APPLICATION OF HISTORICAL METHOD OF RESEARCH IN THE STUDY OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE : AN OVERVIEW

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The need and importance of library historiography and the application of historical research method in library and information science are discussed. Mentions its special characteristics and significant studies being done in the field with application of historical method of research. Suggests application of scientific technique in the study and research using historical method. The formulation and testing of a hypothesis and the analysis of data as essential component of scientific technique to make the historical studies more reliable, are stressed.

WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Research is an endeavour to discover, develop and verify knowledge. The Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines research as "careful or critical inquiry or examination in seeking facts or principles; a diligent investigation to ascertain something"[1]. Hillway defines research as "a method of study by which through the careful and exhaustive investigation of all the ascertainable evidence bearing upon the definable problem, we reach a solution to that problem" [2]. The product, or findings, of a given piece of research should be authentic and verifiable contribution to knowledge in the field studied. In short, research is a systematic and refined method of reflective thinking employing specialized tools, instruments, and problems that would be possible under ordinary means. It starts with a problem, collects data or facts, analyses them critically and draws conclusions based on the actual evidence and finds out better solutions of the problem.

GENESIS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY IN INDIA

The Collin's English Dictionary defines 'Historiography' as "the writing of history, the study of the development of historical method, historical research and writing any body of historical literature" [3]. In India, the term 'Historiography' is used to denote "the history" or "the history of historical thought" [4]. As far as Indian historiography is concerned, it has been viewed and written by the historians and scholars as the one weak spot in Indian literature and is, in fact, nonexistent. Almost total lack of the historical sense is so characteristic, that the whole course of Sanskrit literature is darkened by the shadow of this deficiency and shows suffering from an absence of exact chronology. So true is this, that the very date of Kalidasa, the great Indian poet, was long a matter of controversy within the limits of a thousand years, and is even now doubtful to the extent of a century or two. Thus, the dates of ancient Sanskrit scholars and their works, in the vast majority of cases, are only known approximately, having been inferred from indirect evidences, quotation or allusion, development of language or style. And, as to the events of their lives, we usually know nothing practically [5]. History became a popular subject of research in India in the late fifties. Since then, there have been considerable efforts which were put in for the promotion of historical writings not only in the discipline of history alone, but also in the disciplines like economics, sociology, political science and library and information science.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

History is an integrated narrative or description of past events or facts written in a spirit of critical inquiry into the whole truth, Mouly [7] states that "as used by the Greeks, history meant an inquiry designed to construct past events, and in a sense historical research can be defined as a scholarly attempt to discover what has happened". Sukhia [8] opines that a historical research conducted in the study of any subject denotes an effort to recount some aspects of past life. In other words, the historian attempts to give meaning to the facts in the light of a relevant theory.

NEED AND PURPOSE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN LIBRARIANSHIP

Although there is a difference of opinion regarding acceptance of historical research as a truly scientific research, as it does not permit enough precision and objectivity, yet there is a consensus that historical research has much to contribute in the field of library and information science. The basic purpose of historical research is to provide a clear perspective of the present and facilitate planning for the future. Busha and Harter [9] wrote that historical research could contribute to the body of knowledge about librarianship and could increase our understanding of how, when and why past events occurred. They further opined that it can expand our appreciation of the significance of these events. Michael Harris [10] stated that "a clear understanding of the historical definition of the functions of libraries may well contribute to increased communication between libraries". Similarly, emphasizing on the need of historical research Jesse Shera [11] wrote that "library history allows librarians to better understand the present and to more effectively fulfill their social responsibility". While commenting on the status of library history in India, Donald G. Davis, JR. of the University of Texas at Austin also advocated for the promotion of historical writings in the field of library and information science and writes, "Indian library history is a subject that excites the imagination because of its long duration, rich primary resources, and vast potential for significant study. Yet one can be frustrated not only by the problems of library development in India, but by the status of describing and evaluating that development with historical perspective" [12]. In short, good historical research can help librarians and information specialists to present the past events efficiently and effectively without repeating the mistakes made in the past.

TYPES OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Historical research has been categorized in the following six Types [13] :

1. Biographical research
2. Histories of institutions and organizations
3. Investigation of sources and influences
4. Editing and translating historical documents
5. Studying the history of ideas
6. Compiling bibliographies

SOURCES OF DATA/INFORMATION

In historical research, the data or information is generally gathered from the following information sources.

1. Official records, such as laws, deeds, annual reports of organizations, charters, etc;
2. Newspapers and other periodicals;
3. Eye-witness accounts of events;
4. Archives;
5. Manuscripts;
6. Letters and personal diaries;
7. Biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs;
8. Historical studies;
9. Literary writings;
10. Oral histories;
11. Memorials;
12. Catalogues;
13. Schedules, agendas, etc; and
14. Archaeological and geological sources (nondocuments).

To conduct a historical study primary and secondary sources of information play a vital role. Primary sources represent the data which lie closest to the historical events. It trends to ensure the integrity of a study and to strengthen its reliability. Whereas, secondary sources of information provide important information and conceptual development not available elsewhere. Therefore, secondary sources of information are the best tools for rounding out the setting or filling in the gaps between primary sources of information.

FUNDAMENTAL STEPS OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Generally, it is expected that historical research should also follow the same criteria and procedures as is followed by the other scientific methods of inquiry. Keeping this in view, following steps should be followed in the historical research.

1. Identification and delineation of the problem of historical significance;
2. Collection of data and information through primary and secondary sources;
3. Formulation of a hypothesis, if possible;
4. Verifying the gathered data in terms of authenticity of sources and the validity of their contents;
5. Organization and analysis of the pertinent data; and

6. Presentation of facts in a readable form with proper organization, composition, exposition and interpretation.

HYPOTHESIS IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

The use of a hypothesis in historical research helps to increase the objectivity of the study and minimize researcher's bias. It also guides the researcher in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data by indicating what is relevant to the study. The hypothesis provides a basis for considering various factors in relation to one another and synthesizing them into a generalization or conclusion that puts their overall significance in focus. Thus, like any other kind of research method, historical research tends to benefit by incorporation of a hypothesis.

