



## **Access to Social Science Information**

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Information is a vital national resource, just as essential to a nation's well being, socio-economic development and security as any other natural resource, such as water and minerals. Beyond the boundaries of a country, it provides an important basis for international relations, peace, prosperity and overall global development. The wealth of popular, intellectual, scholarly and research resources in libraries and information systems in a country is therefore one of its great strengths. But like several other natural resources, information or knowledge resource, if remain unsupported and uncoordinated in growth and usage, would certainly be in a danger of being wasted and inefficiently utilised.

Historically speaking, a substantial part of the human culture has been handed down to generations in the form of recorded knowledge. This resource consists of documents such as clay tablets, books, journals; other categories of text, audio-visual material; and other units of information or data that can be processed and organised by a computer. In recent years, these records have become increasingly varied through technological extensions of written words, pictures and sounds. For example, a significant part of information about a country's resources is today available on films, magnetic tapes, video cassettes, CD-ROMs and in computer files. As the nation's knowledge grows and the number of these records increases our dependence upon them also increases, proportionately and the need to gain access to them becomes more essential and even crucial. It has been rightly said that no society can advance beyond a certain point without effective access to its collective memory of records, or conversely, an advanced society that loses control of the records will regress.

Libraries, information systems and the other information facilities are thus custodians of this cultural heritage, which is recorded. They must be adequately

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equipped, organised, financed and interconnected if their resources are to be made available to all the people of a country. In every country, this can be possible only with the active support from the government and related public and private agencies and institutions.

It hardly needs to be emphasised here that ready access to this information and knowledge is indispensable to an individual's advancement as well as national growth. The right information provided when it is needed, where it is needed and in the form in which it is needed, improves the ability of an individual, a business, a government agency, or an organisation to take informed decisions and achieve targeted goals. Undoubtedly, library and information needs are felt at all levels of society, regardless of an individual's location, social condition or level of intellectual achievement.

### **Role of Information Technology (IT)**

The nation's future capability to handle information effectively and efficiently, to a great extent, depends upon how well and how rapidly we are able to integrate new information technology methods and devices into the mainstream of our library and information systems and services. In today's world, among the several developments in IT, computers, reprographics, micrographics and various other developments in storage media telecommunications which have made it possible to have connectivity and networking, and audio-visual media are directly affecting library and information services. Use of computers and other tools of IT has now greatly changed the face of libraries, information systems and services everywhere in the world. They are being actively used not only for house keeping functions but also for recording, analysing, retrieving and dissemination of information, as also for their networking. Use of reprographics, micrographics, magnetic, optical and other media of storage of information have been increasing at a fast speed. Documents on optical media—CD-ROMs, Video discs, etc.—have changed the whole complexion of publishing world, libraries and information services. These developments undoubtedly offer considerable potential for cost and space savings and represent a new era in information transfer. Libraries and information systems, these days, are quite active in acquiring audio-visual materials such as films, audio-video cassettes, interactive multimedia CDs and video discs, which are being found to be really useful in their services. Developments in telecommunications have now brought the whole world within the format of a 'Global Village' and these provide immense potentials for services to be provided by libraries and information systems within a country and the world at large. Frankly speaking, these developments now tremendously facilitate the establishment of National Information Infrastructure (NII) and even Global Information Infrastructure (GII) and thus assist in achieving the objective of a networked global information society in the real sense of the term.

### **Libraries, Information Systems and Services in India (LISS) : An Overview**

The history of librarianship in India (as in several other countries in the East) has been of 'having libraries' with little emphasis on library services in the modern sense.

The recognition of the vital role LISS could play in the educational, scientific, industrial and over-all socio-economic development of India began to receive acceptance only after Independence in 1947, when the government embarked upon several programmes of national development and reconstruction. The need for developing these systems and services became all the more essential because of certain factors such as: (i) vast proliferations in the universe of information and knowledge, and the resultant document/information explosion in the world; and, (ii) the varied and complex needs of users for information in R&D activities, educational and research programmes and various other fields of human activities. As a result, a fairly large infrastructure of LISS has been developed in the country during the past five decades or so. Though much remains to be done in this field yet the achievements already made can largely be considered as commendable providing an optimistic basis for the future. Besides the developments in different types of libraries, documentation/information centres, bibliographical services, etc.; library and information networks at local level such as DELNET and CALIBNET, and at the national level such as ENVIS, NISSAT and INFLIBNET and others are being developed. Access through information networks such as NICNET, ERNET, SIRNET, INDONET and several others is being utilised in the LISS in the country for services such as CAS and SDI. INTERNET facilities are being used in many libraries and information systems for benefit of the users.

