

Strategies for Rejuvenating the Academic Library as a Local Social Hub

Harinder Pal Singh Kalra

Abstract

The academic library has been called the heart of the academic institute. In this context, it is important to understand the social contexts of the academic institutions and their libraries. While in metropolitan areas and big cities, there are large number of educational institutions, and each has a library or a library system; but in case of small cities and towns across the length and breadth of the country, there is generally one or two, or in a few cases more than two higher education institutions. In recent years, however, a large number of private institutions (colleges and universities) have come up in urban, semi-urban and rural areas and these institutions are also developing their library collections. But, one or two higher education institutions that have been there in a city/town are the ones that have moderately good collections. These are the only library facilities that are available in a small city/town. This is because public library system in India has not developed further in the small cities and towns, and in rural areas. In the digital age, where smartphones and internet connectivity is fast reaching semi-urban and rural areas; readers want a quiet place to read and study. This vacuum can be filled by the academic library. In fact, the academic library needs to reach out to its local community for serving them with their information needs, as well as making the institution a hub of social activities.

A few outreach strategies are mentioned in this paper. These include providing library facilities to college/university alumni, eminent persons of the region, and other interested readers. Mechanisms for providing the facilities and rules governing such facilities can be developed by consultation with stakeholders. Another strategy is to invite eminent persons of the region who are settled outside the region to deliver a talk on a current issue whenever such persons visit their city/town. Every city/town has local and regional level non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and voluntary organizations and groups that work for specific causes. The academic library can provide a platform for them to reach out to its users as well as the local/regional society. In fact, the academic library can develop a database of such organizations and groups and can share that with those seeking such information. Strategies applicable in one area, or successful in a city/town may not necessarily succeed in another area. One facet of an academic library's expertise which can be harnessed is by providing information literacy skills to people in its local area. The role of the academic library is also to develop a database of success stories of social interaction at national and global levels. This paper provides with some suggestions for rejuvenating the academic library as a local social hub, and there is immense potential for this in the case of Indian academic libraries.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Social Hub, Higher Education, Library Ambassadors



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1. Introduction

The academic institution i.e., college, university or a school, is in fact an extension of the broader social system. And any academic system does not exist in vacuum or isolation, rather it's a part of the whole social system. In this context, it is important to understand the social functions of the academic institutions, particularly universities and colleges, and their libraries. The extension function of the university is essentially to serve as a bridge between the knowledge and the society. In India, while in metropolitan areas and big cities, there are a large number of educational institutions, and each has a library or a library system; but in case of small cities and towns across the length and breadth of the country, there is generally one or two, or in a few cases more than two higher education institutions (a college, or may be a university). In recent years, however, a large number of private institutions (colleges and universities) have come up in urban semi-urban and rural areas and these institutions are also developing their library collections. But the one or two higher education institutions that have been there in a city/town for years and decades are the ones that have moderately good collections. And unsurprisingly, these are the only library facilities that are there in a small city/town. This is because, exceptions apart, the public library system in India has not developed further in the small cities and towns, and in rural areas. In the digital age, where smartphones and Internet connectivity is fast reaching semi-urban and rural areas; readers want a quiet place to read and study, and also want community spaces to discuss, collaborate and communicate within their physical communities, and

outside through virtual groups. In the age of less user footfall in the academic library, this vacuum can be filled by the library. In fact, the academic library needs to reach out to its local community for serving them with their information needs, as well as making the institution a hub of social activities.

2. Why Library is not a local social hub and what needs to be done

The introduction brings a question to the mind, as to why is the situation not-so-rosy regarding the social function of academic library. This is because to the actual users and potential users of any library, we, the librarians have failed, collectively, to inform the various functions that a library can perform. Nor have we been able to successfully link library resources and services as a mode for improving the literacy rates in different states. A few voracious users know about the variety of library services, and they avail, but our libraries do not have any system to capitalize on this by recognizing their efforts in promoting the use of the library through initiatives such as 'Friends of the Library', 'Library Ambassadors' or something similar. Such initiatives require the following competencies from the librarian/chief librarian: (a) assertiveness, (b) confidence, and (c) good communication skills, besides the ability to innovate and think out-of-the box. In fact, a few libraries and librarians in the country are already doing it, but the message has to be spread across, beyond the seminars and conferences on library and information science to the society.

