Building a Culture of Information Literacy and Libraries: A Proposal for Developing a Library System in Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

Describes the need of information literacy highlighting cultural heritage of Kashmir and need to revitalize it with thrust on information literacy, its policy, link with technology, financial avenues and digitization perspectives. Proposes a model based on digital system in its essence.

KEYWORDS

Public Library System; Reading Culture; Digitization; Library Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Hope, optimism, creativity and imagination, characteristics of human nature seem to be currently scarce among the population of the Valley of Kashmir. Perhaps a society that has been riddled with conflict and violence for so very long has learned to live with pessimism and is struggling to find ways to shatter the chains that bind its enthusiasm and spontaneity. The status quo seems to be an accepted norm. Change, especially change that may make people think out of the box, is generally resisted. Yet, it is a changed outlook, a fresh look at the system of

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education and a creative approach to learning and information that could be a catalyst for progress in the Kashmiri society.

Technology has indeed changed distances, yet it will be unable to change minds unless utilized appropriately and to its full potential. Just a few years ago, Kashmir like many parts of the globe was considered so remote and cut-off from the rest of the world. Sometimes it was even difficult to get any news in or out from the state conveniently, the tide of the information superhighway has eventually forced its way into the valley. The world is inter-connected and Kashmir has a presence on global technological map. With information at finger tips with the use of technology, distances have shrunk, information has become easily accessible for people who own a personal computer, a phone line and a network connection and know a few tools of searching. So is this really the answer to all our information woes and lack of book or reading culture? Can technology alone solve all the problems in the information arena? Can the traditional culture of literacy and a well established library structure be overlooked? Clearly, the answer lies in a middle ground; a good mix of traditional culture of libraries with the aid of current technology. A literate society, and now an information literate society is a precursor to development and change. Libraries, new and changed libraries, are the true instruments of progress and development in this information age. Technology is a mere tool in the hand of librarians to ease their job as information finders and user-friendly information organizers.

Information literacy is not a privilege anymore in today's world. It is a necessity. It has been described as basic human rights issue by a panel of experts on information literacy. Information literacy is described as

"the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively use information to address issues or problems at hand that face individuals, communities, and nations." (**Thompson, 2003**).

In developing societies such as J&K, struggling with the basic rights of existence, considering information literacy as a human rights issue seems far-fetched. However, this does not preclude that the society should ignore such a critical issue, for it is through information, enlightenment and recognition of one's rights and responsibilities true value of human potential can be recognized and attained.

THE HERITAGE

Kashmiri society has historically valued scholarship. Creative, historical and artistic works were in abundance in the past. Monumental works were published in Sanskrit, Persian, Sharda, Kashmiri and Arabic. The culture of writing, poetry and calligraphy flourished. Unfortunately this vibrant literary culture has seen a decline. So when did this creative energy go into remission? Why did the tradition of writing, calligraphy and poetry decline? A question to ask is how the influence of languages not part of the Kashmiri culture may have contributed to this phenomenon. Just a generation ago Persian, Urdu and Arabic were the main languages of artistic expression. With the onset of colonialism, a whole new culture and language emerged overshadowing the traditional languages of literature. English was introduced as a medium of instruction. Kashmiris had to make a major transition to a whole new way of thinking and processing information. They were exposed to literature that was so alien to their culture in a language so foreign to their milieu. The colonial

invasion discouraged the use of native languages, especially Kashmiri. As time went on, it became a status symbol for many families to send their children to missionary schools that further alienated the young minds from their original culture and traditions. Young students were taught to enter the so called "civilized world" by purging their cultural and linguistic traditions. There was suddenly a clash of cultures. A new kind of thinking emerged and this thinking slowly became the predominant mode.

In the Valley, library culture was more visible and established even a couple of decades ago. There was a fairly used public library, a reading room and newspaper room in the heart of the city. All of these fell into disuse mainly because of political instability, leaving the younger generation with a non-existent organized library system. Today's youth grew up in a state of turmoil, struggling to survive their school years with just the resources provided at their immediate schools, which have been limited as well. Learning beyond the recommended syllabus is a tradition Kashmiri system of education has never promoted thereby limiting the imagination and creativity of young students.

