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Whom Do We Serve? : Doctoral Research in Library and Information Science in India

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Abstract

Discovery and dissemination of new knowledge has always been a source of excitement and incalculable social benefit to the society. Tremendous progress made by the mankind in the 20th century is only due to research and new information. Information society subsists on information which is only generated by research. This article briefly describes the beginning, growth of doctoral research and proliferation of education in Library and Information Science (LIS) in India. Author's views on the status and quality of research in LIS in India have also been given.

1. RESEARCH AND SOCIETY

Research is a systematic inquiry to discover new facts/data or relations between them by objective methods. It is a problem solving approach. It is always undertaken to answer a question. Novelty is at the heart of this science; objectivity is the rule of this art. A scientific investigation can be repeated with same results under same conditions. It is a tool and a process available to everyone. It is universal and democratic. There is nothing individual, subjective, mystifying or recondite about it; research methodology can be learnt.

The aim is to solve some immediate practical problem or to unravel the mysteries of nature; or to learn the behaviour or properties of living or non-living entities in this universe. There may or may not be immediate practical purpose in mind. In other words, the research may be basic or applied though the demarcation between the two is not as easy; basic research ultimately proves to be most useful and practical.

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It is the only sure way to constantly add to the fund of reliable knowledge–knowledge which is power. Man is an inborn curious being and a power-seeker. Thus research has always been going on in every kind of human society–even in primitive society. Innate curiosity to know the unknown; or necessity to seek solutions to some problems endangering his survival, or the desire to make life little less difficult has led mankind to probe and experiment constantly. Man's evolution is simply not a biological process. It is also due to his urge and efforts to do research to know the unknown.

Discovery and dissemination of new knowledge has always been a source of excitement and incalculable social benefit to the society. Advances is knowledge are invariably accompanied by social change and progress. In the pre-industrial society research was mostly a private affair. But the researchers and scholars were patronised by the kings and elite. After the industrial revolution the pace of research had to be quickened to meet the growing demands of the society. Mounting population pressure, growing consumerism, fast depletion of limited natural resources; perceived need to have

political or military edge by one nation over the others, urge to save time and space, need to find cures for diseases to prolong health and longevity have given rise to planned, organised and coordinated research at national and international levels. Our security, health, education and economy depend mostly on scientific research. Today, research is mostly corporate, team work, and fully supported by organisations. The result is economic prosperity. It is too obvious to say that economic prosperity and military powers of big nations is only due to research[1].

Tremendous progress made by the mankind in the 20th century is only due to research and new information. SR Ranganathan firmly believed that research is necessary for well-being of humanity and peaceful co-extensive of nations[2]. Investment in research yields rich dividends. Planned and highly organised research has become the order of the day. Every government dedicated to democracy and social welfare not only encourages free research but also funds it adequately without any undue interference regarding the results. Government is the biggest financier for research. In the information society, the research of perforce, has acquired new pace and dimension. Information society subsists on information which is only generated by research. Researchers are the gods and information professionals the priests of an information society.

2. RESEARCH AND A PROFESSION

There is always a prestige in research. Every profession puts its best brains to do research. Researchers are always on the forefront of a profession and impart it new directions and dimensions[3]. By definition, a profession is based on knowledge and research to constantly renew its knowledge base. A profession cannot survive without constant and organised research. Eminent philosopher of library science Jesse H Shera (1903–1982) said that "research is the key to the future of the profession and is an important means by which institutional programme is enriched"[4]. To an individual professional research helps in many ways: It keeps the intellect burnished and growing, professional problems are shared with other colleagues and commonly applicable solutions are found, professional services are improved and multiplied[5]. The accrediting body of the American Library Association recognising the importance of research believes that "Research and publications enrich teaching and learning while contributing to the body of scholarship and professional knowledge"[6].

3. DOCTORAL RESEARCH

Once upon a time the title 'Doctor' was bestowed on a person for life time learning and scholarship in Europe[7]. To promote research and train manpower, the research had to be formalised and institutionalised. Programmes for earning PhD were designed though the standards remained rigorous. Till recently European, especially British Universities had been quite niggardly in awarding PhD degrees; and PhD has been a *rara avis in Britain*. American Universities had been bit generous in this arena. Standards got relaxed with proliferation and democratisation of education. Now a PhD degree at best signifies training in acquiring attitude for and learning the tools of research. Strictly speaking, the central stipulation of contributions to knowledge has been taken a back seat. A PhD degree holder is no more necessarily a scholar. Vulgarisation has immensely deteriorated the standards both in terms of contents and methods.

4. BEGINNING OF RESEARCH IN LIBRARY & INFORMATION SCIENCE

Research in library science is a 20th century awakening ushered in by the library schools of the University of Chicago in mid 1920's. Visionary efforts of the Chicago school bore abundant fruit and gave a leadership to the world in library science research[8]. Roots of research in our profession are not deep. Pace of library research is picking up everywhere. Thanks to social pressure and induced inspiration. Justifying the PhD programme in our profession John Wilkinson recently urged that "If librarianship aspires to become a profession, it should depend upon research to develop its knowledge base and its theoretical framework"[9].

