging them to think creatively and look beyond the routines of their institutions. Through associations, librarians can also contribute to the profession's body of learning by publishing in association journals, newsletters, and monographs and by presenting programs at conferences and continuing education courses. For those looking for upward career movement, associations provide the opportunity to develop leadership skills by serving as leaders in committees, interest groups, divisions, and executive councils. Such positions give the professional a chance to enhance his or her leadership, planning and organizational skills and to demonstrate these skills to others.

For some, particularly those working with associations that conduct and publish research, membership in an association allows them to become familiar with the processes of research and publication

One of the benefits of joining an association, particularly for those who actively participate, is that they are likely to be more informed and up-to-date on current issues. This

is an essential reason why employers should support and encourage their staff to actively participate in associations, since “[l]ibrarians who participate actively are more ‘marketable,’ more likely to be promoted, and more likely to succeed in their careers.” (Frank, 1997)

- **Software**

The last few years have seen some important and useful initiatives in the development of library automation software. Some special libraries, notably at BHEL (66.39.99.160/bhel/ -- Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited), SAIL (www.sail.co.in/ --Steel Authority of India Limited), ICRIAT (www.icrisat.org/ -- the International Crops Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics), the Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre INSDOC (www.insdoc.org/), the National Informatics Center (“NIC”-- home.nic.in/), DESIDOC (www.drdo.org/labs/compsci/desidoc/index.shtml)--the Defence Scientific Information and Documentation Centre, the Indian Institute of Technology, IIT Kanpur (www.iitk.ac.in/), have successfully developed software for library automation. Book and serial acquisitions, computer assisted cataloging, union-listing, and current awareness services are some of the applications developed. LIBSYS (www.libsys.co.in/home.html) and TULIPS among the better-known commercial packages that have been developed for both DOS and UNIX and are therefore available not only on microcomputers but also on minicomputers and mainframes and in LAN environments.

Required Skills

The electronic environment of the 21st century will demand a range of skills from by library and information science (LIS) professionals, including:

- Technical skills
- IT skills
- Managerial skills

Users may turn for help and advice on search techniques, database quality, database development, and the range of databases that are available. Librarians will need organized training programs, which can be in the form of workshops, conferences, seminars, symposia, etc.

Conclusion

A librarian with diverse talents and training, and who is flexible, will be able to meet the challenges of future library scene. An ideal librarian is one who is competitive and assertive, who is cooperative and willing to compromise, one who is intellectually committed, who is equipped with technical and managerial competencies, who is enthusiastic to the needs of new technology at the same time not being emotionally attached to any one system.

Librarians should be ready to participate in the process of generating and distributing information and knowledge for quality of life and education for all. In short, librarians must

unite to withstand the revolutions that will occur in the information and communication fields.

Technology alone cannot help bring about the required changes. Attitudes, practices, and policies need to change if libraries in India are to truly benefit themselves and their community of users by the application of new technologies.

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¹Ranganathan's laws of library science are: "Books are for use; every reader his book; every book its reader; save the time of the reader; the library is a growing organism."