

## Chapter 16

# LIBRARIANSHIP AS A PROFESSION

### 0 ORIGIN

Librarianship is as old as the book itself. However, it started satisfying some of the characteristics of a profession from 1876 onwards. In 1876, American Library Association was established. The other events of importance, which took place in 1876 were the founding of *The American Library Journal* by F. Leypoldt, the publication of the first edition of DDC under the title *A classification and subject index for cataloguing and arranging of the books and pamphlets of a library* by Melvil Dewey and C.A. Cutters' *Rules for making a dictionary catalogue*. The imparting of formalized method of training was started in 1887, with the establishment of the first library school at Columbia College by Melvil Dewey. Over the last 100 years or so librarianship has grown a great deal.

### 1 PRESENT SITUATION

Today, we have library associations at different levels (international, regional, national, state and local). Many associations covering specialized interests have also come into being. For example, in India, we have IASLIC (Indian Association of Special Libraries and Information Centres), MLAI (Medical Library Association of India) and IATLIS (Indian Association of Teachers of Library and Information Science). These are working towards Professionalization of librarianship. There is a large body of growing literature on library and information science. Specialised journals have started coming out in recent years. For example, *International Classification, Serial Librarian, Bulletin of Medical Library Association, Research in Librarianships* etc. It has its own indexing and abstracting services (such as *Library Literature, Library and Information Science Abstracts*). There is an adequate body of literature for training and educating professionals to acquire specialized knowledge and skills. Educational programmes have been developed in different countries, which are strong

enough to provide education and training of fairly high standard to train generalists as well as specialists to serve the needs of the society.

## 2 DEFINITIONS

A profession is defined as "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force of organisation or concerted opinion, high standards of achievement and conduct and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service."<sup>1</sup>

*A dictionary of the social sciences* says that "the term professions denotes occupations which demand a highly specialized knowledge and skill acquired at least in part by courses of a more or less theoretical nature and not by practice alone, tested by some form of examination either at a university or some other authorized institution, and conveying to the persons who possess them considerable authority in relation to 'clients' . . . At present the term usually denotes certain occupations whose members give service rather than engage in the production and distribution of goods."<sup>2</sup>

The above definitions indicate as to what can be the characteristics of a profession. However, there are differences in emphasis.

## 3 CHARACTERISTICS

Often a question has been raised whether or not librarianship is a profession. The answer to this question will depend upon whether or not librarianship possesses major characteristics of a profession.

The major characteristics<sup>3</sup> of a profession are given below:

- (i) *Body of specialized knowledge and technical skills.* A profession calls for specialized knowledge and technical skills. There is no doubt that librarianship requires specialized knowledge and technical skills.
- (ii) *Formal training and experience.* It requires intensive prepa-

<sup>1</sup>*Webster's third new international dictionary of the English language*, unabridged with seven language dictionary, Springfield Mass., Merriam, 1961, vol. 2, p. 1811.

<sup>2</sup>N. Elias, "Professions", *A dictionary of the social sciences*, ed. by Julius Gould and William L. Kolb, New York, Free Press of Glencoe, 1964, p. 542.

<sup>3</sup>Dalton E. McFarland, *Management foundations and practices*, 5th ed., New York, McMillan, 1979, p. 16.

ration for acquiring the necessary knowledge of methods for putting knowledge to work and technical skills. For this there should be formalized method of acquiring training and experience. Experience shows that an intensive course of two years training leading to Master's degree in library and information science is desirable. In practice large majority of professionals possess a degree or post-graduate diploma of the duration of one academic year. This should be considered insufficient for senior jobs.

(iii) *An ethical code or standard of conduct.* There should be an ethical code or standard of conduct to be followed by its members with clients and colleagues. Various library associations have laid down code of professional ethics for their members. IASLIC has done this for its members. However, there is no universal code of ethics.

(iv) *A commitment to public service rather than to monetary gain.* The main aim being to render public service, therefore, it requires that its members should regard service to customers/clients/patrons as the basis of their work rather than monetary gain. Librarianship is a service profession, therefore, the user is regarded as a king.

(v) *Formal organization to espouse professionalization.* There should be some formal organization that will bind all the members together for the smooth and efficient functioning of the profession. The aim of the formal organization being to: (a) achieve a high standard of performance on the part of its professionals; (b) work towards a common goal; (c) carry out collective thinking; (d) serve as a forum for achieving consensus on matters of professional concern.

Large number of library association have come into being at different levels. Some of these are general. Others are highly specialized. They are supposed to espouse professionalization. But library associations have succeeded only to a small extent in this regard.

(vi) *Licensing of practitioners.* In medicine, each person who intends to practice medicine, gets himself registered with Medical Council of India (MCI). Then he is given a license to practice. There is no practice of this kind for librarians prevailing in India.

