

Community Information Services through Public Libraries and Information Centres: an experience in West Bengal, India

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Abstract: Public Libraries that are existed with the basic role of providing access and preserving the recorded knowledge of past and present for future use, these are also responsible for providing required information to the community which help people in daily problem solving or in raising the quality of their lives. Community Information Services (CIS) is one through which a public library provides community information to surrounding community. The paper highlights the present role of public libraries and community information centres on CIS. This paper also discusses about community Library cum Information Centres (CLICS) in West Bengal implemented in 1999. This paper also discusses the role of cooperation in facilitating community information services (CIS) through public libraries. It presents in short the theoretical aspect of CIS.

1. Introduction

Today information has become the basic need of life, which helps to ensure other needs such as food; shelter etc. for its survival and growth. Hence it can be rightly said that without information, survival and development of human life is not possible. Information accelerates the pace of development of society as well as the development of nation. Information need to cope with crisis in the Lives of an individual and community is referred as Community Information Service (CIS) is performed by many Governmental, non-governmental voluntary organizations in their operative areas by their own ways. As such a Public Library is one which tends to enrich the lives of people through access to the ideas, information and entertainment available from books as well as from a variety of other resources. Now a day's Public Library has been taking full advantage of modern day technologies in procuring storing, organizing and dissemination all kinds of information required by the people it serves. As the situation prevails today it has come imperative for each and every public library

especially in the rural and suburban areas to establish and mention spontaneous cooperation with other information providing agencies in the society to cater the information needs of community through its Community Information Service Programs.

2. Information Support to Community Development

The efficient and effective functioning of a community development system calls for the effective utilization of information resources as mandatory support to all the sphere of the life of a community.

Public library can create awareness through information support and motivate the local community to take responsibility for their development. Librarians of public libraries need to explore how their libraries can support the communities they serve with the resources available.

The following types of information support to be given for community development:

- i. Community information services;
- ii. Development of as area profile;
- iii. Involvement in community planning process;
- iv. Support to the preservation of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices;
- v. Marketing and promotion of information literacy programmes;
- vi. Services to distance learners;
- vii. Information support to community self help; and
- viii. Collaboration and partnership with local Government and Non-government agencies.

3. Community Information (CI)

Community information is the combination of two terms i.e. “Community” and “Information”. It is such type of information needed by the members of the community for effective use of available resources to solve their day-to-day problems.

According to Susan Fleetwood “Community Information is considered to be that information required by members of the public (or these acting on their behalf) to make effective use of the resources potentially available to them in the communities in which they live. Such information may be needed to help solve problems in the fields of housing, disability, household finance, marriage, employment and so on”.

4. Need of Community Information

Information need of urban people are different from rural people. The common information needs of rural people requires assistance for the following types of information:

- Agriculture and related issues
- Education
- Employment
- Health
- Self-Employment
- Animal husbandry
- Financial assistance
- Government programmes
- Legal aids
- Social welfare
- Cottage industries
- Housing
- Horticulture
- Local and political news

These information needs may vary from one to another in their daily life.

5. Community Information Services (CIS)

Library Association provided a comprehensive definition of Community Information Services. It defines “Community Information Services are those, which assist individual and groups with daily problem solving and with participation in the democratic process. The services concentrate on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance on the most important problems that people have to face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs and their rights.” (Library Association, 1980).

According to Allen Bunch, CIS has the following two aspects;

- one is concerned with the nature of the information provided, that is, information in the community to help people with daily problem solving or in raising the quality of their lives;
- the other is concerned with the nature of the clientele served, namely those who belong to the lower socio-economic groups or are disadvantaged through an inability to obtain, understand, or act on information that effects their lives (Bunch, A Allen, 1982).

6. Problems to provide CIS for Public Library

- i) Planning and infrastructure,
- ii) Staff,
- iii) Leadership,
- iv) Collection of information,
- v) Preparation of Area Profile,
- vi) Fund and
- vii) Attitude of authority and librarian(s) of public libraries

7. Programmes of Community Information Service

The following programmes can be taken to provide CIS:

- Public relation
- Information literacy and its marketing
- Distance education
- User education
- Preparation of information file
- Preparation of computerized data base
- Internet and World Wide Web
- Preparation of Area profile
- Identification of the needs of community
- Networking among Community information centres
- Collection and preservation of indigenous knowledge
- Computer awareness programmes and training about Internet

8. Types of Community Information Services

The following types of CIS can be given from public library:

- Information regarding livelihood
- Health information
- Drinking water
- Transport
- Emergency services
- Education
- Government information and publications
- Self-help programmes
- Rights and duties
- Consumer information
- Environment pollution
- Employment
- Travelling
- Recreation
- Internet services
- Social programmes of different NGOs
- Blood donation and health camp
- Legal aids

9. Development of Community Information Services

The concept of CIS tool various forms in practice in different periods in different cultures and communities. The historical beginning of CIS can be traced back to the post Second World Wartime in UK and USA. In Britain Citizen's Advice Bureaux (CABX) was set up to cope with wartime problems

such as emergency regulations, evacuation, missing relatives, separation of families, etc. During the same period many municipal libraries were also called to set up information offices during the war, which performed a function similar to Citizen's Advice Bureaux (CABX).

