

## Academic Librarians of the North-East and Automation

By

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is a report on a refresher course held at the Department of Library and Information Science, NEHU, Shillong in November 2002. The participants included librarians and faculty members from the North-East as well as from other parts of the country. The writer wanted to find out what the participating librarians felt about 'Database Management,' the theme of the refresher course and whether the course had changed their mindset about automation. The findings from the questionnaire that had been distributed as well as through observation were that while some did suffer from techno phobia, they were all willing to learn and use new technology.*

**KEYWORDS :** Library automation, Library survey, refresher course

### 0. INTRODUCTION

The rapid implementation of information technology like computerization and networking in all areas of life including libraries has compelled people to transform their mindset. It has become a dog eat dog world and anybody who does not conform to the new ways of thinking is sidelined. We have now what are called the 'information elite' who are dominating the running of organizations while the 'computer illiterate' are left to feel very inadequate. The library professionals as well as the support staff are also being shaken out of their complacency to join the march into a digital future. There is also a new belief amongst many today that "librarians are no longer needed and that libraries are dull and replaceable. There are some who view the future of libraries and consequently of librarians, as determined by technology and who therefore predict a diminished role for both in the digital future." (Deegan & Tanner, 2002, 209, 210)

Digital Future! Digital Librarians! Libraries Without Walls! Paperless Society! Words that are making a lot of librarians cringe especially those among the older generation. As if their routine work is not taking enough of their time and energy – library professionals are now being confronted

with a new problem in information technology. A 'monster' of a problem – out to replace/displace them. Should they embrace it gracefully or reject it totally? According to Biddiscombe (1996, 5), "One certainty is that there is no option than to accept that change is inevitable. It is not possible to remain as we are; it will be necessary for everyone to re-examine traditional methods and systems in the light of end-user needs and demands." The verdict is thus clear. A time may come when the library professionals will be compelled to either embrace technology or lose their jobs. Yes it can be as drastic as that (as the first few sentences of the article have stressed). Librarians everywhere have to face this uncomfortable situation. Different librarians are being affected differently by information technology. Perhaps one of the most common attitudes that they have is that of fear. 'Techno phobia', computer phobia and stress are some of the common words found in the many articles and books that are being published rapidly. The academic librarians of the North-East cannot escape the above phenomenon either. They are as affected by information technology as librarians in other parts of India and the rest of the world, if not more. For, many of them have developed an attitude of complacency towards their work and are being rudely nudged out of it by the inevitable appearance of information technology right under their noses.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

The author was able to get a glimpse of the impact that technology was having on some of the academic librarians of North-East India at a refresher course that was held recently. A similar study was conducted by Shyama Rajaram (1996) on Librarians of Academic Staff Colleges who were attending a Refresher Course at Kurukshetra University, Haryana. She found that the participants desired to learn more about modernization and automation of libraries and were happy to learn new words and skills.

A Refresher Course with the theme, 'Database Management,' was held at the Department of Library and Information Science, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong from the 8th to the 28th of November 2002. There were twenty-two participants including four lecturers. The method used was a questionnaire. The author who was also a participant was also able to interact with and observe the participants as a result of which additional information was obtained. For the purpose of this study only the librarians were taken, the lecturers were excluded. Though a majority of the librarians were from the North-East, there were also participants from as far as Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh. These too were included in the study in order to acquire some variety in opinions. While most of the participants were working in college libraries, there was also one working in the university who was included in the study. The study covered the eighteen librarians out of which were thirteen male and five female participants. Fifteen participants held the post of librarian while three were assistant librarians. The largest numbers of participants were from Assam (ten, including two females), followed by Manipur (four, including one female), Meghalaya (two, including one female), Uttaranchal (one female) and Himachal Pradesh (one male) respectively. The age of the participants ranged between thirty-three and fifty nine years while their length of service varied from five to twenty-five years.

