

Professional Ethics in Librarianship: an Indian perspective

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Abstract

The library profession is at a crucial point. In the information age, the role of libraries and librarians are more demanding than ever. From librarians, we can learn how to identify and evaluate information that is essential for making decisions that affect the way we live, work, learn, and govern ourselves. Most librarians believe that they are part of a profession that is service oriented, democratic and non-judgmental. Indian libraries are ideally suited to play a crucial role in rejuvenating public spirit by providing not only information but also the expanded opportunities for dialogue that the public needs to make decisions about common concerns. The intent of this paper is to help librarians' answer to the questions like, "What is ethical practice?" or "How should the librarian act or behave in their work according to the given ethical codes?"

Keywords: Ethics, Profession, Professional Ethics, Codes of Ethics, Ethics of librarianship.

1. Introduction

Libraries are the storehouse of knowledge from time immemorial. They have been satisfying the user's thirst for knowledge by providing required information. They are adding to the boundaries of knowledge. "A librarian is a person who looks after the storage and retrieval of information. In a workplace, the librarian is usually a professional who is trained and educated to deal with information in a wide variety of formats and settings" (Wordi, 2010). A librarian helps users to navigate through the voyage of the internet and evaluate information efficiently. Librarians offer a helping hand to users to find out the required pieces of information and to use it for personal and professional purposes (BLS, 2011). Library and information science profession is a service oriented profession with an aim to fulfill the information needs of the people. Libraries and information centers are the trinity of staff (Library and information professionals), information sources (documents) and patrons (users). Library professionals act as a bridge between the library users and information sources. In order to make libraries a dynamic institution, library staff has to perform their professional responsibility in a right manner so that aim of libraries is achieved without any obstacle. This responsibility of library professionals to perform their duties in right manner has given rise to the concept of professional ethics in LIS profession.

2. Literature Review

Reference to library ethics and the need for a code for Indian librarianship can be traced back to the writings of Ram Labhaya in 1950 (as cited in Chatterjee, 1984). Maganand (1962) forcefully argued the case for professional ethics for librarianship following the models

provided by medical and legal professions. He supported the inclusion of lessons on ethics in Library Science curriculum (Maganand, 1962, p. 47-188). Mittal (1984) has opined that ethics of librarianship denotes the conduct and behavior of those who adopt the profession. He has referred to the Five Laws as the cardinal principles and basis of his list of ethical behavior including duties to readers, to books, to the profession, to the staff and to him (Mittal, 1984, p. 27-30).

Patwardhan (1984, p. 44) believed that a code of ethics provides a guideline for professionals in discharging their duties and punish professionals engaged in non-professional activities. Ethics is the art of determining what is right or good. It is used in three different but related ways and thus signifies (a) a general pattern or "way of life" (b) a set-off rules of conduct or moral code and (c) inquiry about ways of life and rules of conduct (Dwivedi, 1987, p. 22).

D. Kaur (2002) discussed in his paper that codes of ethics are very important for librarianship to deals with actual ethical challenges faced by librarians in India. The paper analyses the contents of variously available codes of ethics and identifies three sets of responsibilities of a librarian - towards the user, in document selection and towards staff (Kaur, 2002, p.198 - 202). Banerjee (2005) deals with dilemmas related to ethical issues faced by the contemporary library professionals due to the impact of ICTs. She has discussed in details the ethical issues related to intellectual freedom, quality of information, data privacy and professional accountability (Banerjee, 2005, pp. 232 - 234).

3. Ethics defined

The term ethics is derived from the Greek word "ethos" which means custom or character. Ethics is a set of moral principles that govern the person's conduct, behavior, character, fairness, humbleness, morality, values, commitment, duties to self-improvement to the society at large, and his obligation to the profession, institution and society at large.

The Oxford English Dictionary clears the meaning of the word ethics as the science of morals; the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty.

As a philosophical discipline of study, ethics is a systematic approach to understanding, analyzing, and distinguishing matters of right and wrong, good and bad, and admirable and deplorable as they relate to the well-being of and the relationships among sentient beings. Ethics is often used in connection with the activities of organizations and with the professional code of conduct: for instance, Library and information professionals code of ethics, which are often formalized in terms of exhaustive sets of rules or guidelines stating how employees are expected to behave in their workplaces.

4. What is a profession?

It is not merely a collection of individuals who get a living for themselves by the same kind of work, nor a group organized wholly for the economic protection of its members, although, naturally, this aspect is not overlooked. It is really a body of people who carry on their duties in accordance with rules designed to enforce certain standards, with two main objectives- the better protection of its members and the better service to the public. The essence of a profession is that, although people enter it to gain a livelihood, the measure of their success is the service they perform and not the financial gains which result.

5. Librarianship as a profession

Librarianship has got all the attributes of a profession as mentioned above. As a profession, Librarianship aims at service. Only those persons should be encouraged to enter the field who are interested at least as much in opportunities to help others as in a suitable salary and satisfactory conditions of work. Librarians should, of course, like books. They should also like people and be able to work well with people. Dr. S. R. Ranganathan, speaking about the profession of librarianship in India, reminded the library professionals that “The library profession is a noble profession. It can do no harm to anybody.” He exhorted them to imbibe the spirit of service and research with dedication and undivided loyalty. He said, “If the young aspirants to the library profession, now put above want and at par with other professions, devote themselves to their work with undivided attention, and throw themselves heart and soul to give the library service to every reader at every time they will have the satisfaction of having left not only library service and library science, but also our country at a much more advanced stage than what they found when they entered the library profession.”