The developments of CIS in the United States have been started with the Charity Organization movement of the 1870s, out of which grew the Social Service Exchange. But CIS were required and attempted to be provided during and after the Second World War in similar lines as in UK. Veterans Information Centers were formed in USA after the Second World War which was modelled on the British Citizen Advice Bureaux. Over 3,000 such centers were set up but most of these had closed by 1949. These centers provided information regarding employment opportunities, resettlements, facilities of education and training, legal helps etc.

Realising its importance, both USA and UK the Library policy makers and community thinkers found that even in normal peace time there are strong need in every community for various kinds of information services. Therefore, attempts were made for formalizing concepts of Community Information Service particularly through Public Libraries in order to reach out to the community.

Public Libraries which are entrusted with the basic task of information dissemination can provide Community Information Services either directly or in association with other information giving agencies. Public libraries offers direct community information services to the people through its outreach activities or programmes undertaken in addition to or in the place of ordinary library service with the intention of discovering the true needs of the community and by reaching the disadvantaged with required information. Corporate sectors in the form of "Corporate Social Responsibility" programme are also found engaged in providing information services reflecting their commitment to the society.

With the passing of time and the rapid developments in information technology, the new ways of communication have taken effect and the ways in which information was previously handled, stored and disseminated have been altered. The traditional method of providing community information is remaining the same but it will have to do it differently. The new concept of online information services and virtual information services appears where there is public repository and portal to disseminate information. It refers to a network of expertise, human intermediation and resources placed at the disposal of users in an online environment.

For instance, CORDIS is the Community Research and Development Information Service of European Union. The Website and repository include all public information held by the Commission (project factsheets, publishable reports and deliverables), editorial content to support communication and

exploitation (news, events, success stories, magazines, multilingual “results in brief” for the broader public) and comprehensive links to external sources such as open access publications and websites.

Community Arts North West (CAN) is a Manchester-based arts development organisation working with urban communities across Greater Manchester to create access to cultural production for people that are excluded from or on the fringes of the mainstream. CAN’s online information services aim to maximise the flow of information into and out of the company to benefit the target group through the effective online information exchange that links communities and artists to cultural resources.

Today’s world has experienced lots of online information services with deep and lasting influence to human knowledge legacies. Besides an email & telephone enquiry service the **Social networking sites** which are fast becoming the most effective tool for information flow. Almost all information service providers currently maintains an online presence in Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace etc.

10. Role of Public Libraries and Community Information Centres in CIS

According to IFLA – UNESCO, Public Library Manifesto; 1994, “the public library is the local gateway to knowledge”. It “provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups” (IFLA/UNESCO guidelines, 2001). The primary purpose of the public library are to provide resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for education, information and personal development including recreation and leisure. (IFLA/UNESCO guidelines, 2001).

The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status.

Public library provides a range of services, both within the library and in the community, to satisfy their users’ needs. Some of the key services of the public library are:

- i. Loan of books and other media.
- ii. Provision of books and other materials for use in the library.
- iii. Information services using print and electronic media.
- iv. Readers’ advisory services including reservation services
- v. Community information services
- vi. User education including support for literacy programmes
- vii. Programming and events. (IFLA/UNESCO Guidelines, 2001)

In West Bengal 2460 Govt. Sponsored public libraries, 12 Government public libraries, 7 Added libraries and 2771 non-government non-sponsored public libraries provide community information service to the people of local communities according to their own ways.

11. Community library cum information centres (CLIC) in West Bengal-A new attempt

The Department of Mass Education Extension has started a project in 1999 to establish CLICs in panchayat area which are not yet covered by sponsored public libraries (Govt. of West Bengal. Annual Report 2011-2012, Dept. of Mass Education Extension & Library Services).

Community library cum information centres (CLICs) have been established in the gram panchayats only where there is no government or government sponsored library.

In West Bengal there are 1640 gram Panchayats out of 3362 which have no Govt. or Govt. Sponsored public library. As per the scheme, Community Library cum Information Centres are to be established by the Gram Panchayats. State Government provides one time non-recurring Grant of Rs. 9000/- for purchase of books, periodicals / News Papers and other reading materials and yearly recurring grant of Rs. 9600/- for payment of honorarium @ Rs. 800/- per month to the community library organizer, from the year 2011-2012, the monthly honorarium of the community library organizer was enhanced of Rs. 1500/- per month.

The centres open at least 3 hours a day on 5 days in a week including Saturday and Sunday as per convenience of the local community. Subscriptions may be collected from the members and grants/donations may be received from Govt./Local Bodies and general public. However no subscription can be realised from the children members before 16 years of age each of these CLICs is looked by a managing committee consisting of:

- i. Pradhan or upa-pradhan of the respective gram panchayat, as chairman;
- ii. One Teacher from the local College or one Headmaster / Assistant Headmaster / Assistant Teacher from Higher Secondary/ Secondary / Primary School;
- iii. One Librarian/ Library Assistant of any sponsored library situated in the respective panchayat sammiti area;
- iv. One local person representing in the interest of literacy movement or scientific and cultural activity;
- v. One Gram sevak attached to the respective Gram Panchayat;
- vi. Community library organiser of the centre, as convenor and
- vii. Three members of the centre, one of those must be the female person.

12. Conclusion

CIS is an important issue today. A CIS-based public library system is a new idea in urban and rural communities. It is a challenge for librarians of public libraries to work in such a context. Public library may act as a Community Information Centre and collect information to meet the information need of the people of the community, who are totally or partially unaware of the sources of the information, the process of collecting and applying the same. Librarians must have an active role in providing appropriate guidance and services to the members of the community. They must build more cooperation with communities to find their real needs.

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