

More than just keepers of books: the role and training of rural librarians

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Abstract: Rural librarians are placed in situations unique from those of librarians in urban areas. Their place of work and clientele compel them to play roles that are over and above what they have learnt at library school. The uniqueness of the position of rural librarians and their multiple roles are discussed here. Also discussed are the corresponding training requirements for rural librarians.

Keywords: Rural librarians, Training of rural librarians.

Introduction

Since still a chunk of the population in every country still resides in rural areas, and since this group has information needs that are fairly unique from other citizens, rural librarians have to play roles that are over and above what they have learnt at library school. To fulfill these unique roles, corresponding training is also necessary. This paper takes a look at the situations rural librarians are faced with and how they are overcoming these situations

Types of rural libraries

According to Professor P.N. Kaula (2000), rural or village libraries have been established and maintained in several states through the following agencies:

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- Gram Panchayats
- Cooperative Societies

- Religious Endowments
- Youth Organizations
- Voluntary Organizations

The Rural Community

The term 'rural,' immediately conjures up visions of villages and farmers. And that in a sense is what 'rural' actually connotes. This is an area that cannot be ignored as practically all countries in the world, no matter how urban centric some may seem, still have their village bases. "India," [especially] "is a land of villages. The majority of its population still lives in rural areas. Poverty and illiteracy are the two major obstacles to the quality of life in rural areas. The people in rural areas are still largely dependent on agriculture for employment even after fifty-six years of independence." (Kumar, 2005) "Thailand," which is "a developing country in Southeast Asia, has a very large rural population of approximately 43 million (71% of the total population of 60 million). (Cheunwattana, 1999). Even in a first world country like the United States of America, "forty-five million...live in areas in which service through public libraries is not available.....[these] reside in rural agricultural areas." (Wilson, 2007).

Types of users

Educated farmers, uneducated farmers, uneducated youth, educated employed youth, educated unemployed youth, women, children.

Information needs

As in urban areas, in rural areas too, inhabitants require information "relating to their work and daily life." (Veeranjaneyulu and Ramesh, 2002). "However the need of [the] rural community is different from [that] of an urban community in terms of age group, literacy and education, vocations and professions." (Kumar, 2005). Members of the rural community need information for the following purposes (Veeranjaneyulu and Ramesh, 2002):

- agriculture
- health and childcare

- housing
- food and nutrition
- family welfare
- animal husbandry and dairy development
- training programmes for employment
- credit and marketing
- special assistance programmes for the socially economically deprived groups
- cottage and village industries, etc.

Apart from the above, Cheunwattana's (1999) list also includes:

- land rights
- citizenship
- local politics
- current news and events
- recreation
- drug prevention
- sex education
- parenting information
- environment conservation

Problems

Despite information technology making inroads into rural areas, studies have found that rural inhabitants continue to confront problems in meeting their information needs. This is especially true in a developing country like India where problems like the following still persist:

1. Illiteracy and a lack of will to read are among the main stumbling blocks to solving the information needs of rural folk. (Kaula, 2000)
2. Information sources on local content are inadequate due to poor communication infrastructure. This has compelled the rural folk to depend on the knowledge and experience of the elderly, friends/relatives and educated persons. (Kumar, 2005)

3. General economic backwardness [even in an advanced country like the USA] (Wilson, 2007; Bhattacharjee, 1999); rise in cost of reading material; and dearth of dedicated workers to promote library services in rural areas impede the development of the rural community. The development of public libraries has also not been given due importance (Bhattacharjee, 1999).
4. Low level of community participation and involvement render library services like bookmobiles and the combined library ineffective. (Cheunwattana 1999)

The Role of Rural Librarians

In the light of the above situation in rural areas which clearly is unique from that in the urban areas, the rural librarian's is no ordinary role. Apart from the mandatory role as intermediary between information and users with its accompanying implications, the rural librarian is also:

1. **Guide and Counselor:** On all matters such as agriculture, public health and hygiene, family welfare, legal matters etc.; lecturer on various topics related to rural areas such as – panchayati raj system, necessity of adult education, fundamental rights, family planning etc. (Veeranjaneyulu and Ramesh, 2002).
2. **Trainer in community empowerment:** In order to maintain community enthusiasm, interest and involvement in library projects, rural librarians need to use strategies like leadership training on topics such as participative planning and decision making as well as collective actions; active mobilization of community participation in library activities; and creating a support system for local initiatives and actions. (Cheunwattana, 1999).
3. **Trainer and online support staff for Internet users.** (Cisler, 1995)
4. **Facilitator:** when a community decides that it wants to be better connected, the most basic role the library can assume is to serve as a meeting place for a group that is planning a community network. Even if the library has no computer, or may never have used a network, it can offer a room after hours for initial meetings. The librarian can (a) suggest that interested parties

meet to discuss changes in networks and telecommunications in their town or county; (b) invite representatives from the cable company, cellular service, local BBS system operators, the school, city and perhaps even the power company; find someone (either a local or an outsider) who has something to say or demonstrate and invite the person to speak. (Cisler, 1995)

Training of Rural Librarians

Seeing as their role is extra special, the training of rural librarians is no less special. Sunil Kumar (2005) is of the opinion that, "this is the right time that existing library science schools are impressed to review their curriculum to accommodate rural information services..... [the] training and retraining [of rural librarians] should also ensure knowledge of rural information sources and local content through national bodies like NIC [which would] serve them in an effective and better way." While Vibhuti (2003) is convinced that, "the great libraries of the future will not be those with great collections, but with good staff because knowledge must be discussed in the library before it is used." He is also of the opinion that, "it is important that the attitude of [agriculture] libraries' staff should be very cooperative. In addition to learning about the technical aspect of information technology and its uses..... there is a need to make an effort for attitudinal change among the human resources in libraries."

Apart from the requisite degrees in Library and Information Science, rural librarians can benefit from the following programmes. (Kannappanavar and Kumbargoudar, 2004):

- Refresher Courses
- Orientation programmes
- Workshops
- Specialized Training

In India, efforts for training rural librarians are being made by such organizations as Raja Ram Mohun Roy Library Foundation which is conducting Workshops and Short Term Training Courses for working librarians from time to time. An example of institutes providing training for rural librarianship abroad is the Library School at Hampton Institute, USA which has trained more than 100 librarians who are now serving in Southern states (Wilson, 2000).

Conclusion

While a lot still needs to be done in relation to meeting the information needs of the rural community especially in the area of Library Legislation, it is heartening to note that efforts are being made both in India and abroad to concentrate on rural librarians who can in turn give necessary attention to their rural clientele. Proper understanding of their roles and proper training will go a long way towards bringing rural library services at par with those in urban areas.

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