6. Professional Ethics

- According to Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, “Ethics is a science of morality. It is that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the human character and conduct.”
- “Intellectual freedom can exist only where two essential conditions are met: first, that all individuals have the right to hold any belief on any subject and to convey their ideas in any form they deem appropriate, and second, that society makes an equal commitment to the right of unrestricted access to information and ideas regardless of the communication medium used, the content of work, and the viewpoint of both the author and the receiver of information.”(Intellectual Freedom Manual, 7th edition).
- Once we have defined goals for our profession, we need to make sure that we meet these goals in ethical ways. Library and information workers are expected to follow certain ethical standards, typically codified in documents called Codes of Ethics. A profession is not a profession without a set of basic or fundamental principles or ethics. Professional ethics is the science of right conduct and character. Ethical issues are based on certain moral values which are considered to be good and worthwhile for the well-being of the society in general

7. “Code of Ethics for Library and Information Professionals” adopted by JOCLAI (The Joint Council of Library Associations in India)

Professional ethics and responsibilities of librarians are covered by LIS course. In 1986 the Joint Council of Library Association in India adopted a set of professional ethics for Indian Library and Information Professional.

The codes

- Library and Information profession is a service-oriented profession. Library and Information professionals should gather information, organize them into easily accessible collections and provide a mechanism that helps productive utilization of the same by the eligible clientele.
- Library and Information profession must be governed by the democratic principle of giving every user his/her opportunity to access the information resources and make special efforts to keep their interests growing towards further developments.
- Library and Information professionals must familiarize themselves with all available information sources that are of interest to their clientele either on demand or in

anticipation. Library and information professionals must keep service-orientation in their professional work.

- Library and Information professionals should avoid unlawful and unethical pecuniary interest and must serve their clientele on an equitable basis.
- Library and Information professionals should keep timeliness as a prime factor in serving information to users. A delayed response brings discredit to the service and ultimately may not be useful.
- Library and Information professional should aim at the development of their own professional organizations and take pride in the ethos, activities, and services. They should encourage the younger generation of professionals with their own exemplary service.
- Library and Information professionals should cultivate their field of knowledge in a professional way. They should contribute to the field by research, teaching, and dissemination through literature.

Focus of Code of Ethics

- ***Ethics towards user:*** to perpetuate the good relationship between the library and its users
- ***Ethics towards the profession:*** to ensure the responsibility for the development of the profession and to promote excellence amongst professionals
- ***Ethics towards colleagues:*** to strengthen the cooperation among library professionals and to increase good relationships with colleagues and other members of the profession
- ***Ethics towards the organization:*** to uphold and give due respect to the library as an integral part of the organization or institution
- ***Ethics towards society:*** to affirm the library status and roles in providing information for the advancement of society.

8. Ethics of Librarianship

Ethics of librarianship, an essential element of Library Profession denotes the conduct and behavior of those who adopt the profession. A library professional owes certain responsibilities to the library's public and its books, the library professional organizations and to himself.

- ***Responsibility to the Readers:*** A librarian is for the readers and the latter cannot do without the valuable and expert services of a qualified librarian. Their bond of friendship is unbreakable. A librarian is called 'the guide, the philosopher and the friend' of the uninitiated and the scholar alike. A librarian has an onus to prove himself worthy of this honor.
- ***Responsibility to the soul of book:*** A book may be compared to a human being. Like the latter, it has a soul and a body. Paper, binding, and printing constitute its body while the actual contents of the book constitute its soul. A librarian owes a duty to the book to keep its body clean like his own body and save it from destruction by enemies i.e. insects and white-ants. He should repair it at the moment it is torn and also treat it with insecticides at periodic intervals. Besides, he has to take appropriate steps to save the book from its other enemies which include fire, water, dust and human thieves etc.
- ***Responsibility to the Profession:*** A profession is a calling, for admission to which, special training, education, and character are required. The exalted professionals of

librarianship being a learned professional have public service as its ideal. To maintain this high ideal, a librarian should cultivate 'professional habits' and should avoid the bad 'business habits'. A Librarian should see that he should never do anything which spoils the profession or which undermines its foundations.

- **Responsibility to the Staff:** "Each member of the staff should be regarded by the librarian as a colleague and should be encouraged to realize that his work, however menial it may appear, is essential for the smooth working for the whole establishment."
- **Responsibility to the Himself:** The duty of a librarian to himself means the acquaintance of a librarian with those books with which he is there to serve his clientele. He must know "something of everything" so that he may fulfill his duty to himself in a befitting manner. His conduct must be enviable and he must treat his clients with sympathy and love. B.M. Headicar remarked, "We must have both dignity and humility."

9. Conclusions

Librarianship as a profession needs specialized knowledge, skill with creative ability. A person acquiring such skills and abilities can be called an exact professional. The society expects special responsibility from the professionals. However, it is disclosed from the study of the subject that we professionals talk more about the profession and practice little in discharging the responsibilities of the profession. Therefore, the Library Associations have prepared a code of ethics for library professionals and it is expected that they should follow those norms and standards given in the code of ethics. The practice of the code of ethics will lead to the profession towards the excellence.

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