REQUISITES OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Following are the main requisites of historical research:

1. Knowledge and availability of adequate historical sources;
2. Selection of relevant and significant historical evidences; and
3. Logical arrangement of material. The researcher should have a specific plan for the acquisition, organization, storage and retrieval of the data.

PROBLEMS IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

The main problems faced in a historical research are:

1. Deciding to what extent the data is enough. The researcher must be careful to avoid an over reliance on insufficient amount of data, or evidence;
2. Improper selection of data. The historian must avoid improper or faulty selection of data, e.g. ignoring of some data, exaggerating others etc;
3. Relying too heavily on secondary sources of information;
4. Investigating an overly broad problem;
5. Failing to evaluate adequately, the historical data and their sources; and
6. Failing to interpret the data.

SOME SIGNIFICANT STUDIES IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE WITH APPLICATION OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH METHOD

Over the years changes in the multifarious facets of human life in modern society have radically changed the functions of the library, particularly in view of the new information demands of the users. Placed, in a broad spectrum of historical processes and events, the studies related to library historiography witn application of historical research method become significant.

Several studies have been conducted on different aspects of the history of libraries in India. One of the earliest calls for an Indian library historiography came from N.M. Dutta [15], in an address to the Third All Bengal Library Conference held in Calcutta in 1932. His talk, published as the *History of Indian Libraries from Earlier Times to the Present Day*, lamented the lack of interest or writing on the subject. He said, "the subject which I have selected for my discourse is the history of ancient and modern Indian libraries, but time will not permit of anything more than a brief survey of the subject. I would recommend the topic to any university student for his doctoral dissertation. If we look back to the distant past, we are tempted to think that there were no libraries in ancient India [16]". O.P. Sharma pointed out the continuing discouraging state of Indian library historical writing [17]. Ramakrishna Rao, in his article, *Library Development in India,* attempts to place the topic in the context of historical and social factors [18]. Another major survey article is of Anis Khurshid entitled *Growth of Libraries in India,* which concentrates on the history of libraries for last two centuries and treats the earlier history in a cursory fashion [19]. A.K. Mukherjee [20], S.K. Mookerjee [21], and D.N. Marshall [22] attempt at critically evaluating the position of libraries and their functions in ancient India. Mukherjee [20], Dutta [23], and Mishra (1979) also attempted to give historical assessments of the libraries in medieval India, a period which was particularly dominated and patronized by personal involvement of the kings and other upper class gentry. S.N. Sadhu and B.N. Saraf [24] have provided one of the few general treatments in library legislation. Kaula [25], Trehan [26], and Nagar [27] have critically evaluated the library movement in India. More recently, Donald G. Davis, JR. [28] of the univer-

sity of Texas at Austin, commented on the status of library historiography in India "although a core literature and Indian library historiography exists, it has many imbalances and gaps. The scholars are very dispersed in their interests and their geographical location. With one person rarely contributing more than one work, there is little pattern to existing research efforts. The one obsession appears to be pre-occupation with legislation and implementation of authorization for public libraries to the exclusion of other libraries in their role in national culture". R.K. Bhatt [29] in his study has critically examined the growth and development of libraries in modern India (1901-1985) with special reference to Delhi.

The interest and recognition of historiography of libraries were founded on the vastness of its temporal and geographical purview and distinct identity bearing the history of this continent where the application of historical research method, through which the historical data can be analyzed and examined more or less in a scientific way, has a significant role to play. A list of selective historical research being done in the field of library and information science both in India and abroad is appended at the end.

CONCLUSION

In the light of foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that there is a vital scope of the application of historical method of research in the field of library and information science. Undoubtedly, in the present day librarianship, there is a continuing need for genuine historical research in librarianship which has remained largely a neglected area. To promote historical research in the field of librarianship, it is advisable for the historical researcher to follow some sort of scientific method of inquiry, including the formulation and testing of a hypothesis and the analysis and interpretation of data. Such processes will not only help him to establish true and healthy results and findings, but will also increase faith among research community in the application of historical research method.

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Appendix

Select List of Historical Studies Conducted in the field of Library and Information Science

(a) Foreign Studies:

1. SPENCER (Gwladys). Chicago public library: orign and backgrounds. 1943. University of Chicago Press; Chicago.

2. SHERA (Jesse H). Foundations of the public library: origins of the public library movement in New England from 1629-1855. 1949. University of Chicago; Chicago.

3. COLLIER (Francis G). A history of the American public library movement through 1880. 1952. Harvard University. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation).

4. WHITEHILL (Walther M). Boston Public Library: a centennial history. 1956. Harvard University Press; Cambridge.

5. BOBINSKI (George S). Carnegie libraries: their history and impact on American public library development. 1959. American Library Association; Chicago.

6. KRAUS (Jow W). Book collections of five colonial college libraries: a subject analysis. 1960. University of Illinois. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation).

7. WILLIAMSON (William W). William Fredrick Poole and the modern library movement. 1963. Columbia University Press; New York.

(b) Indian Studies:

1. OHDEDAR (A K). The growth of the library in modern India: 1498-1836. 1966. World Press Private Ltd.; Calcutta.

2. DUTTA (Bimal Kumar). Libraries & librarianship of ancient and medieval India. Atma Ram & Sons; Delhi.

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7. AGRAWAL (S P) Ed. Development of library services in India. 1989. Concept Publishing Company; New Delhi.

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