A BASIC INFORMATION POLICY

For any efforts at creating a true literacy and library culture, a society must commit to devote its resources to it. There has to be a well pronounced commitment on behalf of policy makers to develop a sound information policy that determines information literacy as a basic right of every individual.

An aggressive library programme with sufficient funds and a grassroots movement of renewing the spirit of learning, alone can

guarantee success of this plan. This gargantuan task cannot be accomplished overnight, though it must become a priority. An information literacy policy should involve the schools as well as the local media. Information literacy and training in research are skills all young people must be exposed to as part of their school curriculum. This will necessitate introduction of sound school library programmes run by qualified librarians who are well trained in school librarianship and are well versed in all technological developments.

Can an information policy be developed and implemented in a society that still is lacking in basic infrastructure? Often priority is given to roads and buildings and very little thought goes into planning for, promoting and preserving our literary culture. Along with developing an infrastructure for basic institutions such as hospitals and schools, libraries have to be included. If libraries are considered a luxury, the very core of true education will forever be challenged and the children will always be deprived of the basic right to knowledge and literacy. The argument that developing societies have yet to meet basic needs of their people and therefore cannot afford to give equal importance to the information needs of its people, is really not valid any more. As **Lancaster & Pandit (1997)** pointed out in their review of development information and information policy, "rather than condemning information services as of low priority because they do not produce quick and tangible results, the more positive approach is to consider how these services can be applied to the pressing socioeconomic problems facing a country"

The second question to address is, can politicians who generally themselves may have no love for learning or priority for establishing

libraries ever become advocates for this basic right of citizens? Finding political support is always an asset for any project to succeed. However, instead of waiting for politicians who have a desire to build an information society, let the intellectuals, the teachers, and the media people take the lead. It is their job to highlight these issues and lobby the politicians until they make it their priority. Even if there has not been a library tradition of strong, well-organized, user-friendly libraries, it is never too late to initiate the effort of building this tradition. Libraries must be considered as vital cultural and educational institutions.

Governments and nations have no choice but catch up with the information age. It is their responsibility to provide services to their people that make them informed citizenry, capable of making sound economic, political and social choices. One of the main findings of the UNESCO report on information literacy emphasizes this role:

Governments should develop strong interdisciplinary programs to promote Information Literacy nationwide as a necessary step in closing the digital divide through the creation of an information literate citizenry, an effective Civil Society and a competitive workforce **(Thompson, 2003)**

In the case of Kashmir, an informed and literate citizenry will truly be the leader in creating the civil society that everyone is yearning for after the devastating affects of violence on the society. Basic literacy programmes will obviously have to be linked with information literacy efforts. They are not to be treated as exclusive of each other, basic literacy and information literacy can go hand in hand.

LINK WITH THE TECHNOLOGY POLICY

Every government has to have a technology policy in place as there are efforts at every level to digitize as much information as possible. Digitization and preservation of cultural heritage is a goal of governments all around the world. Given the destruction of precious historical and cultural artifacts of Kashmir in the last seventeen years, preservation must be made a priority. Digitizing whatever is currently housed in the State Archives, the Cultural Academy, the University of Kashmir Library and by other departments of museums and antiquities, ought to be the first and foremost job of the administration. Every effort needs to be directed at creating a central repository of all archival material. Incentives should be provided by the government to acquire personal collections of historical materials from individuals. A digital library of these rich historical documents and artifacts should be made publicly accessible and available to the general public. This will prove to be the biggest publicity tool for the administration and encourage everyone to contribute to this project. If this becomes an open project in which every citizen's contribution is valued, it will be a beginning of a true virtual archive and a living library.

A remarkable step in this direction has been taken by an Indian scientist, Narayanaswamy Bal Krishnan of the Indian Institute of Science. It is a model for the state to emulate. BalaKrishnan's idea of storing all "the world's published information in a single repository" may seem out of reach at times but he believes it is an effort that is worth undertaking. He recognizes the opportunities that the digital age provides humanity in preserving and storing its historical information. India will prove to be a test bed for this world wide initiative. Already, in spite of geographic and linguistic challenges, the Indian digitization project is making remarkable

progress with hundreds of scanners operating in major mega centers around the nation. (**Lewis, 2006**). Replicating a project such as this one in Kashmir and involving the media to promote it among the public would be an initiative that all politicians, bureaucrats and academicians could be convinced to support.