Another reason for the present state of affairs is that the impact of library resources and services

generally measured quantitatively, rather than qualitatively. Yes, quantities and statistics do matter, but what matters more is the social context for these. So, it is all the more important for a librarian to present report(s) about his/her library to authorities with both quantitative figures as well as the qualitative context. Besides these, there is an overarching environment which is to a large extent responsible for the current state of affairs. It deals with the most important resource available in a library: the human resource. It is in this area that educational institutions and their governing bodies are responsible. If we look at the administration of university and college libraries in the last three decades years, it is very common to come across a university or a college where there is no librarian/ chief librarian for many years. In many others, persons without library and information science backgrounds are given charge of the library, and this is true for both public sector institutions and private sector institutions. Why can't we have a system similar to the one in pharmacy colleges where a person with pharmacy related qualifications as a principal is must for that college to get approval from the Pharmacy Council of India (PCI)? We should press for a similar condition that if a college or a university with its college librarian/university librarian position (with a person having library and information science qualifications) remains vacant for, let's say, more than a year, this should adversely affect grants and approval, as well as the next NAAC score. I hope that the UGC and the INFLIBNET would consider this suggestion seriously to improve the quality of library and information services in higher education sector in India. If we want our universities

and colleges to be at par with the world class universities and colleges, improving the quality of library and information services is one of the basic areas for reform.

3. A few specific strategies for making academic libraries as local a social hub

Besides, initiatives like 'friends of the library' discussed in previous section, a few outreach strategies are mentioned in this section. These include providing library facilities to college/ university alumni, eminent persons of the region, and other interested readers. Many youngsters prepare for competitive examinations, and need library facilities. Some of them also take admission in any short-duration course for the purpose of availing library facilities as students of a college/ university. Many college and university libraries have good collections for the use of such youngsters who need to prepare for competitive examinations. Libraries can offer them library use facilities for let's say, one year, and which can be renewed for a certain period. Mechanisms and other details for providing the facilities and rules governing such facilities can be developed by consultation with stakeholders. Another strategy is to invite eminent persons of the region who are settled outside the region to deliver a talk on a current issue whenever such persons visit their city town. Every city/town has local and regional level non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and voluntary organizations and groups that work for specific causes. The academic library can provide such bodies a platform for them to reach out to its own users as well as persons and institutions/

organizations at the local/regional level. In fact, the academic library can develop a database of such organizations and groups and can share that with those seeking such information. An academic library's expertise also lies in the information literacy skills of its staff, and this can be harnessed by providing information literacy skills to people in its local area. Many university libraries and a few college libraries in the country have developed medium to small-sized computer laboratories within their library buildings. These can be used for providing short-term information literacy training programmes (basic and advanced level) to other interested persons in the local area, besides offering such courses to institute's students and researchers. Schopfel et al (2015) has identified new areas on how academic libraries can become learning centres for innovation, but the context of their paper is academic libraries of the developed world. Strategies applicable in one area, or successful in a city/town may not necessarily succeed in another area.

4. Concluding observations

The role of the academic library and academic institutions also is to develop a database of success stories of social interaction at national and global levels. In India, INFLIBNET can take a lead in developing such a database at the national level. It is high time that rejuvenating the academic library as a local social hub is taken up as a priority in the initiatives, programmes and policies for academic libraries in the country. There is immense potential for this in the case of Indian academic libraries, and if such initiatives are started, they would also give a fillip to the reading habit and reading culture,

particularly among the youth. The society would enrich the academic institutions and their libraries in multiple ways, if the libraries reach out to the society in a meaningful manner. The academic institution and its library have to engage with the society in a symbiotic way to become a local social hub.

References and Further Reading

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About Author

Dr. Harinder Pal Singh Kalra, Vice Chair, International Steering Committee, UNESCO-facilitated Global Alliance for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL); and Professor and Head, Department of Library and Info. Sc., Punjabi University, Patiala (Punjab).

Email: hpskalra8@gmail.com

Note:

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