
UNIT 7 PUBLIC LIBRARIES: ROLE AND FUNCTIONS

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit introduces you to the concept of public libraries, their evolution and growth, functions and services. Public libraries are social institutions offering information dissemination services based upon knowledge for various public groups, on social, political, economic, cultural and other matters.

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- trace the evolution of public libraries;
- explain the meaning of a public library;
- describe the public library functions in general, and specially those with reference to the present day Indian society.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

As a common citizen of your locality you may have had opportunities to visit and make use of a public library or you may even be a member of a public library. Among the different types of libraries evolved by society in modern times, public libraries are the most Popular, because of the functions they perform. They play a very significant role in the welfare of a society. What is meant by a 'public library'? What meaning does it hold for you as an ordinary citizen of the country? How has it evolved? What is its concept as evolved by UNESCO? These are some of the aspects which are explained in this unit. This also familiarises you with the functions of a modern public library and appraises you of the typical characteristic features of the contemporary Indian society so as to enable you to visualise the role/functions of a public library.



7.2 EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES FACTORS

Mankind has taken decades, nay centuries, to evolve this institution: It would be worthwhile to know the factors which have helped in the evolution of a public library. Important among these are :

- Urge for knowledge; Literacy;
- Universal public education;
- Enlightened leadership and philanthropy;
- Rapid advancement in science and technology; and
- Fruitful utilisation of leisure.

7.2.1 Urge for Knowledge

The urge to seek knowledge in an individual has goaded him to make efforts to get it from whatever source he could. Why did the man get this urge? As social historians point out that the urge for knowledge manifested in man (i) to protect one's individual freedom like right to think and express; right to communicate, etc., (ii) to master the environment around

, him through the help of science and technology; (iii) to achieve success in competitive spheres of economic and social life, and (iv) to achieve cultural progress. As a result of the joint influence of these factors, man over the centuries, has been striving hard, individually and collectively, to seek knowledge, assimilate it and to use it by his own thinking and application.

7.2.2 Literacy

To help oneself with the sources of knowledge like books, man had to master reading, writing and arithmetic. Although schools did provide him instructions in gaining certain degrees of competence in literacy, man heavily depended on institutions like public library: With the support of the union government in India, the Total Literacy Campaign was started in about 300 districts in 'the country and it is hoped that in the near future our country will be fully literate.

7.2.3 Universal Public Education

It was not enough for some one make their individual efforts to seek and use some sources of knowledge and profit thereby. The masses had to progress through collective efforts: For this purpose education was made compulsory for all citizens so that each one of them, by helping himself, would ultimately contribute to the nations overall progress. This kind of public education had to be on a continuing basis, therefore, the public libraries become vital means of providing life-long self-education in various walks of life.

7.2.4 Enlightened Leadership and Philanthropy

In Western society in particular, enlightened leaders like industrial magnates, parliamentarians, educationists, political leaders and others, who had derived the benefits of education and knowledge, the hard way, came forward to provide money, buildings, books, etc., to establish and develop libraries for the general public, so that those who do not have the means to provide themselves self-education could find in public libraries a place to do so. This trend '-assisted rapid development of public libraries in the west.

7.2.5 Rapid Advancement in Science and Technology

Communication of information among individuals or groups was at a snail's speed prior to the invention of ink, paper and printing. The invention of these materials by the Chinese, improved by Arabs and perfected later by Europeans, helped production of books in large number, better in quality (and therefore could be preserved for longer duration) and at lesser cost. These developments helped the libraries to collect more books for benefit of the people



With further improvements in communication technology, audio-visual materials like records, charts, illustrations, films, slides, etc., made their appearance to serve as a boon to the educated, illiterates or neo-literates in their efforts to acquire knowledge.

In the present century, with the introduction of mass media like film, radio and television and electronic media like tapes, cassettes and discs telecommunication, it has become possible to provide quick information to the masses, cutting across geographical, political and other man made barriers.

All these means of communication are being suitably exploited by public libraries of today to achieve the goal of providing easier, quince and free access to information. Their contribution, therefore, in the development of libraries has been quite immense. With satellite communication, the task of communication of information at the door steps of individuals is possible now.