### **Social Sciences in India**

Since, this special issue is devoted to Access to Information in Social Sciences, it would be relevant to say a few words about the overall status of Social Sciences in this country. As a discipline of study, social sciences has made steady progress in this country during the past 50 years or so. Because of their vital role in economic development and social change, the Social Science Institutions have received fairly good recognition, support and encouragement from the government and other public as well as private organisations. They have now expanded as centres of teaching and research, manpower development and as professional organisations. An idea about their present status in the country can be obtained by looking at different indicators such as the number of post-graduate teaching and research departments, of doctoral students, of research institutions, publication activity, social science manpower, etc.

Although statistics about these indicators are somewhat sketchy yet on the basis of the available information it can be estimated that the number of post-graduate departments in social sciences in universities alone exceeds 3,000 with an annual enrolment of doctoral students being around 10,000. Percentagewise, total enrolment of students for post-graduate studies in social sciences is estimated to be about 60 per cent of the total enrolment in colleges and universities and the number of doctoral students is around 40 per cent. In addition to the colleges and universities, there are about 600 institutes engaged in research, training and counselling work in social sciences.

As regards the manpower in university departments and research institutes alone, the number of teachers and researchers exceeds 30,000. In addition, the total number of colleges having teaching departments in social sciences is around 8,000. It is estimated that more than 800 journals are being published in the country at present in different social science subjects. Also, the number of books, survey reports, statistics, reports, seminar/conference proceedings, government documents, etc.—all of research value—published annually is quite large.

From the late 1960s through the mid 1980s, twenty-seven ICSSR institutes were established throughout the country. They were set up because (a) many eminent social scientists felt the need to break away from the traditional university system which usually limited their freedom to do what they deemed important and necessary in the fast growing disciplines, (b) both the central and state governments wanted to have independent 'think tanks' to help them in their planning efforts, and (c) some institution builders recognised the need to evolve a sound local base for social science research in each state. These institutes therefore have remained quite small (compared to the university system) and are highly focussed in areas of immediate interest to their faculty members and quite a good number of these faculty members often work on projects that closely resemble feasibility and evaluation studies. Many faculty members have developed peer group networks (through informal means or joint projects) which permit them access to literature of their interest. Several economics institutes are depositories of publications of organisations such as World Bank, IMF or UN agencies.

Consequently a good number of these faculty members have developed 'relatively happy' situation for themselves and they do not necessarily see themselves handicapped by the limitation of their small libraries and lack of access to journals beyond their specialised interests. M Phil and Ph D students do feel the need for more broad-based information and they often have the difficulty in having access to the appropriate literature. Also, younger faculty members and other scholars who do not fall into the categories identified above do feel handicapped in this regard.

### **Social Science Libraries in India**

The development in teaching and research in social sciences certainly emphasises the need for well stocked libraries and information centres with proper library and information services and manned by well qualified staff. The total number of libraries in social sciences either as part of the universities, government departments, autonomous or semi-autonomous organisations or institutions can be estimated to be around 850. The document collected in an average social science research library (excluding the university libraries) ranges between 15,000-25,000 volumes, with the number of the current journals being received may be 150-250. Most of them are managed by well qualified professional staff. Most of them, however, including the university libraries suffer from lack of the required financial support with the result that they in general are not in a position to update their document collection. Most of these libraries are organised on traditional lines and continue to provide the

conventional services to their clientele. However, some of them have recently started using computers and CD-ROMs for their services. With the development telecommunications and information networks in the country, a few of these libraries have started getting access to different databases at the national and international level.

### **About the Present Issue**

This being the first special issue of the *DBIT* dealing with Social Science Information, it was decided that this issue should include three areas, viz. Development Studies, Law, and, Socio-Economic Data. Each of these papers has been contributed by an expert in the respective field. K G Tyagi in his paper *Information Support for Development Studies* has dealt with various issues connected with the provision of information for decision making and problem solving related to socio-economic development in the country. After describing the concept of development studies he discusses the role of certain information networks such as DEVSIS, DEVINSA and DEVLIN. He also highlights the need for exchange of information between the 'information-rich' and 'information-poor' for making the required information in the field available to all. In *Access to Legal Information in India*, Satish Chandra describes some of the legal information systems in the West and Australia. He has given details about the existing legal information facilities in India and discusses in detail the COURTLIN system developed at the Supreme Court of India, in collaboration with the National Informatics Centre (NIC). PR Goswami in his paper *Access to Socio-Economic Data with Particular Reference to India*, examines the need of the statistical data in planning and decision making and describes the existing position in this regard in the country. The usefulness of statistical data of UN agencies and others on CD-ROMs and INTERNET have been analysed.

I take this opportunity to convey my thanks to each of the three contributors for the efforts they made to write their respective paper. I am also grateful to the authorities of the *DBIT* for asking me to be a Guest Editor for this Special Issue. I do hope that the readers would find this special issue quite informative and useful.