



# The conceptual evolution of Reference Services: An overview of the literature.

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**Abstract:** Statement on the library described as a storehouse of books in the past have been completely changed or evolved with time and development in the field of information. These changes or development have taken place in all the aspects of a library or a library and information system to be precise. The paper is mainly concentrated on a particular aspect of library service; reference service to understand the changes or development in the core of reference service by analyzing the concepts and definitions from different time periods as discussed by various elite professionals of the field. By analyzing these concepts or definitions one can understand the trends and their requirement of development depending on various factors can be understood.

**Keywords:** Reference service, Reference models, reference works, library services, reference transaction, information transaction.

**Introduction:**

Reference service has been the prime focal of the library system. Being a service-oriented organization, the objective of the library remains the 'services' which includes various forms, ways or types provided to its users or patrons. Within the vast structure of library system, the two most basic components of the library, i.e., Library resources and library services

Reference services have been a critical part of the library system for a very long period of time but a defined concept was framed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Since then, there have been many discussions over the definition and concept of 'Reference services' among the library professionals. The discussions and change in the opinions are the result of the rapid changes in the library system which at present regarded as the 'information system' or vice versa. These changes or differences in the opinions are also considered as the adaptive evolution of concept of Reference services with the change or development in the library and information system.

It is understandable that, while developing the concept of reference services, various factors or facets of library structure systems was considered and during the evolvement process, those factors or facets also evolves or develops. Reviewing the various concepts and definitions or opinions since the beginning till today does make a very clear conceptual process of reference services as a whole.

The genesis:

Reference service was first conceptualized by Samuel Green in 1876 in his article “Personal relations between librarian and readers.” American Library Journal. The first discussion was mainly focused on how to do process where he discussed about the importance of personal relationships between librarian/library professional and the readers or users. His statement was more of ‘how reference service should be instead of what is reference service, even though it is not a newly invented service but propounded a new technique to the old existing service, the statement made by Green is the foundation of acknowledge the reference service in bigger structure of library system.

After Green few other library professionals followed up to his principles, like Charlse A Aurgee; as distinguished from other library activities or services, reference service is characterized by a high degree or personal interrelation between library staff members and users, the service is typically provide to individual users or specifically identified small groups of users and the information needs of the users are known at the time of iteration. William Child, reference librarian at Colombia University offered one of the earliest definitions in a paper read before the New York Library Club in 1891; “ By reference work is meant simply the assistance given by a librarian to readers in acquainting them with the intricacies of the catalogue in answering questions and in short doing anything and everything in his power to facilitate access to the resources of library in his charge”. (Rothstein, 1953)

Reference service has three major aspects or service techniques;

- i) Information service which consists of finding needed information for the user or assisting the user in finding such information.
- ii) Instruction in library use, consisting of helping users learn the skills they need to find and use library materials and
- iii) Guidance in which users are assisted in choosing library materials appropriated to their educational or recreational needs. In addition to their direct reference services reference librarians provide indirect services. These includes building and maintaining a collection of bibliography in cooperative programs to provide users access to resources outside the library and various administrative activities.

It was until very early 1900s. But most of discussions evolves around the public library system till mid-1900s.

### **1900 – 1950:**

After 50 decades from S.S. Green’s statement, during early 19th century reference service was rediscussed again in a large structure or in a complete library structure. The first statement of Green was more of a principle instead or a precise definition of the term

“Reference Service” after his statement many other professionals followed his idea and discussions and opinion. Wayer, J.I proposed those theories of reference services i.e., conservative moderate and liberal. His idea to mostly to specify the reference service in a constructive way.

Between the statement of Green S.S. and Wayer G.I. there have few discussions over the concept of reference service some of the prominent are:

From this extensive literature during 1876 onwards till early 1900s the discussions over the concept of reference service were particularly based on the statement provided by Green and emphasized on the public library system and its users. Even though study was carried out based on the principle-based Green’ statement.

Alice Kroeger’s guide to “The study and Use of Reference books” (1902) declared reference work to be that branch of administration which deals with the assistance given to readers in their use of resources of the library.(Rothstein, 1953)

For William Warner Bishop writing in 1915 reference work was the service rendered by a librarian in aid of some sort of study. It is not the study itself that is done by the reader; The help given to a reader engage in research of any sort is what we meant by reference work.(Rothstein, 1953)

Wayer textbook on Reference Work (1930) simplified the definition to sympathetic and informed personal aid in interpreting library collection for study and research.

Wayer, JI., Guerrier, E. opinioned about reference service in more of technical aspect in his article the measurement of reference service published in Library Journal (1936), he discussed about classifying the reference questions, thereby queries put up by the patrons in order to deliver a better reference service. Most of statements made by library profession largely focused on the direct connection with the users. Statements by Shores L. (1937) stated about the practical aspects of the reference service defines duties and performance of the library professionals, Miles A, and Martin L. (1941) also discussed the same prospect of reference service, providing measures for better service. In 1943 American Library Association actually wrote a definition consisting of two points i. e. Reference work as; i) the phase of library work which is directly concerned with the assistance to readers in securing information and in using the resources of the library in study and research. ii) the work of reference department as in 1994, Hutchirs M. opinioned about reference service by defining the process of reference question and its responses to be made by the professionals.