7.2.6 Fruitful Utilisation of Leisure

With the application of machines to the manual and routine type of work, man could produce more goods, of better quality and in lesser time. By producing and selling such refined goods; he accrued more wealth for himself. Such additional wealth and leisure, slowly and gradually, were utilised to acquire more information and education, and in better cultural pursuits. The public library served as a good platform for such persons for fruitful utilisation of their leisure.

Thus, a variety of factors, individually and collectively, have played their role towards the evolution of present day public library in civilised societies of the world. Now let us consider the meaning of the term 'Public Library' as it is now conceived the world over.

Self Check Exercise

1) State the six factors that caused the evolution of public libraries.

Note : i) Write your answers in the space given below.

ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of this Unit.

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7.3 MEANING AND MISSION OF A PUBLIC LIBRARY

Public library has been defined differently by different experts depending upon the importance they gave to its objectives. It was a People's University for those who laid stress on educative aspect; it was a common man's cultural centre for those who had in mind its recreational role; for some it was a centre to provide authentic information for various aspects of life.

7.3.1 UNESCO's Definition

However, the most widely accepted definition of a public library was formulated by UNESCO in 1949, which was revised in 1972 and again revised in 1994, and is known as the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. The definition of a public library according to this manifesto is as follows :

- it is a public library which being the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups;



- a living force for education, culture and information, an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women;
- the local centre of information, making all kinds of knowledge and information readily and freely available to its users;
- accessible for all, regardless of age, race, sex, relation, nationality, language or social status;
- and lastly, the libraries which have collections and services, all types of appropriate media and modern technologies, as well as traditional materials with high quality and have relevance to local needs and conditions. Material must reflect current trends and the evolution of society, as well as the memory of human endeavour and imagination.

This definition is exhaustive, covering all the facets of public library services.

7.3.2 Key Missions of Public Library

The UNESCO, in its public library manifesto, for the first time spelled out the key missions which relate to information, literacy, education and culture and should be at the core of public library services :

- creating and strengthening reading skills and habits in children from an early age;
- supporting both individual and self conducted education as well as formal education;
- providing opportunities for personal creative development;
- stimulating the imagination and creativity of children and young people;
- promoting awareness of cultural heritage, appreciation of the arts, scientific achievements and innovations;
- providing access to cultural expressions of all performing arts;
- fostering inter-cultural dialogue and favouring cultural diversity;
- supporting the oral tradition;
- ensuring access for citizens to all sorts of community information;
- providing adequate information services to local enterprises, associations and interest groups;
- facilitating the development of information and computer literacy skills;
- supporting and participating, in literacy activities and programmes for all age groups, and initiating such activities, if necessary.

With these key missions, the public libraries will enable the development of well informed citizens capable of exercising their democratic rights and play responsive role in the changing society. This will generally depend on a free flow of unlimited access to public libraries.

7.4 BASIC ELEMENTS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

If you examine this definition closely you will find that it incorporates certain basic elements which are unique to a public library. Let us now understand these basic elements.

i) A Free Library

A public library does not charge its users any fee for any of its services like consultation of books on its premises or loan of books for home reading or for rendering reference service or for providing recreation through a film show or any other cultural programme. All these services are rendered free to the citizen of a locality. Thus, a 'public library is unique in bestowing a right to every citizen to have free access to its books and other information resources.

However, a nominal charge may be made in cases when a particular product or a service passes to a reader as his own. For instance, when a certain bibliography or an article is copied for you and you retain the copy permanently with you, you may be charged nominally for such a service.



ii) Financed by Public Funds

How, then, a public library maintains itself? The finance needed for the establishment, maintenance and development of public libraries is secured mostly from public funds. That is, the government under the law of the land levies an indirect tax known as library access, which is levied as surcharge on property or land possessed by a person or income accrued on professions or vocations or on vehicles owned by a person. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, the Government of Andhra Pradesh levies a library access of 8 paise per rupee on house tax and property tax. A person who owns a property when he pays the property tax pays also the library access. Thus every property holder indirectly contributes to the Library Fund of the area and thus lends support to the public libraries whether he/she is a literate or an illiterate. But the benefits of public library services are enjoyed equally by all citizens, irrespective of the fact whether they contribute to the library fund or not.

