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What Ails Doctoral Research in Library and Information Science in India?

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses research in library and information science in India. It delves into the history of library and information science research crediting the institutionalisation of research to Ranganathan. While presenting the growth of the research, the article discusses the factors responsible for poor standards. It also provides an international comparison by citing examples at places.

Keywords: Research, research in LIS, India

1. IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

Research of all sorts and at any level or in any sector of society is an objective and methodical problem solving approach. Research is an investigation to provide answers to some unanswered questions. It fills gaps in our knowledge and is an authentic and reliable process of knowledge discovery. Research increases our knowledge base. It helps to replace myths and superstitions with facts and figures. It provides evidence and documentation for what is obvious or common knowledge. Research throws more light on more facts, and discovers hidden relations between entities. By discovering new facts or by modifying the earlier ones, it helps in formulation of new theories. Research provides fodder for the textbooks and renews their contents. It constantly adds to the fund of theoretical and practical knowledge. Both, basic and applied researches are important. In fact, at the end of the day there seems no difference between the two: applied becomes basic and basic becomes applied. Paradoxically a theory is the most applied knowledge. It increases the breadth and depth of a discipline. Above all it brings prestige to the individual researcher and the profession at large. To individuals it provides access to many privileges and power. Every discipline feeds on constant research, which is its lifeline. New information and knowledge obtained by research helps in problem solving, which in turn leads to many innovations for better quality products and services. Apart from inventions, research leads to many innovations in governance, politics, communication, education, administration, defence, healthcare, business and commerce, production, and lifestyle. It leads to new thinking, and ultimately to changed social values and hopefully better standard of living.

2. THE BEGINNING OF RESEARCH IN LIS

The roots of research in library science are not very deep. Research in library science started only in the 20th century ushered in by the Library School of the University of Chicago in mid 1920s. The visionary efforts of the pioneers of Chicago School bore abundant fruit, and provided leadership to the world in library science research[1]. Today the pace of library research is picking up everywhere due to social pressure as well as inspiration. In justifying the PhD programmes in library science, it has been urged that "if librarianship aspires to become a profession, it should depend upon research to develop its knowledge base and its theoretical framework"[2].

2.1 The Indian Context

In India, following the British tradition and American precedent as established by Asa Don Dickinson, Librarian, Punjab University, Lahore (1915–1916), library schools for advanced professional education have remained attached to universities. The constant growth

of universities in independent India ensured their regular growth, too. In a university, apart from teaching, a teacher is expected to do and guide research. The third function of a university, namely service and consultation, has always remained weak in India despite many newly established university-industry linkage programmes[3]. Most of the research in Indian universities has remained confined to dissertation writing not targeted at any pending problem solving.

2.2 Ranganathan's Work

The credit for the formal institution of the doctoral degree programme in library science in India goes undeniably to Prof. S.R. Ranganathan (1892–1972). In 1951, he started one such programme at the University of Delhi surmounting many difficulties and facing personal ridicule. The University of Delhi awarded the first *de jure* degree in library science in 1957 to D.B. Krishan Rao who worked on a faceted classification for agriculture. Doctoral research remained in the wilderness when Ranganathan shook the Delhi soil off his feet in 1955. The Documentation Research and Training Centre (DRTC) in Bangalore, founded by Ranganathan in 1962, is technically not empowered to award the PhD Therefore, for the rest of his life, from 1962 to 1972, Ranganathan only advocated solo 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 both the quality and the tempo of research. Since the death of Ranganathan almost the entire DRTC faculty has earned PhDs from other Indian universities on topics of research relevant to DRTC[4].

2.3 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 programmes more so due to non-availability of approved and competent guides. In the 1960s and 1970s some doctorates on library-related topics were earned by library professionals from some other faculties such as sociology, history, law, economics, management, and the like. The mantle of reviving and furthering doctoral research facilities was assumed by Dr J.S. Sharma (1924–1993), the then university librarian and head of the library science department of the Panjab University, Chandigarh, who had earned his own PhD from USA. Under his guidance the second *de jure* PhD in library science was awarded to S.K. Sharma in 1977 after a gap of two decades. Thereafter, there was no looking back. Many universities followed suit with some individual's efforts and enthusiasm. Doctoral research got a fillip in the 1980s. India maintained its Third World leadership in library research as well as in library education and literature. PhD programmes since then have rather mushroomed even despite the lack of facilities or adherence to standards.

