Chapter 11

Libraries and the Preservation of Public Intellectual Space and Heritage

Anil Kumar Nauriya
Supreme Court of India, India

ABSTRACT

There is one aspect of Libraries that needs particularly to be highlighted, namely the role of the public library as a par excellence site that upholds the public intellectual space when contrasted to the more restricted academic space. It is a primary means by which public intellectuals and, through them, civil society, may hold even academia to account when the latter becomes confined by dead habits or restricted by institutional, bureaucratic, elitist or other, structures. It needs to be emphasized that academia and scholarship are not necessarily congruent. The interplay between academia and scholarship is crucial and that is made possible by the public library. Open libraries, especially public libraries, are at least as vital as the academia. The importance of a library or a museum is not necessarily related to its location or its size. “Preservation” and “intellectual heritage” need to be decolonized in order to realize epistemic justice.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries are for all. In my journeys from India to South Africa I have come across excellent public libraries and some private ones, and have been privileged to make the acquaintance of some wonderful, dedicated and skilled librarians. South Africa is especially fortunate to have vast and usually well organised collections in its several public libraries.

Old newspapers have been exceedingly well preserved in public libraries in Pietermaritzburg, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Kimberley and in several other places. There are excellent records in Tshwane/Pretoria and the level of maintenance almost everywhere is quite creditable. The libraries are not only well-stocked but also extensively used. The library halls in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town were always overflowing with users whenever I went there. The Killie Campbell Library in Durban had extensive holdings as did the Don Africana Library under local government in Durban. That the children have not been neglected is evident from several other of these libraries, including the ones at Edendale near Pietermaritzburg and in Volksrust.

Apart from the general considerations, there is one particular aspect of Libraries that is sought especially to be highlighted in this chapter, namely the role of the public library as a par excellence site that upholds the public intellectual space when contrasted to what is, in certain respects, a more restricted and restrictive academic space. It is a primary means by which public intellectuals and, through them, civil society may hold even academia to account when the latter becomes confined by dead habit or restricted by institutional, bureaucratic, elitist or other structures. It needs to be emphasized that the academia and scholarship are not necessarily congruent. The interplay between academia and scholarship is crucial and that is made possible by the public library. Open libraries, especially public libraries, are at least as vital as the academia. The importance of a library or a Museum is not necessarily related to its location or its size. Some small libraries hold rare materials. These need to be preserved in themselves and also as they have a bearing on our tangible and intangible heritage. “Preservation” and “Intellectual Heritage” need to be decolonized in order to realise epistemic and other justice. Our objective in this chapter is to discuss these issues bearing in mind especially the experience in India and South Africa, utilising this experience to illustrate the aspects and principles we seek to highlight.
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