As money accrued by way of library access may not be sufficient for establishment; maintenance and development of public libraries, the State governments in some cases contribute certain amount to the library fund. For example, in Karnataka, the State Government contributes 3% of the land revenue of a district% to the District Library Fund. In addition, there is a provision for any other organisation (national or international) or the Central Government to contribute whatever they can to the library fund. It is for this reason that you find in the definition given above the phrases "financed for the most part" i.e., some portion of the library fund may come from the Central Government, other organisations or philanthropic individuals.

iii) An Auxiliary Educational Institution

Over the centuries civilised society has evolved a number of educational institutions of formal learning like schools; colleges and universities. The libraries attached to these educational institutions provide direct assistance for the teacher and the taught. But as the student population, which is increasing every year, is physically spread out in cities, towns and villages, the academic libraries are unable to meet all their demands. So, the public libraries located in these localities assist the students/teachers by providing suitable educative material, as may be needed, to successfully complete their formal education with ease: In this sense, a public library serves as an auxiliary educational institution serving each person according to his requirements. This part of the concept of a public library, therefore, assumes active cooperation between public libraries and academic libraries of a given area.

iv) A Mandatory Institution

A free library; supported by public funds in order to provide free access to every citizen impartially needs to be established under the law of the land by a competent authority like the Parliament or the State Assembly. In a democratic welfare nation it should be legally ensured that a public library is established, maintained and developed in all localities so as to enable a citizen to reap the benefits, whatever free access to information, education and culture could bring. Thus, in the recent past almost every civilised nation has enacted a library law under the provisions of which public libraries have come into existence. In India, ten states, viz., Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Manipur, . Kerala, Haryana, Mizoram and Goa have enacted library laws to provide public library services. You will learn more about this in the unit relating to Library Legislation.

Self Check Exercise

2) Define and explain the concept of public library as per the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, 1994.

Note : i) Write your answers in the space given below.

ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of this Unit.

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7.5 PUBLIC LIBRARY AND FEATURES

So far you have been acquainted with the factors in the evolution of a public library, the meaning of a public library as per the UNESCO manifesto and its general functions. At this stage, you may be eager to know what role/functions could be envisaged for such a library in our present Indian Society. This requires reinterpretation of the functions of a public library in the light of certain characteristic features of our contemporary society.

Characteristic Features of Contemporary Indian Society

To discuss the features of a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society with age-old traditions is a complex task.' However, an attempt is made here to present such of its features which, are having a bearing on the role of public libraries. These are :

- Socio-economic features;
- Politico-historical features;
- Educational features; and
- Socio-psychological features.

i) Socio-Economic Features

As per the 1991 census, 74.30 percentage of the Indian population resides in rural areas comprising small towns, villages and hamlets. It is, therefore, very much scattered. It is agriculturally oriented. The per capita income is quite low with nearly 40% of the population living below the poverty line. The economic disparities among the people are glaring. With the onset of industrialisation, rural population is steadily migrating to the nearby urban centres.

There are large number of linguistic groups residing in unilingual or bilingual states. But each linguistic state has in its fold substantial populations communicating in minority languages i.e., other than the State language. Similarly, the population could be distinguished on the basis of different religions and castes, which means different customs, manners, dresses, family laws, etc. Thus, there is the presence of varied beliefs and practices.

ii) Politico-Historical Features

The constitution of India envisages a democratic society but we are without democratic traditions. We have been ruled by princes, kings and emperors over the centuries more or less in an autocratic way. We have inherited rich civilisation and a culture, which depicts the amixture of various racial influences of Aryan, Semitic, Roman and Dravidian. Politically we are governed by different political parties with their specific ideologies.

iii) Educational Features

From the point of view of literacy, nearly 60% of the population is illiterate. Our constitution envisages provision of compulsory primary education for all children between 6 to 14 years of age. But this target is still to be realised. There is a high percentage of dropouts in the primary education. Secondary and higher education although show quantitative growth, these are not in line with planned development of the country. There are great disparities between the educated and the non-educated. Many people, especially rural, are unaware of scientific and technological developments which affect their lives, e.g., health, hygiene and nutrition. Thus, generally, the application of scientific and technological innovations is low.

v) Socio-Psychological Features

People are generally found to be tradition bound and fatalistic in their outlook on life. Traits of self-help and independent thinking are not found in many. Information is conserved rather than disseminated. People are governed by fear and diffidence rather than by hope and confidence. They are fearful of experimentation. Religion and language have hindered national unity and progressive attitude.