2.4 Facilities for Research

A conscientious university teacher is always in a dilemma over how to divide the time between teaching and research. Teaching is a primary compulsive and urgent duty to be performed. Students expect their teachers to give them time and personal attention. There may be appreciation in good teaching but the rewards lie in research. The university expects its teachers to do research as its prestige and fame lie therein. Research output is also important for a university to get better grading from the national accreditation and funding agencies. But when it comes to supporting of research many universities in India are neither generous nor unambivalent. Ordinarily piecemeal research, especially in social sciences, is not supported financially. Internal support for research trickles through a tedious and off-putting bureaucracy and political manoeuvering. Colleagues are unsupportive. They are unappreciative, intolerant, and jealous. Library facilities are poor. Thus most of the teachers are driven to the passivity of guiding doctoral research instead of doing postdoctoral work. Some conscientious people turn away from research. To quote an official report: In India 45 per cent of the PhDs (against 5 per cent in USA and 7 per cent in UK) are engaged in activities not related with R&D. It is difficult to say whether this is because of the absence of a challenging research and development environment or because of the orientation of training, or due to the policy with regard to import of technology, but the fact remains that very few people have contributed to original research which could be considered commensurate with the potential Indian genius[5].

Programmes for PhD research have been introduced and expanded mindlessly. As a result, there has been a bit of doctoral boom–a spectacular rise in PhD awarding universities and awardees–though many institutions lack utterly the resources of people or material or both. A 1987 bibliography listed 41 PhD theses written from 1957 to 1985[6]. In another bibliography of doctoral dissertations in India from 1950 to March 1997 about 340 titles have been listed[7]. In another study listing a year-wise production of PhDs from 1957-2008, a total of 802 thesis have been counted during the previous half a century[8]. Its subject analysis unveils an interesting picture: the topic of bibliometric studies with 85 topics topes the list, and the LIS education with 17 dissertation comes at the end. Some of the recent topics are: Human resources development; digital libraries/institutional depositories;

electronic documents acquisition; use of Internet by different sections of the society. Information searching and seeking behaviour still maintains its popularity.

2.5 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, identify, and formulate valid problems for research. A cursory glance on the topics for PhDs will at once reveal that the topics chosen do not have a problem or hypothesis but merely survey the state-of-the-art or the existing conditions. Hypotheses if given are bookish, too obvious, and even meaningless.

The popular areas for research have been, in order of popularity: university libraries, bibliometrics, library use and user studies, information seeking behaviour, information systems, classification and indexing, special libraries, library history, reference service and sources, and library science education. Document selection and procurement, cataloguing, and experimental designs in library management are the least popular topics– though these seem practical and relevant to present day needs. That basic research is the most neglected area is also endorsed by other surveys of doctoral research[9, 10]. Library automation, library software, networking and information technology are dominating. There is need to revive research in knowledge organisations especially in context of OPACs, information networks and the electronic information environment in general.

The Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) on Library and Information Science (1992)[11] of the University Grants Commission rehashed the importance of research, though it did not dwell at length on this aspect in its report. The blue document listed the following areas for research, which are no less broad than the courses being taught at the Master's level at that time.

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

The list could have been more specific. Though not much revered, the report rightly laid emphasis on standards in research. It uncompromisingly asked for a clear statutory 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"[12]. While it is normally expected of every completed piece of research, yet it rarely happens. The Working Group on Libraries of the National Knowledge Commission[13] in its recommendation *inter alia* says... "Necessary encouragement should be given to research...." It has further recommended the establishment of "Indian Institute of Library and Information Science" under the aegis of Ministry of Culture. To the proposed institute the following enumerated tasks have been assigned by the WGL:

"To identify, sponsor and conduct R&D programmes in the field of library and information science, including newly emerging research areas. Among the areas needing immediate R&D the following were identified by the Working Group:

- Cross-language information retrieval, with an emphasis on information in Indian languages.
- Standardisation of Indian names.
- Vocabulary control over Indian subjects developed in terms of multi-lingual thesauri and subject-heading lists.
- Development of open source software.
- Development of Digital Libraries, both in English and Indian languages.
- Technical standards for Indian scripts, Optical Character Recognition (OCR) for Indian scripts, and search engines which can implement stemming algorithms for Indian languages.
- User needs and reading habits for different groups.
- Organisation of community information and development of appropriate standards.

