

UNESCO'S PUBLIC LIBRARY MANIFESTO – 1994: AN IMPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

Three definitions of public library provided by Unesco during 1949 to 1994 to cater to the needs of the changing society were widely acclaimed by the professionals, educators and commoners. Unesco declared public library as a living force that provides education, information and recreation. All the three definitions depict the public library as a responsible institution for the overall development of the community and reflect modern trends of services provided by the public library. The 1994 definition is a remarkable one inasmuch as it links the public library with the eradication of illiteracy from the community and the development of computer literacy skills for the community. Moreover, the definition encompasses networking among the different types of libraries, resource sharing and encourages creative urge of the young people and popularizes the performing arts. It is urged that Unesco should consider the unhappy situations of public libraries in many underdeveloped countries and help bridge the gap between the information rich and information poor nations.

Keywords: Public libraries; Informal education; Information provider; Community development services; Eradication of illiteracy; Resource sharing.

INTRODUCTION

“The members ... were unanimous in calling for continuous revision .. because the rapidity of change in modern life makes it impossible to foretell what changes are in the making, each with its impact on public libraries and those whom they serve”. This statement was made as early as in 1966 while publishing *Minimum Standards for Public Library Systems* (1967) by the Public Library Association of the United States of America. The statement was very much justified and is true even in today's context of technologically developed society. Indeed, the public library is the mirror of a society. The reading habit of

the people is reflected in the collection the library holds. As time changes, so does people's taste who adapts themselves to the changing needs.

Public libraries served the needs of the general public and acted as the memory of mankind since its inception. As a result, the public libraries provided information and recreation and were treated as the partner of progress. In all societies, specially in the developed nations as well as to some extent in some developing nations public libraries played a vital role and established norms without which no institution can run properly. As a result library and education became synonymous terms and were

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considered as an indicator of overall progress of a nation. A public library collection projects new developments of the society in the form of published literature and other forms of new materials. To accommodate the changing patterns of information needs of the people and also new ideas and thoughts, Unesco from time to time redefines public library together with its activities and responsibilities. Unesco from the beginning has been performing commendable jobs to popularize the cause of public libraries among the nations.

The importance of the public library gained its momentum when the United States of America and the United Kingdom, published their first Public Library Acts. "In 1848 the state legislature gave the city of Boston permission to levy taxes for running a public library and general court of Massachusetts promulgated law for Boston Public Library" (Sharma, 1987). Similarly, "The year 1850 marked in U.K. advent of free and tax supported libraries. In this year U.K. adopted the first Public Library Act" (Sharma, 1987).

Since the inception of the public library concept, hundreds of definitions have been produced by the public librarians, library scientists, book-lovers, and social scientists. These definitions emphasized extended responsibilities and commitments to the society. Apart from all other definitions of the public libraries the present study is devoted to the **three definitions of Unesco** given from time to time to reallocate its new assignments.

In the year 1949 Unesco defined public library as a democratic institution, established under clear authority of law to provide facilities to pursue education as a life-long process. It termed public library as the 'People's University' where self-education is encouraged and which acts as a center for informal education. Besides, it is a place where the young and the elderly can have free access and equal rights. It is open for all sections of the people in a community irrespective of caste, creed, race, sex, or economic status. This definition worked very successfully for nearly two decades giving new incentives to redesign public library in line with Unesco's definition. Public libraries were established by nations for educating people and also serve as a center of information and recreation. The public libraries found a solid footing as they were created under legal basis. The famous often-quoted definition of democracy: 'By the people, of the people and for the people' becomes part and parcel of public libraries. Nearly two decades later Unesco provided another definition of the public library. In the year 1972 Unesco declared public library as a "living force" for education, culture and information. It also emphasized cooperation between libraries in a country and considered public library as a center for communication and information. The public library should be accessible to all including the handicapped people of all age groups. The public library should respect the languages of the community people. Book mobile should be operated to serve the population who reside in the remote corners of the country. The children of the community should get service according to

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their requirements. The public library should supplement the facilities provided by the libraries of the schools, colleges and universities. The old and the senior citizens of the community should be given adequate library service and it would act as a center of continuing education.

The 1972 definition bestowed upon public libraries many new responsibilities. After a lapse of 22 years Unesco again defined the public library as an institution established to meet the new demands which arose due to the advent of new technology and to prepare the community to face the challenges of the 21st century. Naturally, the Unesco definition declared in the year 1994 is wider in scope and it assigned new activities for the public library. Reiterating the concept of the public library as 'living force', new duties and functions of the public libraries were introduced. The new definition portrayed public libraries as an "agent for fostering peace and spiritual welfare of the community people".

The public library should act as a center for community information and cater to local needs of the people. The definition pronounced once again the equality in access, special service for the people of linguistic minority, service for the local hospital population to the prison people and the senior citizens of the community. The public library will also supplement the collections of the school, college and university libraries. The public library is to encourage 'creative urge' of young people. It is a place for self-education and self-improvement and serves as a center of continuing education. It is also the

responsibility of the public library to keep up the cultural heritage, encourage performing arts, provide facilities for education, inspiration, information and recreation to people of all age levels. The access to the library is open to all and without any barrier to any people of the community. The public library is a non-profit organisation creating interest for education and awareness of cultural heritage of the country. The library collection should abandon all types of ideological, political or religious censorship.

The library should work towards eradicating illiteracy and organize programmes to popularize education and its value in the society. The library should also encourage networking activities among different types of libraries be it national, academic, special, research or school library.

The library should work as a center for library cooperation and act as a place for resource sharing among the libraries of a nation. The public library is also responsible for 'computer literacy skills' of the community and is to ensure services to 'local enterprises, associations and interest groups'. It is also the function of the public library to create interests and provide opportunities for professional as well as continuing education. The public library should also make arrangements to make library services for outreach and conduct user education programmes.

At the interval of roughly two decades, Unesco modified and added new functions

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and redesignated new responsibilities just to make the services of the public libraries more user-oriented and cost-effective for the overall benefit of the common people.

Unesco Public Library Manifesto. 1994.
Paris : Unesco.

Indeed, it is a dynamic “living force” of a nation. It is the public library that stands for the overall educational, moral and spiritual development of a nation. The library collection should be built up in accordance to the need of the people.

Be it a developed nation, or an under developed country, a public library should act as the nerve center of a nation. In spite of Unesco’s untiring efforts, most of the developing nations are lagging far behind in respect of public library developments. Already there emerged ‘information rich and information poor nations’. It is a fact that many developing nations cannot afford to provide adequate library services.

Unesco gives priority for the support to poor and underdeveloped nations to bridge the gaps. The differences thus created among the nations should also be minimized if not wiped out, otherwise the new definitions would be meaningless to many nations.

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