7.6 FUNCTIONS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Having acquainted ourselves with some features of Indian society let us try to visualize the



role, a public library could play in changing the unproductive mass of population into productive and contributive individuals in the overall progress of the nation.

A public library as enunciated in the Unesco Manifesto is expected to play its role mainly in the three principal areas - information, education and culture.

7.6.1 A Centre for Information

We have unusually large human resources which need to be harnessed and made productive. Lack of information and lack of free flow of information to the masses are impeding this effort. We, therefore, need to provide information suiting the needs of individuals and groups, almost at their door step and in a language understandable to them. The three immediate implications of this policy are (a) we need to establish more public libraries as information centres in rural areas where the maximum population resides (b) such information centres needed to be oriented largely towards agriculture (c) and information presented in a non-book form i.e., by the use of oral, audio-visual and mass media communications in view of high level of illiteracy in the population,

a) Rural Communities

To mitigate the hardships of poverty, libraries need to disseminate such information as people can use in seeking employment, skill development or in generating self-employment activities. For instance, rural folk needs to be appraised of the policies and programmes of the government whereby a farmer is able to get money to cultivate his land, purchase quality seeds at reasonable prices, purchase agricultural implements, irrigate his land, etc. The ignorance of a farmer is, at present, being exploited by middlemen. Similarly, policies of the Government relating to agro-industries need to be popularised in villages and hamlets so that a climate in favour of agro-industries is created which, in the long run, will be able to arrest the migration of the rural population.

b) Developmental Activities

Dissemination of information relating to development activities like construction of canals, dams and approach roads, digging water, construction of houses for weaker sections, establishment of cottage and village industries, etc., goes a long way in improving the economic conditions of the rural population.

Dissemination of social information relating to unhealthy and unsocial practices in society is likely to bring out the issues into the open; and rally the people to face them boldly and profitably. Some such issues relate to: child marriage, widow marriage, the practice, Sati burning, dowry deaths, ragging in academic institutions, portrayal of women in low profile, corruption in public offices, drinking and gambling. In order to enable the people to think loudly on such issues, they should be provided with free and impartial sources of information. Public library is the most suitable agency to undertake this task,

c) Popularization of Science

Scientific and technological information also needs to be published widely and in an understandable manner so that favourable attitude for such information is created among people. Information relating to science and technology which could be applied in day-to-day life needs to be made known by lectures, demonstrations and science exhibitions. Live demonstrations by agricultural scientists of the use of fertilisers will help the villagers. Dissemination of information through public libraries, on health and hygiene, child care, children's diseases will be highly profitable to all segments of the society.

d) Language Groups

As there are a number of linguistic populations in our country, libraries need to communicate information in regional languages - major or minor and not in a language unknown to the people. By systematic bibliographic work, librarians need to identify the lacunae in subject literature in different languages and communicate such information to potential authors and others who are concerned with production of literature. Efforts also need to be made to produce such literature in audio-visual format.

e) Religious (Groups)

In order to build a sense of unity and respect for human values, literature relating to common



objectives of different religions, their beliefs and practices needs wider circulation among the public.

At every opportunity the libraries should inculcate democratic traditions and values among people. Knowledge regarding our constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights and responsibilities is essential on the part of every citizen. Similarly, appreciation of the benefits and pitfalls of adult franchise has to be brought to the knowledge of the general public.

f) Legal Groups

Legal information relating to family laws, property laws, crime, etc., needs wider circulation. Awareness of rights as well as responsibilities in civil laws and criminal laws is vital for avoiding unwanted strife and misery among families and communities. Again, knowledge about the hazards of multi-party, system in a federal structure of government needs due to reach the public.