"The Institute's scientists will carry out research in major areas contributing to libraries and information science. In addition, they can undertake externally funded projects and provide consultancy to other organisations.

The Institute will also undertake activities to disseminate research findings, through printed and online publications, seminars and conferences, or web portals".

2.6 The Deterioration of Standards

The University Grants Commission (UGC) preconditions for faculty employment and promotions have prompted many library professionals to acquire PhD degrees, though many may not have the aptitude and the intrinsic ability to do research. Standards have not only been diluted but have been kept at abeyance. Supervisors and the examiners have become obligingly compromising. The first cut-off date of December 1992 (then advanced to December 1993) for obtaining the PhD degree to get an exemption from the (difficult) national level test for teaching jobs in universities/ colleges has done incalculable damage to research standards. An eminent academician has corroborated the ill effects of this policy: "They were required to submit their theses before the deadline (31 December 1993) regardless of the date of registration. Some of the candidates on whom PhD's were conferred were not fully acquainted with the contents of their dissertations. In some cases even the supervisors were not aware of what the theses were about. The incitement came from the UGC"[14]. The very kind and generous Chaddha Committee for the revised salary scales of university and college teachers (applicable since 2006) has again accepted PhD degree as substitute for the NET to become eligible for lectureship in universities and colleges. Nevertheless as per its recommendations admission to PhD has been streamlined, made bit formally rigorous and partially a credit-based course work. Yet loopholes remain to evade standards and quality. Though controlling admission to PhD is commendable, but to equate it with NET for lectureship is a retrograde step. It seems nothing has been learnt from the experience of 1992-1993. It is incomprehensible how an aspirant having failed many times to clear the NET becomes competent and worthy to do research which requires innovative and imaginative minds. It is possible only in exceptional cases showing a clear evidence of aptitude for research and innovation. The policy of PhD-NET equivalence not only encourages mediocre of the mediocres to join academic but also plays havoc with the institution of research. Most of such candidates are manipulators and a lifelong liability on the profession and the institutions.

2.7 Research Milieu

The evaluation process, however formal, is easily manipulated with impunity and without qualms. Examiners are obliging on a reciprocal basis. In a small profession like ours this interplay of mutual usability comes in easily. It is often said jocularly (but understood seriously) that the degree is recommended more for the supervisor than for the candidate. And above all, we must admit that the library profession has failed to lure the best brains and even more to retain them. Mediocrity thrives; hypocrisy reigns. But this is not to overlook some genuine oasis in the Indian desert of academic research. Despite being too theoretical, theses have contributed little towards pushing the frontiers of knowledge; few are models of research methodology. Indian library research seems to have no moorings in the prevailing realities. Topics are skin-deep, superficial and bookish. Even experienced librarians keen on earning the PhD degree rarely come with any perceptible problem for research. The supervisor usually suggests the topics and shies from controversial areas. Even a mild and healthy criticism is not tolerated in India. Feudal norms still lie deep in the Indian social ethos. In addition, there is a dire paucity of data archives and reference works. Collecting data and information is considered a satisfactory end to the job – the goal of the research exercise. It is very difficult to collect data by questionnaire in a vast country like India. There is hardly any all India survey. To lessen the load a topic is studied in context of region and repeated over different regions. For example, Public Library Services in north-east. Then another topic will be Public Library Services in Punjab and Haryana. Each researcher has a bag full of woeful tales to tell. Library associations at all levels seem to have washed their hands of the research responsibility. They have not even collected and compiled statistics of the professional activities and conditions pertaining to their areas. Their libraries are poor. They have no research budget.