5. INDIAN CONTEXT

In India, following the British tradition and the American precedent set up by Asa Don Dickinson (1876-1960), Librarian, Punjab University, Lahore, 1915-1916, the library schools for professional education have remained attached to the universities. Growth of universities in independent India ensured their constant growth. In a University, apart from teaching, a teacher is expected to do and guide research. The third function of a university, namely service and consultancy has always remained weak in India despite many university-industry linkage programmes[10].

6. RANGANATHAN'S WORK

The credit for formal institution of PhD in library science in India goes undeniably to Dr SR Ranganathan (1892-1972). In 1951, he got it instituted in the University of Delhi surmounting many difficulties and facing personal ridicules. The first *de jure* degree in library science was awarded to DB Krishna Rao (d 1985) by the University of Delhi in 1957. Doctoral research remained in wilderness when Ranganathan shook the Delhi soil off his feet in 1955. The Documentation Research and Training Centre (DRTC) which Ranganathan founded in 1962 is technically not empowered to award PhD degrees. Therefore for rest of his life from 1962 to 1972 Ranganathan only advocated individual and team research with stress on quality, relevance and basics. No big research projects were taken up at DRTC though individual teachers and students maintained quality and tempo of research. After the death of Ranganathan almost the entire DRTC faculty has earned PhDs from other Indian Universities on topics of research going on in DRTC. Now the DRTC teachers are approved PhD guides in many Indian Universities; and they have already produced many PhDs.

7. GROWTH OF DOCTORAL RESEARCH IN INDIA

Elsewhere in India other individual librarians and library science teachers eager to earn doctorates were hampered by the non-existence of such facilities. In earlier years of 1960's and 1970's some doctorates on library topics by library professionals were earned from some other faculties such as sociology, history, law, economics, management and the like. The mantle of reviving and further doctoral research facilities fell on JS Sharma (1924-93), then the University Librarian and Head of the Department of Library Science of the Punjab University, Chandigarh. Under his guidance the second *de jure* PhD in library was awarded in 1977—after a gap of full two decades. Thereafter there was no looking back. Many universities followed suit with mostly the individual efforts and enthusiasm. Doctoral research got a fillip in 1980's. India maintained its Third World leadership in library research as in library education and literature. PhD facilities have rather mushroomed.

8. PROLIFERATION OF LIBRARY EDUCATION

At present about 107 institutions mostly university and colleges have library science education course; of these MLISc course is being offered by 67 Universities; 11 Universities offer MPhil, though this degree has no value in the job market. Today 32 Universities have PhD research facilities[12]. One university recently awarded an DLitt, claimed to be the first such degree in library science all over the world. It may not be an odious comparison that up to 1986 only 38 universities had master programmes, and 18 universities provided doctoral research facilities, though not all these 18 universities had master programmes then [13].

9. FACILITIES FOR RESEARCH

A conscientious university teacher is always in a dilemma over the time to be divided between teaching and research. Teaching is a compulsive and urgent duty to be performed. Students expect their teachers to give them time. There may be appreciation in good teaching but the rewards lie in research. University expects its teachers to do research—its prestige and fame lie therein. But when it comes to support of research many universities are neither generous nor unambivalent. Ordinarily piecemeal research especially for research trickles through tedious

and off-puffing bureaucracy. Colleagues are non-supportive and unappreciative. Library facilities are poor. Thus most of the teachers are driven to the passivity of guiding doctoral research.

10. DETERIORATION OF STANDARDS

UGC conditions for faculty employment and promotions have prompted many library professionals to acquire PhD degrees, though many may not have the aptitude and the intrinsic merit for research. Standards have not been diluted but the intrinsic merit for research. Supervisors and the examiners have become obligingly compromising. The cut off date of December 1992 (then advanced to December 1993) for obtaining PhD degree for getting exemption from the national level test for teaching jobs in universities/colleges has done incalculable damage to research standards. Facilities for PhD research have been introduced and expanded mindlessly. As a result, there has been a bit of doctoral boom; spectacular rise in PhD awarding universities and awardees, though many institutions seriously lack resources of men or material or both. PSG Kumar's bibliography listed 41 PhD theses from 1957 to 1985[14]. In a recently published bibliography of doctoral dissertations in India from 1950 to March 1997 about 340 titles have been listed[15]. This record of 340 dissertations though not wholly authentic is reliable by and large. Its demographic study unveils interesting picture (Table 1):

Table 1. Number of Library Science doctoral dissertations in India.