7.6.2 A Centre for Self-Education

A very important function of a public library is to work as a centre for self-education. Institutions of formal learning like schools, colleges and universities provide a person a means of education for a particular period in certain subjects in a very formal way. But a person has varied interests in which he would like to seek knowledge at a pace or time, which suits his situation. Most importantly, he would love to do it in an informal way. Public library is the institution which provides self-education suiting one's interests throughout one's life span. Such a self-education enriches a person's life to a great extent and mitigates his or her day-to-day hardships.

Consider the case of a mechanic who has an innate desire to develop photography as his hobby. Public library assists such an individual to cultivate photography as a hobby by providing him suitable information and material to understand the mechanism of a camera, to handle it effectively, etc., in a non-technical language. As he masters the basics of photography, the library provides him additional materials to keep up his interests. Thus, his leisure hours are spent in fulfilling his desire to learn in his own way about his hobby which enriches his outlook on life. The money, time and energy utilised in this pursuit pays many fold dividend not only to the person concerned but to all those who are close to him.

7.6.3 A Centre for Culture

A public library apart from being a centre of self-education and information is required to serve as a centre to promote local or regional culture. The Unesco-Manifesto declares that the public library is concerned with the refreshment of man's spirit by the provision of books for relaxation and pleasure.

The term 'books' is interpreted here in the widest sense to include all recorded materials of mankind: So, all recorded materials of mankind depicting his excellence in prose, poetry, drama; music, painting, dance and sculpture are collected together to provide a smoothening effect to the working mind. As a public library is required to meet the individual needs of the, local public, local or regional cultural materials are given a place of prominence.

To recapitulate, -a public library is essentially a free library, financed by public funds providing impartial service to all the members of a local community and which serves as an auxiliary educational institutions. It is 'a democratic institution providing information, education and cultural environment to each according to his needs.

7.6.4 A Centre for Local Cultural Materials

Yet another important function fulfilled by a modern public library is to identify and collect cultural material of importance available in its area. These may be works of art or sculpture, paintings, literary documents, musical instruments of the past, etc. In short, a public library goes in search of all such materials which link the people of the locality with its cultural past. In countries like UK and USA, public libraries have separate sections known as 'local history collections': For the young, even an observation of such cultural materials kindles in him a sense of pride and achievement. Some of them are even tempted to try their hands



the media of communication of public library in India differ due to the typical features of our society. A public library does play an important role in building well-informed, skilled and productive individuals and tries to achieve this in a democratic way.

7.8 ANSWERS TO SELF CHECK EXERCISES

1) The factors that caused the evolution of public libraries are :

- i) Urge for knowledge;
- ii) Literacy;
- iii) Universal Public Education;
- iv) Enlightened leadership and Philanthropy;
- v) Rapid advancement in science and technology; and
- vi) Fruitful Utilisation of Leisure.

2) Definition of Public Libraries:

- i) living force of education, information and culture;
- ii) life long learning institution; and
- iii) free to all sections of the community.

3) The characteristics of public libraries:

- i) Socio-economic features;
- ii) Politico-historical features;
- iii) Educational features; and
- iv) Socio-psychological features.

Functions of Public Libraries:

- i) Serving as Centre for Information;
- ii) Serving as Centre for Self-Education;
- iii) Serving as Centre for Culture;
- iv) Serving as Centre for Local Cultural Materials;
- v) Development of understanding democratic spirit; and
- vi) Being an impartial service agency.

7.9 KEY WORDS

Audio-Visual	:	Hearing and Seeing.
Auxiliary	:	Helpful, assisting, subsidiary.
Cultural Materials	:	Literary contributions in the form of prose, poetry, drama fiction; or contributions in fine arts like music, dance, drawing, painting and sculpture; or contributions in philosophy, religion, history, etc.
Fatalism	:	Belief that all events are predetermined by arbitrary decree; sub' mission to all that happens as inevitable.
Inculcate	:	Urge, impress.
Innovative	:	Bring in novelties; make changes in.
Mass Media	:	Means of communicating to large number of individuals. Film, Radio and Television, etc.
Semitic	:	Belonging to group of the races supposed to be descendants of Jews, Arabs, Assyrians, etc.



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