

The American Libraries

— S. Chordhury

A large variety of materials including books, journals, pamphlets, films, photographs, recordings, maps, engravings, lithographs and other items are treasured in libraries. People, students, teachers, scholars, scientists, businessmen, government officials and all others who have some desire for knowledge that has accumulated through the ages use library resource in their work.

The libraries of the past were not of the type of today and those of tomorrow will differ in the same way, and that is the sign of life and development.

The history of library started with the history of writing. After some stages of clay, papyrus, parchment and many more in between, the writing system was given a new life by the invention of paper by the Chinese about 105 AD. The replacement of parchment by paper could not even keep pace with an accelerated demand for books, created by the spread of education and the increasing desire for knowledge during the Renaissance in Europe, without the founding of printing press in 1453 that revolutionised book making.

Of the American Libraries, the Harvard University Library is the oldest in the United States of America, a nation of nations, founded in 1638. But Benjamin Franklin founded the first Subscription Library in America, the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1731.

And this made books available for everyone. There arose the question of the arrangement of books in the libraries. Melvil Dewey created an order for the arrangement of the books and that is known as the Dewey Decimal System. Most American school and public libraries arrange books according to this system. Later on, the Library of Congress produced the Library of Congress Classification System. Most College, University and

Research Libraries in the United States arrange books according to this Library of Congress System as it provides a greater precision in most fields and more room for expansion than the Dewey Decimal System does.

The kinds, services, activities of the libraries and the library associations in the United States of America, and the modern scientific and technological devices they use unfold the wonderful standings of the American Libraries from all angles. There are separate libraries for each department and many United States government agencies.

Three government libraries are considered national libraries. They are (1) The Library of Congress (probably the largest in the world); (2) The National Agricultural Library of the Department of Agriculture; (3) The National Library of Medicine, in the Public Health Service Division of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. A fourth institution, the National Archives, is added to the above ones as the National Library. In it are preserved the valuable permanent records of the United States Government. The above libraries maintain a wide range of collection. They also prepare monthly journals of their own. No doubt all the libraries resort to mechanisation in accomplishing their tasks, yet the National Library of Medicine has one of the most advanced systems of library mechanisation in the world. This system is known as Medlars. Other devices it uses are Grace and Medline Service. These devices are very sophisticated.

It is an overwhelming feature of the American libraries that all in the United States of America can enjoy the facilities of libraries. It will be better understood with the description of the other American libraries. There are some large federal agencies

that operate library systems on a nation-wide and world-wide scale. Amongst these, the largest is that of the Army, Navy and Air Force. Another interesting feature, that clearly holds the extent of development of libraries in the United States of America, is that the Veteran Administration maintains at least two libraries and one is primarily for the use of the patients.

The eleven executive departments of the government also maintain libraries and each of these has an outstanding collection devoted to the special fields related to the department's work. The libraries of the Bureau of Standards, the National Weather Service, the Office of Management and Budget, the Patent Office, and the Environmental Protection Agency are among other important libraries.

Each of the state of the United States of America has a library. These libraries are agencies of the state government. Their primary function is to make materials available to government officials. State libraries are the linking institutions between the states, public, school and college libraries and the state and federal government. These libraries are associated with other agencies for library improvement that include the American Library Association, the United States Office of Education and the Council of State Government.

Other than all these, there are school, college and university libraries and research libraries in the United States of America. Moreover, the United States Information Agency operates libraries in about a hundred countries. These libraries are known as the USIS (United States Information Service) libraries. Some of these also operate in Bangladesh. There have been various ventures for library improvement in the United States of America. The America Library Asso-

ciation was founded in 1876. Its activities are devoted to libraries, librarians, library trustees and other people interested in libraries. The aim of this organisation is to improve the quality and effectiveness of libraries. The representatives from all parts of the world are included in the 30,000 members of the association. Its monthly official bulletin is American Libraries.

All federal library activities are co-ordinated by the Federal Library Committee, established in 1965. Its headquarters is in the library of Congress.

The wide variety of services libraries offer today are all representative services of the American Libraries. Prominent among these are the providing of materials, assisting patrons, active community service, etc.

In general, the information boom has stood as a big challenge to library development along with the problems of finance, security, photocopying and censorship. These problems and challenges are more severe to the American libraries than to all others as they are much advanced in the field.

Modern library buildings are planned so as to let sufficient light enter into the library space, and for this artificial lighting systems are there. For the easy access to and comfortability of the visitors in the library there are modern fixtures and good buildings.

About the USIS libraries in Bangladesh all would agree that the role they play is matchless. Yet they suffer from such drawbacks which can easily be removed as to make these libraries (here in Bangladesh) better-looking, more spacious and popular. The collection in these libraries is partially unable to meet the needs of the students, teachers, scholars, scientists, officials, businessmen etc.