

CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 81 Number 12

25 December 2001

EDITORIAL

Libraries

'The faint aroma of gum and calico that hangs about a library is as the fragrance of incense to me. I think the most beautiful sight is the gilt-edged backs of a row of books on a shelf. The alley between two well-stocked shelves in a hall fills me with the same delight as passing through a silent avenue of trees. The colour of a binding-cloth and its smooth texture gives me the same pleasure as touching a flower on its stalk. A good library hall has an atmosphere which elates. I have seen one or two University Libraries that have the same atmosphere as a chapel, with large windows, great trees outside, and glass door sliding on noiseless hinges.'

—R. K. Narayan
(*The Hindu*, 23 September 1951)

Libraries are central to academic life; they are the heart of a University. Public libraries, friendly and accessible, were, not too long ago, powerful instruments for educating, informing and entertaining a wide clientele. In a recent issue of a chemistry journal, I came upon an evocative description of a library by Roald Hoffmann, Nobelist, chemist, poet and playwright: 'To a secular refugee of World War II who did not own a book until age 13, a library was about as close to a holy place as I could imagine. ...They were filled with organized knowledge, with wisdom, with the salacious (to a boy), hidden under the librarian's desk. These true libraries were the work of men and women shaping laughter and tears, defeating entropy' (*Angew. Chem. Int. Ed. Engl.*, 2001, **40**, 3337). To both Narayan and Hoffmann, libraries provided a window to the remarkably rich human experience. Half a century has passed since R. K. Narayan pondered on libraries in his characteristically simple style. In this period, the state of many wonderful libraries in India has deteriorated; the decay hastened in recent years by the seductive promise of the new digital technologies.

For the proponents of digital libraries exciting times lie ahead. In describing a vision for the future, Ian Witten says: 'Digital libraries whose history spans a mere dozen years will surely figure amongst the most important and influential institutions of this new cen-

ture. The information revolution not only supplies the technological horsepower that drives digital libraries, but fuels an unprecedented demand for storing, organizing and accessing information. If information is the currency of the knowledge economy, digital libraries will be the banks where it is invested' (Conference Papers, The 4th International Conference of Asian Digital Libraries, eds S. R. Urs, T. B. Rajashekar and K. S. Raghavan, 2001, Bangalore). Clearly, the rhetoric is a far cry from Narayan's simple-minded view of libraries; information and knowledge are now viewed as key elements of a ruthlessly competitive global economy. But in concluding his essay, Witten reminds us of S. R. Ranganathan's five laws of library science, paraphrased succinctly: (1) Books are for use. (2) Every reader his book. (3) Every book its reader. (4) Save the time of the reader. (5) The library is a growing organism. These laws might, of course, apply to the digital libraries of the future.

For the time being, however, our academic institutions continue to revolve around traditional libraries; most often, imposing buildings on our campuses, whose impressive exteriors hide a developing crisis caused by diminishing resources, rising costs of books and journals, difficulties of procurement and, most importantly, the declining number of dedicated professional librarians. Indeed, in our academic institutions, the key role of professional and committed librarians has rarely been acknowledged. There have been few attempts to define criteria to assess a librarian's effectiveness. Libraries have been built around the importance of acting as a 'storehouse of information', with little emphasis on the 'delivery of information'. There is little interaction between librarians and users; the scholarly librarian with a love for books and a vision for the future has become an endangered species. For this extinction, the academic community bears a major responsibility; years of downgrading the importance of libraries and their custodians in the institutional hierarchy, have resulted in lifeless entities which merely act as a storehouse for holdings of books and journals. The dramatic increase, over the last two decades, in the volume of scientific publications, requires that libraries must carefully pick and choose

journals for their collections; carefully balancing the academic requirements of their institutions with the budgetary constraints under which most organizations operate. Even in the most fortunate of institutions, library budgets can hardly keep pace with rising costs of acquisitions. But, how is the effectiveness of a library judged? Blagdon has an interesting view of library audit: 'It is important to establish how much good does a library do, rather than how good a library is' (Library and Administration Management Association, 1980, p. 25). Many of our libraries have become extremely restrictive and unfriendly to users, increasingly becoming mausoleums for books and journals. Surprisingly, in my hunt for material for this essay, I found that a long time ago, R. K. Narayan had said it all, in his inimitable manner—'Library Science seems all concerned with furniture, locks, keys, registers, vouchers and statistics, everything except reading. The most noticeable deficiency in any library today seems to be a lack of propaganda for books themselves. It would be useful to inscribe on every library-wall the motto: "Books are meant to be read and not merely to be classified and preserved"'. In describing his experience at a new public library, Narayan laments on the budgetary plan: 'Building Rs 2,00,000; lighting Rs 15,000; plumbing, etc. Rs 12,000; garden lay-out and supervisors' charges Rs 5000, counters, shelves and furniture Rs 30,000; opening ceremony, printing of invitations, welcome address, president's speech and secretary's report Rs 2000; pandal and tea Rs 4000 and books, no budget yet' (Narayan, R. K., *The Hindu*, 5 April 1953). The budgets may have gone up substantially since Narayan wrote his piece, but priorities are still skewed in most public libraries.

With the digital age having come upon us, conventional libraries are likely to be hard pressed to even maintain their present state. A new breed of information managers have sprung up, who speak of technological fixes to all problems of access to information. Lazy browsing amongst tightly packed shelves of books and journals, an intensely pleasurable activity for members of a disappearing generation, is giving way to browsing on the internet, a remarkable, formless, unorganized digital library made navigable by the spectacular prowess of the technology of the 'search engine'. For many students, introduced early to the wonders of the world

wide web, limited reading and minimal attention spans become habits which may be difficult to shake off in the future. In our increasingly networked world, a new digital divide is becoming evident; a schism based on age. For the young, the internet appears the most efficient and desirable source of information, the printed book and journal rapidly becoming secondary in importance. For the older academics, this writer amongst them, the digital world poses many psychological hurdles. In preparing to speak, as a conventional and conservative editor, at a recent conference on Digital Libraries, I was reminded of Wordsworth's famous lines celebrating the French Revolution:

*'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive
But to be young was very heaven.'*

(The Prelude XI)

But, on the night before my talk, the second line eluded me; lost in those suddenly inaccessible recesses of the mind. The internet and Google came quickly to my rescue. Searching that ocean of stored information, using Wordsworth's first, and only remembered line, as my search string I discovered 17,500 hits in a blindingly fast response time of 0.73 seconds. Fortunately, the very first site listed, yielded after a little perusal, Wordsworth's immortal second line. But, I was not so lucky when I searched for 'digital libraries'; finding as many as 1,020,000 hits in 0.27 seconds, quite literally the blink of an eyelid. This is, of course, both the strength and weakness of the digital age. Information is literally available at your fingertips in an instant, but most often there is a surfeit of it, making it very difficult to sift the relevant from the irrelevant, the good from the bad, the reliable from the unreliable. The explosion of digitally stored information can only be harnessed usefully if new and thoughtful ways of organizing digital libraries are evolved, a process which will require a new generation of scholarly information managers, who have the ability to clearly distinguish between information, knowledge and wisdom. In the immediate future an important task may be to protect conventional libraries from being swept away in the deluge of hype and misinformation that heralds the digital age.

P. Balaram