Barriers that existed in the past with regard to access to information have to a large degree been overcome with aid of technology. A well coordinated information system that links the departments of information, research and libraries, technology and telecommunications is necessary for establishment of an effective information network. Of course, the initial step in this direction would be a well established network throughout the valley.

Paperless Society and Technology:

When Lancaster predicted that there would one day be a paperless society (**Lancaster, 1982**) there were many doubters. Now that most of what he predicted then has become a reality, he admits that a true paperless society may never really evolve (**Lancaster, 1999**). The profession of librarianship is based in human interaction and even when most of the routine tasks performed by librarians have become so easy with technology, the main human, user friendly element should still be predominant in the information profession. Library information professionals have a key role in promoting the culture of literacy. And this role has to extend beyond the printed word.

To serve their users well, all librarians will have to be well trained in the use of technology and resources that exist in digital formats. While card catalogs have disappeared in most libraries, Kashmiri libraries still

have their card catalogs. Very soon, these catalogs will become history as well. While academic libraries of Kashmir may be unable to subscribe to all the journals needed for their scholars in print, they will increasingly be relying on online subscriptions to journal databases. A welcome step in this direction is the link to various research databases through the University of Kashmir library; an initiative supported by the University Grants Commission.

Common public will also enjoy the benefits of online information once they have access to popular journal or reference databases through an organized information organization. To have access to any of this information will not even require a trip to the library. They can do it from the comfort of their homes, provided access to these resources is provided by a public library. To make it a successful plan in action, the need is for library and information professionals that are well trained in online searching and understand its benefits and limitations.

One of the immediate and concrete efforts that the local administration can pursue with the help of information experts and scholars is to find a way to get access to these scholarly databases. Such access is available directly through vendors such as EBSCO, GALE and others. Or, a concerted effort can be made to invite funding to support such services. However, a beginning must be made. Let it start either at the University level or at the public library level. It will not take much more than finding a way to subscribe to some basic online databases. A welcoming website, perhaps hosted by the main public library or the Department of Research and libraries would be a first step. This website can become a central place for people to gather together, even if virtually, to benefit from the wealth of information that can be provided. This plan will eliminate all bureaucratic delays, no books to be ordered, no tenders

to be issued and no buildings to be built and especially no waiting time. It is a project that can be launched immediately once the basic network structure is put in place and a group of well trained library information people are put in charge of running this operation. Yes, it will be a true public library without walls and borders. It will have a librarian present at all times, albeit virtual. A virtual reference librarian can do wonders in even getting the most hesitant user to become an active user since the fear of asking the wrong question does not exist behind the screen. This virtual library can take advantage of millions of resources available free of cost on the web and present them to the public in an organized fashion with proper indexing. Virtual library centers can be launched all around the valley. These centers can become training places for the common folk. Providing public access to information with the use of technology will instantaneously turn a society that lacks a reading culture into an information hungry society.

There are certainly many limitations to this project. The main one being language. Most of the information that is available through databases and also on the web is in English. There will be a challenge for those who are not familiar with the language. However, there are still numerous resources available in Urdu and Arabic as well. One of the ways to entice readers would be to expedite the digitization project and make documents in local languages available digitally to public. If the local digitization project can be implemented simultaneously with the virtual library project, that problem will soon become non-existent. As texts in local languages are digitized and included in the information repository similar to the one BalaKrishnan proposes (**Lewis, 2006**), it could become a huge attraction for the users. Already there are several thousand manuscripts owned by the J&K Department of Libraries digitized under

National Mission of Manuscripts (India) programme for digitization. Let these documents be used for the beta test for this project. Let the people of Kashmir have access to these precious documents which are gathering dust in the closets of Oriental Research Library located presently at the University of Kashmir. The professional library culture in J&K academic and public libraries calls for a change as well. Keeping books under lock and key is still a preference; a principle that goes totally against the basic right of free access to information. Books are to be touched, felt and used. They are not to be treated as sacred objects that can only be touched by certain people of authority. It is these physical barriers that will be broken down once the virtual library concept is adopted. No one will have to guard the information anymore. Making the archival materials searchable and accessible to the general public will truly be a democratizing trend in information. No one will lose jobs or control. Everyone will become a valuable user of information.

