A HISTORICAL STUDY OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN INDIA

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Introduction :

"Room without a book is a body without soul" so stated by Cicero. In keeping with this, academic libraries in India have played a pivotal role in the dissemination of knowledge since ancient times. From the repositories of Nalanda and Takshashila to the digital libraries of today, they have witnessed a remarkable evolution. During the colonial period, Western educational models influenced the structure and purpose of academic libraries. Post-independence, India saw a renewed focus on higher education, leading to the expansion and modernization of university libraries. The establishment of the University Grants Commission (UGC) further standardized and supported library development. Over the decades, libraries transitioned from traditional book-based services to hybrid and digital formats. Technological advancements brought about e-resources, and remote access facilities. Despite infrastructural and financial challenges, academic libraries continue to be the centers of learning, research, and innovation. Their role in shaping intellectual capital in India remains vital. This study aims to trace their historical journey and analyze their transformation across time.

Keywords : Academic library, **Library network, Consortia,** National **Knowledge Commission, University Education Commission, Sangam age.**

Libraries in Ancient Period :

India has a rich historical background to the library from ancient period especially for academic library. The writing and reading manuscripts were common practices in ancient times, extending from the fourth century B.C. to the sixth century after Christ, according to literary and archaeological evidences. They must have encouraged the expansion and improvement of manuscript collections at significant educational institutions. The important library of that period was that Nalanda University of Bihar in the fourth century A.D. It grew to be the foremost Buddhist monastery and an educational centre. The library situated in a special building known as the Dharmaganja. This area was composed of three massive buildings i.e. the Ratnasagara, the Ratnodadhi, and the Ratnaranjaka. The Ratnasagara was a nine-story structure that held a collection of manuscripts and rare sacred works, such as the Prajnaparamita Sutra. (Kaur, 2024) A vast collection of manuscripts was on philosophy and religion, including writings on grammar, logic, literature, the Vedas, the Vedanta, the Samkhya philosophy, the Dharmasastras, the Puranas, astronomy, astrology, and medicine, at the library at Nalanda. Specialized in Mahayana, the University of Nalanda's library prospered until the

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12th century A.D., when Bakhtiyar Khalji set fire to the whole Nalanda establishment and destroyed it in 1197–1203 A.D. Another oldest and important university library in the world, Takshashila University, was founded in the north-western Indian city of Gandhara in 414 A.D. in the Buddha's period. There were 500 students enrolled in it, including a few international students and princes. The university included an excellent library with books on political science, philosophy, medicine, literature, Hinduism, and other subjects. The founder of Mahayana Buddhism, Acharya Nagarjuna, was said to have maintained a library on the university building's top floor. It was also said that Taxila has a rich library.

During that time, Vikramsila, Odantapuri, Somapuri, Jaggadal, Mithila, Vallabhi, Kanheri, and other significant academic libraries were also in existence. There was a lot going on in south India at the time, and there was a tradition about the libraries there known as the "Sangam Age." (Satish, 2014)

Libraries in Medieval Period :

The existence of academic libraries during the medieval period of Indian history is not known, though the Muslim rulers did support libraries in their own palaces. However, there was a library attached to a college at Bidar, having a collection of 3000 books on different subjects. Aurangzeb got this library transferred to Delhi to merge it with his palace library. During the medieval period, due to Muslim invasions and political troubles, the powerful empires and kingdoms of Indian rulers fell one by one.

Libraries in Modern India (1757-1947) :

The East India Company and Christian missionaries founded various educational institutions in India during the British colonial period. The most significant occasions that contributed to the expansion and advancement of higher education in India. During the period were the establishing of the Benaras Sanskrit College in 1792 by British agent Jonathan Duncan and the establishment of Calcutta college in 1781. In 1800, Fort William College in Calcutta was established. All these colleges had their own libraries. During this period, the Charter Act of 1813, the founding of Fort William and Serampore Colleges, the establishment of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay universities and their libraries, and Hunter, Raleigh, and Calcutta are all significant turning points, especially in the context of academic libraries.

The British Parliament's passed Charter Act in 1813 and gave whole authority to the East India Company exclusive authority over Indians education. The British Parliament's 1813 Charter Act gave the East India Company exclusive authority over Indian education. The immediate outcome of the Charter Act of 1813 was the founding of C.M.S. College in Kottayam, Hindu (Presidency) College in Calcutta in 1816, and Raven Shaw College in Cuttack in 1816. Serampore College was founded by the Danes in 1818. During this period and the King of Denmark in 1927 agreed to give this college an academic status by providing equivalence to the Danish Universities with power to confer degrees. The Charles Wood dispatch of 1854, popularly known as the 'Magna Carta of English Education' in India also paved the way for the establishment of the universities in the presidency towns. The Bill to create universities in India was proposed by Sir John Colville, and on January 24, 1857, Lord

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Dalhousie, the Governor General of India, passed it. This decision gives immediate consent. As a result, the foundation of first three modern universities were started based on the patterns of London University at Calcutta, Madras and Bombay.

