

Editorial Commentary

In the previous issue of the journal, I mentioned about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and *the IFLA Statement on Libraries and Development* which calls upon all stakeholders to recognize that libraries all over the world as reliable mechanisms for underpinning the delivery of sustainable development programmes. It was also stated there that the work of libraries can be seen threaded throughout the goals especially in providing public access to information, access to technology, and lifelong learning. As stated by the *National Policy Agenda for Libraries* brought out by American Library Association (n. d), Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP), “libraries have long been champions of free and equitable access to information and education. This role is more important than ever before in this era of rapidly changing information policy and new digital ecosystems.” Much work has been done in developed countries to equip the libraries to function effectively in the ever-changing digital environment.

Building Digitally Inclusive Communities: A Guide to the Proposed Framework brought out by Institute of Museum and Library Services, University of Washington Technology & SocialChange Group, International City/County Management Association (2011) is one of the earlier attempts in this direction in the United States. American Library Association, the pioneer in many such initiatives, has come out with many documents highlighting the strategies to be adopted by libraries to make them essential in the digital ecosystem. A typical document is the report entitled *After Access: Libraries & Digital Empowerment: Building Digitally Inclusive Communities*. The report contains discussions on the impact of digital platforms on library programs and services; staff training and capacity building; policy and funding; research and evaluation; latest related research; programs and services and digital inclusion policy developments. Similar efforts are made in UK and other countries of Europe. *Libraries welcome everyone: Six stories of diversity and inclusion from libraries in England* brought out by Arts Council England (n. d) is one among them. It explores different aspects of equality and diversity provision as part of a new development in each of the six library services. Concerted efforts are being made by Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2017) also. Examples aplenty.

As far as developing countries are concerned, Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL), a not-for-profit organization, works with libraries to enable access to knowledge in developing and transition economy countries in Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe and Latin America. In Asia-Pacific, it functions in Cambodia, China, Fiji, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and Uzbekistan. Its vision is a world in which all people have the knowledge they need to achieve their full potential. In 2018, EIFL reached more than 8.5 million people through its network of libraries in 53 developing and transitional countries. Though their presence is not there in India, the strategies adopted by them can be emulated here.

Coming to India, a number of programmes have been initiated both at the governmental and non-governmental levels. To cap it all is the Digital India, the flagship programme of the Government of India with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society. The programme aims to provide the much needed thrust to the nine pillars of growth areas, namely Broadband Highways, Universal Access to Mobile Connectivity, Public Internet Access Programme, e-Governance: Reforming Government through Technology, e-Kranti - Electronic Delivery of Services, Information for All, Electronics Manufacturing, IT for Jobs and Early Harvest Programmes. It is centred on three key areas – digital infrastructure as a utility to every citizen, governance and services on demand, and digital empowerment of citizens. Digital Literacy plays a vital role in e-services like e-commerce, e-governance, e-panchayat, e-learning and the like. These are all government initiatives.

When the country is moving fast forward, can libraries remain mere spectators? Definitely not. But the fact remains that our libraries – public, academic and special – have not charted out a vision and mission as to how they can successfully fit into the scenario. In fact, I have started with the examples of USA and UK just to highlight the lack of preparedness of our country. The government was working on connecting more than six-lakh villages through 2.50 lakh gram panchayats under the BharatNet project. Though ambitious, this project is

going on at a slower pace which is characteristic of our country. It is high time that libraries get a rightful place in making available the resources through the connectivity.

The real role of the libraries come in the achievement of the 10 dimensions of the government's 2030 vision aimed to create an India where poverty, malnutrition, littering and illiteracy would be a matter of the past. This massive programme warrants a national initiative on re-skilling to create future-ready talent. In fact, what we need is a reskilling revolution. Reskilling means "teaching" a person new skills. New categories of jobs will emerge, partly or wholly, displacing others. The skill sets required in both old and new occupations will change in most industries and transform how and where people work. By 2030, according to the a McKinsey Global Institute (2017) report entitled *Jobs lost, jobs gained: Workforce transitions in a time of automation*, as many as 375 million workers—or roughly 14 percent of the global workforce—may need to switch occupational categories as digitization, automation, and advances in artificial intelligence disrupt the world of work. These changes are imminent in the context of increased application of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Robotics, Internet of Things (IoT), Block chain technology etc.