Period	No. of PhD Thesis
1950–59	2
1960–69	3
1970–79	8
1980–89	96
1990	16
1991	26
1992	47
1993	28
1994	41
1995	32
1996	33
1997 (upto March)	06

In productivity, the Punjab University, Chandigarh played the lead upto mid-1980's. Thereafter it was left behind by the universities of South in the number game. The universities which have so far awarded upto nine degrees are ranked in Table 2.

Table 2. Ranking of Indian Universities awarding upto nine PhD degrees.

University	Degrees
Karnataka University, Dharwad	42
Jiwaji university, Gwalior	25
University of Rajasthan, Jaipur	25
Andhra University, Vishakapatnam	23
University of Delhi	16
University of Pune	16
Gulbarga University	15
University of Burdwan	10
Utkal University, Bhubaneswar	10
Banaras Hindu University	9

11. RELEVANCE OF RESEARCH

In a developing country like India, there could not be a dearth of research problems to be investigated. But there seems a lack of perception to visualise and identify valid problems for research. A cursory glance on the topics worked on will at once reveal that topics chosen do not pose for a problem, but merely survey the state-of-the-art. The popular areas for research in order have been : university libraries, bibliometrics, library use and user studies, information systems, classification and indexing, special libraries, library history, reference service and sources and library science education. Document selection and procurement, cataloguing, experimental designs in library management are the least popular topics though these seem practical and relevant to the present needs. That basic research is the

most neglected area is endorsed by another such survey of doctoral research[17]. Library automation, networking and information technology are just picking up.

The Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) on Library and Information Science (1992) of the University Grants Commission rehashed the importance of research though did not dwell at length on this aspect in its report. The blue document listed some areas for research which are no less broader than the current papers being taught at the master level:

- Structure and development of knowledge
- Classification, cataloguing and indexing
- Information studies
- Computer applications
- Historical studies
- Social and economic aspects of librarianship
- Library and information management and system analysis
- Applications of techniques of library and information science to evaluate other disciplines[18].

List could have been more specific. Though not much revered report, it rightly lays emphasis on standards in research. It uncompromisingly asks for a clear declaration from PhD candidates that the 'work is based on the discovery of new facts by the candidate or the new relations of facts... and how the work tends to the general advancement of knowledge' [19]. It is normally expected of every completed piece of research. But it hardly happens. Evaluation process, however formal, is easily manipulated without qualms. Examiners are obliging on reciprocal basis. In a small profession like ours this interplay of mutual usability comes in easily. It is often said jokingly (but understand seriously) that degree is recommended to the superior than to the candidate. It is not to overlook the genuine research and researchers.

Apart from not so relevant topics, the thesis have contributed little towards pushing the frontiers of knowledge, few are a model of methodology. Indian library research seems to have no groundings in prevailing ground realities. Topics are ideal, superficial and bookish. Even the experienced librarians keen on earning PhD degree hardly come with a problem for research. The topic is mostly suggested by the supervisor who shy away from controversial topics for research. Criticising individuals in formal black and white mode or exposing harmful tendencies of a class are not for them. Even a mild and healthy criticism is not tolerated in India. In addition, there is a dire paucity of data and reference works. Collecting data and information is considered a satisfactory end of the job—the goal of the exercise. Library associations at all levels seems to have washed their hands off the research responsibilities. These even do not collect and compile statistics of the professional activities of their jurisdiction. And above all, we must admit that the library profession has failed to lure best brains more so to retain them.

12. CONTRIBUTIONS MADE BY RESEARCH

Contrary to expectations dissertations are not fountainhead of the rest of the literature to grow and mature. These primarily sources are distanced from relevance. The National Social Science Documentation Centre (NASSDOC, New Delhi) systematically procures a copy each of research dissertations in social sciences to preserve and make available to the researchers for consultation within the premises of its library. Retrospective bibliographies of LIS dissertations in India are available[20]. Latest information on theses awarded PhD degrees and PhD research in progress is available in the featured column of the weekly *University News* (1962 +) of the Association of Indian Universities, New Delhi.

In spite of their availability, these dissertations are not adequately used by other researchers; nor are these cited or quoted by teachers or the textbook writers. Research results are hardly used by the working librarians in solving their professional problems. Conversely there is no precedent of a library inviting a library school to do research in problem confronting them. (Conversely there seems inborn animosity and mistrust between them). Librarians go in for local ad hoc and

provide solutions for their practical problems. Researchers consult a teacher or a fellow researcher for a topic of research rather than a practitioner[21]. Thus research has become divorced from reality—a theoretical exercise at best. This seems a universal phenomena in profession as a confirmed by an American teacher Margaret Steig:

"Research done by library and information science educators seems to receive little respect from professionals and if they do not find it of value one has to wonder who will".[22]

She further quotes the famous Conant report to prove her point:

"Library educators seldom produce well-researched literary products...". This is where library schools mostly fail the profession[23].

It is a time to pause and think why; if we fail the practitioners and the scholars alike whom do we serve then?

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