Academic Libraries in India after Independence :

The actual process for the development of the university libraries in India can be said to have been set in motion with the appointment of the University Education Commission presided over by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan (1948-49) which gave valuable recommendations. The annual grant for these libraries was not sufficient. Therefore, the Commission recommended that at least 6% of the total budget of each academic institution should be set aside for the library. Only then will the condition of these libraries will improve. It added that if institutions were not willing to allocate 6% of their budget to libraries, they should spend Rs.40 per student enrolled. The Commission also suggested that more attention should be paid to improve the reference services in the university libraries. The growth of university libraries since Independence can be seen in respect of the initiatives taken by the Central Government considering the vital importance of higher education and role of libraries in the educational development, commitment to fulfil the demand of higher education, and the foundation of the UGC in 1953 by an Act of Parliament. The Ranganathan Committee, appointed by the UGC in 1957, made some outstanding recommendations, which included standards for library building, collection development, staff and services and furniture etc. The Kothari Commission also made valuable recommendations for this purpose, but the role of the University Grants Commission deserves special mention, because it has played a vital role by regularly providing appropriate grants and funds to all universities for development of libraries, to purchase books and journals, construction of new library buildings and for library equipment and furniture. (Kaur, 2024)

Library networks and development of consortia :

Computers are being used in libraries to process, store, retrieve and disseminate information. This has recast the concept of library from a storehouse of books to a place to access most advanced media including CD-ROM, the Internet and other electronic formats of information resources. Today libraries are witnessing the network-based era having connected to wide area of the Internet based information. The use of ICTs have placed the Indian academic libraries at par with the libraries the world over.

The Information for Library Network (INFLIBNET) set up by the UGC as an autonomous inter- university centre in 1991 proved to be a landmark to interlink the academic libraries. It is involved in modernizing university libraries in India and connects these to a nation-wide-high speed data network. The INFLIBNET promotes automation of libraries, develop standards; creates union catalogues of serials, theses, books, monographs and non-book materials; provide access to bibliographic information resources; creates database of projects, institutions, specialists; organizes training programmes, etc. In addition to INFLIBNET, several other national networks and library networks have evolved. The National Informatics Centre's Network (NICNET), INDONET, ERNET, CALIBNET, DELNET,

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MALIBNET, etc. are notable. These networks boosted the resource sharing and widened the spheres of access to information for users.

The consortium approach began in India in 1982 with emergence of the Forum for Resource Sharing in Astronomy and Astrophysics (FORSA). This was initiated for sharing resources available in astronomy libraries in the nation. However, its membership was extended to physics and mathematics libraries in 2004, having common interests to carry forward the aims and activities of FORSA. The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India set up the Indian Digital Library in Engineering Science and Technology (INDEST) to provide access to e-resources to all the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and other institutions including NITs, ISM, IIMs, NITTTRs, etc. The INDEST headquarter is at IIT Delhi. The National Knowledge Resource Consortium (NKRC) was established in 2009. It is a network of libraries and information centres of 39 National Laboratories and institutes of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and 24 institutes of the Department of Science and Technology. The Health Science Library and Information Network (HELINET) was launched during March 2003 with an aim to improve the quality of education and research in institutions of health sciences in Karnataka through enhanced access to high quality medical information. The consortium facilitates access from leading publishers to 600 scholarly, international biomedical journals to members/institutions. The Consortium for e-Resources in Agriculture (CeRA) provides access to 3000+ journals in the broad spectrum of agricultural sciences to agricultural universities, veterinary universities and Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) institutions.

The UGC-INFONET Digital Library Consortium was launched on 28th December 2003. The consortium facilitates current as well as archival access to more than 7,500 core and peer-reviewed electronic journals and 10 bibliographic databases from world famous publishers, scholarly societies and aggregators. The consortium was implemented in a phased manner. In the first phase, access to e-resources was offered to 50 universities having the Internet connectivity under the UGC-INFONET networking program. Thereafter, the consortium access was extended to 209 universities under the purview of UGC. The consortium provides access to e-resources in almost all disciplines including arts, humanities, social sciences, physical sciences, chemical sciences, life sciences, computer sciences, management, mathematics and statistics.

National Knowledge Commission :

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC), first of its kind in the world was set up by the Government of India on 13th June 2005 with a time-frame of three years, from 2nd October 2005 to 2nd October 2008. As a high-level advisory body to the Prime Minister of India, the National Knowledge Commission has been given a mandate to guide policy and direct reforms, focusing on certain key areas such as education, science and technology, agriculture, industry, e-governance etc. Easy access to knowledge, creation and preservation of knowledge systems, dissemination of knowledge and better knowledge services are core concerns of the commission. The Commission envisaged the future road map for the growth and development of academic libraries by imbibing core issues such as, set up a national

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commission on libraries, prepare a national census of all libraries, revamp LIS education, training and research facilities, re-assess staffing of libraries, set up a central library fund, modernize library management, encourage greater community participation in library management, promote information communication technology applications in all libraries, facilitate donation and maintenance of private collections, and encourage public private partnerships in LIS development, etc.

The most important recommendation of NKC regarding university libraries is that by 2015 the number of universities should be 1500 to cater to the needs of the youth. This, it is believed, would enable India to attain a gross enrolment ratio of at least 15 per cent by 2015. (Tilak, 2007) Is it just about numbers or the focus of policy makers and planners should be more on the quality and affordability of higher education.

If we look back and from Taxila till now, the university libraries have come a long way. There has been growth and development in every sphere and access to reading material has increased many folds. University library is still a centre of learning and research for its users. (Kaur, 2024)

Conclusion :

In the light of the above discussion, if one can say that "books are the treasure, wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations", the historical evolution of academic libraries in India reflects a journey from traditional manuscript collections to modern digital knowledge hubs. These institutions have not only preserved the intellectual heritage but have also adapted to the changing contours of education and technology, thus showing their compromise and flexibility. Their role in nation-building, academic excellence, and lifelong learning remains indispensable. As centers of enlightenment, libraries continue to bridge the past and the future. Their resilience and relevance mirror the scholarly spirit of the land.

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