Other characteristics are given below:

(i) *Rigid rules and high standards of qualifications.* There should be rigid rules and high standards of qualifications for new en-

trants into the profession. Standards of qualifications of professional staff have been laid down in certain sectors. In many cases, these are lowered down to fit internal candidates who may be found otherwise suitable.

- (ii) *Bond of trust between its members and clients.* There should be a bond of trust between its members and customers/patrons/clients. A bond of trust does exist in the field of librarianship. This is more true in advanced countries.
- (iii) *Financial return not the measure of success.* In it, financial return is not regarded as a measure of success. Due to changing values of Indian society, library professionals have sometimes given more value to financial return. This is not desirable.
- (iv) *Pursued for the sake of others.* It is pursued for the sake of others and not merely for one's own sake. Librarianship is service oriented and user is the king. In recent times, user studies are getting more importance so that library services could be based on actual and anticipated information needs of the users. Thus user is getting more attention.

#### 4 LACK OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

According to Blumer, "Professionalization seeks to clothe a given area with standards of excellence, to establish rules of conduct, to develop a sense of responsibility, to set criteria for recruitment and training, to ensure a measure of protection for members, to establish collective control over the area, and to elevate it to a position of dignity and social standing in the society."<sup>4</sup>

If we apply the above criteria to library professionals in India then we find that many of them do not measure up to the mark. Code of ethics have been established by library associations but professionals have not been following these strictly. There is certainly a lack of sense of responsibility to a certain extent. Indian society is fast changing. Old values are being abandoned. In university and college libraries, criteria for recruitment and training of employees has been standardized but in other sectors, not much progress has been made. Library associations have been taking measures to protect the interest of the members. Special library associations have been formed to take care of the interests of the librarians belonging to different categories. For instance INDAAL (Indian Association of Academic Lib-

<sup>4</sup>Herbert Blumer, "Preface", *Professionalization*, edited by Howard M. Vollmer and Donald L. Mills, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1966, p. xi.



rarians), MLAI (Medical Library Association of India) and AALDI (Association of Agricultural Librarians and Documentalists of India), have been formed to look after the interest of university and college librarians, Medical Librarians and Agricultural Librarians respectively. As regards position of dignity and social standing in the society, there is a long way to go. In the United State and Canada, the trend is to provide academic status to librarians working in university and college libraries. In India, the struggle for achieving academic status in university and college libraries is going to be long and arduous one.

However, librarians must fully anticipate the nature and implications of faculty status. That is with faculty status new responsibilities and obligations will fall on librarians. They must show clear evidence of being able to shoulder new responsibilities and obligations.

There has been a great deal of controversy about social status of librarians. Very often librarians measure it in terms of salary scales. Salary scales in college and university libraries are comparable with teachers. But in public and government libraries, the situation is deplorable. Truly speaking, social status refers to position in society. He has every opportunity to establish his status in society by services offered to his clients.

Librarians must take pride in their professional jobs resulting in professionalism. They must realize that any professional job taken seriously can be very demanding and it would require specialized knowledge and skills. Once he realizes this fact, then he would start considering himself as a professional in his own right. Higher level of education and training would result in greater professionalization. This has already happened. What is important is that a professional librarian must adopt professional outlook, which will go a long way towards professionalization.

Lack of professionalization in India is apparent from the membership figures of Indian Library Association (ILA). At present as of Nov. 1986, active membership is 1700. This is a very small membership as compared with total number of professionals in India. As such ILA can not be considered as representative of the whole profession. This weakens the bargaining power of the national association to achieve welfare of the profession in terms of social status and dignity.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Librarianship has evolved a body of knowledge, which is transferable.

This body of knowledge includes principles that can be identified, applied and mastered. Thus body of literature is available to acquire specialized knowledge and skills to train and educate a professional. It has developed specific skills and tools, which enable a librarian to carry out his duties and responsibilities. These professional associations promote excellence in the work of its members and aim at achieving social standing for the profession. Associations of librarians have developed code of ethics for their members. Like other professions, librarianship requires a discipline for its effective performance. Thus it possesses all the characteristics of a profession. But it has a long way to go before it is accepted as a full-fledged profession comparable to other leading professions. The profession must continue to work towards achieving excellence in service to its clientele. The application of information technology is highly relevant in this context. The satisfaction of the clients is the final test of its achievements. There is an urgent need for inducing greater degree of professionalization amongst professionals. Professional associations can play an important role in this regard.

#### FURTHER READING

- FRANK ATKINSON, *Librarianship; an introduction to the profession*, London, Clive Bingley, 1974, pp. 7-8.
- JEAN KEY GATES, *Introduction to librarianship*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1968, part 2.
- HOWARD M. VOLLMER and DONAL L. MILLS, ed, *Professionalization*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1966.