While there is a lack of reading culture in the Kashmiri society in general, it should not be very difficult to cultivate and revive this culture. Technology can truly bridge the divide between the information-haves and have-nots. Making information available in digital format, in the preferred language of the populace, and engaging librarians in training the users in use of this information can change the apathy of the users. There will always be educated elite that will benefit more from these services but the challenge will lie in training the general masses. This effort can be strengthened through mobile literacy and library centers. These mobile networked libraries will expose the users to information way beyond their imagination. These centers can be need based tailored to meet the needs of farming communities, handicraft craftsmen, boat people, community of

fisherman and women and so on. The possibilities are endless and opportunities abound.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

One of the main issues that always stifle any novel ideas is lack of funds. While there are many other priorities and challenges, the challenge of ignorance surpasses any other. If government organizations are concerned that they will not be able to produce tangible results for their investment in information literacy, they may be right to some extent. However, the results of an informed society, although fluid will eventually show in every aspect of a society, especially in the participation of masses in the betterment of their society.

When Government of J&K invests in the information initiative by creating a basic infrastructure, many organizations may be interested in investing in this effort as well. A few organizations have a history of supporting such efforts are the Soros Foundation, the Bill and Melinda **Gates Foundation (2007)** and the Ford Foundation. Soros Foundation has a scheme in place that helps nations acquire access to electronic databases free of cost and the Gates Foundation has been very encouraging of efforts in various countries of library initiatives such as the one under the growing global libraries programme (Gates Foundation). These foundations always look for some groundwork, an expression of interest and some initial effort. If they see societal need and interest on part of governments for genuine investment in the information future of their people, support will be forthcoming

TRAINING INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

The success of an information literacy project depends to a large degree on the commitment of information professionals who are well

trained in all aspects of information gathering, indexing and organizing, access and dissemination. First, they have to demonstrate a commitment to creating a culture of information. Second, they must possess the skills necessary to cultivate this culture. The work of the information professionals must be complemented by well qualified technology professionals. There will have to be a large group of people trained in the technology of digitization. There will be two levels of expertise. One, the process of digitization will be mostly done by well-trained technicians. Second, the more professional services such as creating the metadata, organizing the information and building access points will have to be performed by qualified library professionals. An invitation to members of international library and information organizations to come and train librarians in Kashmir could be one option. There are various such programmes in existence under the auspices of the American library Association or the International Federation of Library Associations.

PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM

What would a public library system look like? Given how the public library system is a system that has fallen into disrepair, a virtual public library system will boost the whole concept in the valley. It will put the library system back on the map and engage those who will have electronic access. While the virtual plan can be implemented quite easily and quickly, the public library system itself needs to be developed and nurtured. Today's world is a far cry from the so called "paperless society" **(Lancaster, 1982)**. The printed word will be around for a long time and there will always be reader and writers who prefer the written word over digital information. A strong well stocked public library system with

branches, at least, in every district of the valley and mobile branches that cater to remote areas should be part of information policy and planning.

A public library should be an inviting space, a space that brings people in, draws families together as users of the library system, provides a space for exchange of ideas, a space for children to play and learn at the same time through the world of stories. In the western world, every community has a public library that allows free unlimited access to its resources. That is a model that could be implemented in Kashmir as well. Perhaps this would become a project of the expatriate community to adopt, a project free from political leanings and one that will truly leave a legacy for the people of J&K. There will be critics who will say that the system will not work in Kashmir for a variety of reasons. We often underestimate the capacity of the human mind. There will be learners if there are teachers, there will be patrons if there are good libraries and there will be writers if there are good readers. The Kashmiri society must move beyond the dependence mode. Not everything has to emanate from the government. A collective societal effort at changing our information habits can bring about successful library systems. When every citizen participates actively in creating this atmosphere, and feels that he or she owns it, it will succeed.

It is about time that the government engages in a feasibility study as well as a user study to investigate the possibility of launching a successful library system. This study has to be a fresh approach, separate from what is in place today. Fixing the broken machine of libraries will only be a band-aid solution. There needs to be a proper and thorough revamping of the library system in Kashmir. The first step towards this direction is to make the tax-payers, or the general public, actively involved in this process and take the governmental bureaucracy. Following the

successful western public library model in this regard will be of tremendous benefit and will truly create a grass roots library and literacy culture.

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