

# Business Standard

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## Here today, more tomorrow

Rishi Raote | New Delhi November 22, 2013 Last Updated at 21:37 IST



Early in the post-Clinton era, I asked a librarian at the American Center in Mumbai why the number of books on the library shelves was shrinking. "Young man," this stupid person said with a knowledgeable air, "everything is online now. Sit with me and I'll tell you how to research on the Web."

Gee, call a fig leaf a fig leaf, I thought angrily. The dotcom bubble had burst and the American budget was tight, acquisitions had slowed to a trickle - but why should a librarian fool herself? I wasn't a schoolboy, and Google was still a baby.

But the rot ran deep. The word "library" was gone from the name: the place was now an "information resource centre". Yuck!

All too soon, of course, nobody needed the-place-once-formerly-known-as-a-library for access to the Internet. Judging by what I saw, people-traffic in the American library in Delhi fell in the mid-2000s. Instead of the buzz of borrowers of the mid-1990s there were nodding oldies and youngsters on AC study time. I believe the library eventually cut back on computers and put in more reading tables, but I haven't been there for years.

A public library, because it contains culture - not just the culture of the moment but a slice through the history of culture - should change wisely and not in a hurry. The American Center libraries plainly aimed to be responsive, which is good, but they were precipitate, which dated them too quickly.

Another public library is setting an example of change done right - not frantic and wholesale but focused, organic and for the long term. On November 14, Nehru's 125th birth anniversary, the Nehru Centre Library in Mumbai reopened after a speedy renovation. It has shifted into more spacious premises in Worli from its last home in the basement of the Nehru Planetarium. And it is using the new space well, with room for thrice as many books as it currently owns.

This library does not lend. It is free and open to all, as a reference library. Its 30,000 holdings include non-fiction books, bound periodicals, and a news archive. It is also closed-access, which means that you or I cannot visit the shelves - we have to ask the staff to bring books out to us.

Here is an example of thoughtfulness: "Because we are a closed-access library," says Librarian-cum-Documentation Officer Arati Desai, "we must give readers the most information we can in our catalogue." In the catalogue, accessible online, each entry has full publication data and subject tags - and a terrific feature called "shelf browse". Click, and you can see what books are shelved near the one you are looking at. This is one way

to reproduce the experience of actual shelf browsing.

Hardly any library website in the world has this tool. The best shelf browse is probably Harvard University's StackLife, but then Harvard's software wasn't picked up off the shelf. And the Nehru Centre catalogue will improve over time.

Another example: a decade ago, Desai took note of patrons asking for news articles on particular topics, like the Indian Ocean tsunami. So the librarians set to work sorting cuttings under 200 different subject heads - invaluable for a period when many publications lacked websites and e-archives.

In the new catalogue, three sets of keywords will join together - book subject keywords, keywords for bound volumes, and "documentation" (or news cuttings) keywords - to make a common list of 5,000 keywords. One search, across all platforms.

A third example: seeing a lack of library resources on South Asian countries in Mumbai, Desai will focus acquisitions in that area. Why? Because there is a need.

Such measures represent a lot of hard human work for the four-member staff. They run a middle-sized institution with a mostly local (and some research) user base - and yet they are laying a foundation for a much bigger future. This library is built to last.

[rraote@yahoo.com](mailto:rraote@yahoo.com)