## 2. FINDINGS

Eight of the libraries were found to possess computers. Some of the participants however complained that though computers were supposed to be allotted to them, the machines were actually kept in the offices of the Principals or Heads of Departments. Thus technically, their libraries did not possess computers. The ten participants who did not have computers agreed that computers should be introduced in their libraries. They all must have been motivated by the words of the experts who dared them to confront their principals for their 'right.' It was found during informal talks that some felt it was not necessary in their tenure as they were about to retire. The participants also unanimously agreed that they would attend training courses to develop their computer skills. Some were willing to learn even from their own children. Twelve of the participants (out of which were four females) answered that they had some kind of training in handling computers. But the author's observation throughout the practical sessions was that most was nervous around the machines and needed help.

A majority (16) of the participants found information technology to be interesting. They certainly seemed to mean it for they paid a lot of attention to and asked a lot of questions of the experts who were able to make them understand the finer points of IT in a most simple and down-to-earth manner. Every effort was made to equip the participants (to some extent) for any eventuality in dealing with computers. Right from the ability to choose the best hardware and software, to the ability to solve technical problems (do-it-yourself), all were explained beautifully. However two of the participants, both males above fifty years were honest in saying that they found technology complicated. Excitement was the feeling that six (3 females) of the participants had when dealing with computers. Another six (2 females) felt pleasure. While two males felt both excitement and pleasure when handling computers. One male participant confessed to a feeling of inadequacy in training when dealing with computers though he too felt excitement and pleasure when handling one. The older generation (3 males, 50-59 years) could just about tolerate information technology and had none of the gushing feelings of the younger lot.

The strain of keeping up with all the new developments was honestly admitted to by seven (4 females) of the participants who agreed that the pace at which new technology is being introduced into their workplace is too fast. Surprisingly this group comprised people between the ages of thirty-five and forty years. Fifteen participants also felt that library employees are expected to learn too many new things too fast. Seven male participants in the age range of forty-one to fifty-nine years felt that the pace of the introduction of new technology into their workplace is just right. Four (1 female) participants on the other hand felt that technology is creeping in too slowly. The participants were made acquainted with a few library softwares from amongst the many available in the market. Special emphasis was put on CDS/ISIS, which according to most of the experts is the better one because it is cheap and flexible. The participants (thirteen) seemed to be quite convinced about its usefulness as they were found to be listening attentively during the lectures and taking part enthusiastically during the practical demonstrations. The readymade software LIBSYS was also pushed forward by some of the experts and its easy format had the

support of three participants. Some of the experts also talked, in passing, about the “even better than LIBSYS” software, SOUL. Though there were no demonstrations on its greatness, yet one of the participants was convinced that it was the one for her library. One of the participants who were quite well versed with computers and who used the software TechLib felt that the choice of software depends on the requirements of the library and the funds available. Perhaps the refresher course helped the participants get over (to some extent) the fear of information technology that they had brought along. Eleven were already motivated while five felt that the duration was too short for learning new things. Two of the participants though motivated felt that the duration was too short. “It should be at least thirty days,” said one. So much for enthusiasm!

### 3. CONCLUSION

Thus, the college librarians in the North-East are not lagging behind in their enthusiasm about the new technology that is being introduced in their libraries. They are not averse to it and are eager to develop to meet the challenge. It remains to be seen however, how well they cope with the situation. The librarians will of course need the serious cooperation of the principals of their colleges without which their hands will remain tied. This they will be able to achieve only if they assert themselves and prove that they are not mere keepers of books but are as professional as the teachers, if not more. Perhaps actions will speak louder than words. They will have to be on their toes and not allow themselves to be taken for granted. They will have to continue to learn from various sources such as training programmes and conferences. The important thing is that they look at the big picture and not decide that since their retirement age is nearing, they have reached the end of the road. For, learning is a lifelong process and real professionals set no time limit for learning new things. The entire traditional and narrow mindset will have to be thrown out if anything of worth is to be achieved. This study, to a small extent, has shown that the scenario is not as bleak as had been imagined and that the prospects for librarians of the North-East are bright.

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### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHORS



**Ms Bikika Laloo** born in 1970, passed M.L.I.Sc from NEHU and joined as lecturer in the same university in 1996 She has seven years of teaching experience and many publications to her credit.