From quite a time, professionals have been talking, writing, and conferencing about library education and research in India. Every year the Indian Association of Teachers of Library and Information Science (IATLIS) holds a seminar on topics of library education and research. That it is the most popular topic with the teachers and librarians can be gauged from the fact that the FID/ET seminar was the largest of all the 49th FID (1998) pre-conference seminars held in India. The literature on library education and research is enormous, though repetitive, and inflated. We have given lip service to the change of curricula and the raising of standards of research. But the needed change has not come through. The blame is wholly put on the lack of infrastructure and unavailability of funds. That is not the entire reason. The new maladies that have recently inflicted the LIS research are:

- Ghost writing.
- Outsourcing of data processing.
- Data cooking.
- Rampant plagiarism.

Not only the candidates lack skills of research and more so of writing, they do not try as well. There is no

understanding that PhD work is a training in doing and writing research in future. The lack of effective and collective efforts to safeguard the standards seems no less a major cause.

2.8 The Contributions Made by Research

Contrary to expectations, dissertations are not fountainheads of the rest of the literature to grow and mature. These primary sources of information are distanced from relevance. The National Social Science Documentation Centre (NASSDOC) New Delhi, systematically procures one copy of each research dissertations in social sciences to preserve and makes it available to researchers for consultation within the premises of its library. The INFLIBNET now also procures and provides online access to Indian theses under its ETD programme. Retrospective bibliographies of LIS dissertations in India are available[15]. The 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. It is a major source to keep track of the dissertations awarded PhD degrees by Indian universities in all disciplines.

2.9 Utility

As a custom lot of suggestions are given at the end of a research thesis. But the findings and suggestions are never conveyed to the libraries on which studies were done. Nor the librarians ask the researcher or the university for a copy of the research report to know what the researcher has to say about these. In heart of heart they know that trite suggestions are no more than a paper exercise. For example, a doctoral candidate designs a "Model of Information Literacy Training in ABC Academic Library" where he himself is the Chief Librarian. Degree is obtained but the proposed model gathers dust instead of its implementation wholly or even partially. It is simplistic to ask why any national agency such as the National Library Kolkata, The Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), INFLIBNET, DELNET, etc., have never invited any LIS school to do research on the problems being faced by them. Either they have no professional problems groping for researched solutions or have no faith in the power of research to help them! For example, sometime back, the RRRLF, Kolkata assigned AC Nielson ORG-MARG Pvt Ltd, the task of undertaking a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the Foundation on public libraries in India. Their formal report was well accepted and is quite often quoted by the Foundation. No public or private industry has ever been a source of research funds for library schools.

In spite of availability, other researchers do not adequately use these dissertations; nor are these works cited or quoted by teachers or textbook writers. Working librarians rarely use research results to solve their professional problems. There is no precedent of a library inviting a library school to do research on a problem confronting it (conversely there seems inborn animosity and mistrust between them). At the risk of calling attention to a red herring, it is worthwhile to have this idea corroborated from a veteran library leader late Professor P.N. Kaula (1924-2009)[16] who candidly observed: "The LIS departments have little or no understanding and cooperation with the central library ... The problem is more psychological than academic ... Much harm has been done to the teaching of library science by the disharmony".

Librarians go in for local, ad hoc and protem solutions for their practical problems. Researchers consult a teacher or a fellow researcher for a topic of research rather than a practitioner. It is not only true in India but elsewhere too[17]. Thus research has become divorced from reality—a theoretical exercise to earn a degree at best. To measure the worth of a research work it will be pertinent to know the following:

(i) How many papers based on the research have been published in refereed and international journals?

(ii) How many dissertations have been published as independent and readable books?

(iii) How many times such a research work has been quoted or cited in textbooks or other derivative works or collateral research?

(iv) It would be too much to ask if any patent has been granted on the research work.

This seems a universal phenomenon in our profession. Carl Keren[18] doubting the value of research in information science daringly suggested, It would be worthwhile to find out how much of it has really contributed to our body of knowledge and to the methods used by practitioners." He himself understands that, "We will probably be rather disappointed". American teacher Margaret Steig[19] endorses this notion: 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. She further quotes[20] the famous Conant report to prove her point: Library educators seldom produce well-researched literary products ... This is where the library schools most fail the profession. This 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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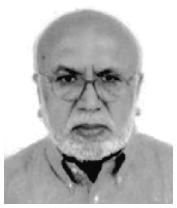
About the Author



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