Now the question is as to how libraries can get involved in this mission. A firm belief is rooted in the Indian psyche that anything involving community participation comes within the domain of public libraries and there is no commitment on the part of other types of libraries. It is true that each type of library has its customers but there is no harm in empowering the public libraries, wherever possible, in imparting digital literacy skills to the masses. For example, the academic libraries can take a lead role in manpower development in public libraries by exposing them to state-of-the art facilities available with them. Considering the disparity in infrastructure and talents between academic and public libraries in the country, it is highly necessary to expose the non-professional or semi-professional manpower in the public library sector to digital literacy skills. This becomes an absolute necessity in states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (BIMARU) where public libraries have not grown to the desired level. Indirectly, this can lead to the digital empowerment of citizens which is an integral part of the ambitious Digital India Programme.

Skilling includes imparting of different literacy skills like financial literacy, health literacy, legal literacy, Internet literacy, media literacy, critical literacy etc. Since one cannot expect the library and information professionals to be proficient in all these skills, this skilling is absolutely needed for LIS professionals also so as to enable them to teach others. A prominent example in this direction is that of the Internet health information training provided to public libraries and librarians in sixteen counties in western Pennsylvania at the Health Sciences Library System (HSLs), University of Pittsburg (Wessel, Wozarand Epstein, 2003). Through this project, this academic medical center library identified the challenges for public librarians in providing health-related reference service, developed a training program to address those challenges, and evaluated the impact of this training on public librarians' ability to provide health information. Herein comes the need for policy making at the governmental level so as to enable the library professionals in all sectors to work for the digital empowerment of the citizens, cutting across boundaries of their parent bodies.

Libraries can work jointly with Digital Empowerment Foundation, Digital India Foundation, Read India and similar not-for-profit organizations to tap their experience in the field of spreading digital literacy skills. The activities of Good Things Foundation, a UK-based social change charity that supports socially excluded people to improve their lives through digital, are worth emulating (<https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/>). The Foundation brings together thousands of community partners to make up the Online Centres Network, reaching deep into communities to help people gain the support and skills they need to change their lives and overcome social challenges. The involvement of LIS professionals warrants a comprehensive review at the national level. This can be done by appointing a High Power Committee by Government of India to study the modalities of ensuring the role of professionals in all sectors in the giant leap of digital empowerment of the citizens and make recommendations. Professional associations in the LIS field and state governments can also come out with creative suggestions and actions in the matter. It should also be ensured that the recommendations do not gather dust in the shelves of bureaucrats. After all, the society will acknowledge the services of a profession, if only they are proved to be essential for its sustenance and development and have contemporary relevance.

References

- American Library Association (n. d.). A national policy agenda for libraries. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org/advocacy/files/content/pdfs/NPAforLibraries1.pdf>
- Arts Council England (n. d). Libraries welcome everyone: Six stories of diversity and inclusion from libraries in England. Retrieved from https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/ACE_Librarieswelcome_everyone_report_July18.pdf
- Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2017). *Libraries deliver: Ambition for public libraries in England 2016 to 2021*. London: DCMS. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021/libraries-deliver-ambition-forpublic-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021#the-outcomes-libraries-deliver-for-their-communities>.
- Institute of Museum and Library Services, University of Washington Technology & Social Change Group, International City/County Management Association (2011). Building digitally inclusive communities: A guide to the proposed framework. Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services. Retrieved from <https://www.imls.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/DIC-FrameworkReport.pdf>
- McKinsey Global Institute (2017). Jobs lost, jobs gained: What the future of work will mean for jobs, skills, and wages. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/jobs-lost-jobs-gained-what-the-future-of-work-will-mean-for-jobs-skills-and-wages>
- Wessel, C. B., Wozar J. A.&Epstein B. A. (2003). The role of the academic medical center library in training public librarians. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 91(3), 352 - 60

Dr. Vijayakumar K. P.
Editor