#### **1951 till 2000s:**

The decade has been marked by various outstanding innovations and development in various discipline but most important key of all the developments was Information Technology which became a part of every system in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20s century. During this

period the introduction of computer has changed the scenario of multiple disciplines including education and its allied areas also thus the library was also not left behind.

During mid 1950s a number of library professionals started discussing about the impotence of a concrete methodology of reference service and logically defined statement. During the course of discussions, few professionals noted that reference service implies not only the personal assistance.

At first certain guidelines of procedures were highlighted by different library professionals from different library background, like public, academic, special etc.

During mid 1990s specially from 1960s onwards evaluation of reference service from various aspects started. From propounding a concrete theory to its evaluation, there were multiple opinion and statements. That reference service cannot be justified by merely answering reference question instead the user to use the material and enabling him/her to secure the answer for himself. This concept was supported by John Cotton Dona with thesis.(Wynar, 1967)

Dr. S.R. Ranganathan intensely defined reference service in his book "Reference Service"; according to him "it is a process of establishing contact between a reader and his/her documents in personal way. In his definition more emphasis is given on the patron and the information unlike entire concept of person to person contact"(Berger, 1996).

It was during these five decades where maximum discussions on Reference service as well as distinctive features of reference service were form or developed. The development of reference service thus evolves simultaneously with development of overall library system. Libraries from being collectors or storer to a fully service-oriented institution regardless of its type and structure. But initially the prospect of reference service started for a public library system where the maximum type of users approaches likewise the type of queries are also varied.

After acknowledging the importance of human interaction in library services more defined and structured system of library services was inevitable. Thus, the importance of reference service became more intense.

An exponential growth on various aspects of "Reference Service" including research and professional discussion was noticed during this decade. More concrete and logical analysis along with theoretical as well as practical based analytical discussions on reference service was made and the major key for all these developments were contributed by American Library Association; by establishing Reference service division in 1995 and effected in 1957. Though Reference Services Division was mainly focused on Public Libraries and college and research libraries, it made a benchmark in formal acknowledgment of reference service as a whole.

In 1960s the RSD of A.L.A. activated a committee on Reference standards, statistics, drafts and guidelines of that committee were the foundation of reference service principles in a more formal way. In addition to all the discussions about the reference service

these drafts made the development of overall reference service and made it a prominent feature of library system. After this standard formalization of reference service in a global platform the library professionals around the globe started discussing about the quality. In all these developments there were few professionals who were the prime influencer in every aspect, and one of them was Samuel Rothstein, he keeps on updating the perspectives and ideology of reference service from time to time depending on various aspects.

During this period discussion were made on the recognition of reference services as a distinct feature in overall library system administration. In 1975 a new detailed definition came from Rugh, A.G., he discusses about direct and indirect reference services. He started using the term information service a synonymous of reference service but with a wider scope since information technology became a part of library from 1960s onwards.(Rugh, 1975)

During this decade number of professionals and committees specific on reference services started considering 'reference' for various aspects, including the specialized qualities or qualification for a reference staff. Here in 1977 Rothstein S. again came up with a new opinion by acknowledging the statement of S.R. Ranganarhan where the later mention that 'reference encounter is not to find the answer but to identify the question' and also mention about the willingness to serve, indicating the reference service as an anticipatory service with more professionalized techniques.

In 1978 Retting, J. opinioned that in reference transactions or services librarians facilitates the communication process by offering themselves as intermediaries between users and information, according to him librarian should provide service at the level expected.(Rettig, 1978)

In 1983 Klassen, R. analyzed various opinions from different professional and bringing the standard of reference services he unvalidated few observations, according to him libraries need to define and publish their service objectives so that user would know the types of available service. In this phase the importance and consideration of reference service as a vital feature of library system become more prominent, hence the awareness of the reference services was brought out to the users also.(Klassen, 1983)

With the beginning of Information and Technology era the period of late 1900s considering from 1980s the dimension of overall library system changes dramatically. Of the multiple dimension the most distinct feature which directly affect the library services was technology-based information retrieval techniques. The decade of 1980s marked the beginning of new phase in the field of library and information science structurally and technically. Use of technology, mainly computer and its inclusion in various sections brought out both positive and negative results but priority was on the positive results. Due to its efficiency, speed and accuracy the technology became a boon for the profession and the system together, inclusion of database system of information storage masked the beginning of new prospect in different aspect of library services including reference service.

After the involvement of IT the scenario of library services also changed accordingly and reference service was not left behind. The term information service became more suitable likewise information transaction etc. by this decade the reference termed had been acknowledge fully with distinct definition, theory and ideology from various professionals.

In 1983, Varvrek, B mentioned about various definitions of reference service as defined by the librarians working in the field, after those different opinions he sum up with his own saying ‘reference service is an art to be applied in any given situation rather than one static entity capable of finite description’. As mention during this decade communication technology was already involved, some specific services of library expand its limitation outside the library also. The overall concept of library changes with the involvement of communication technology which later on came information and communication technology in late 90s and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sable, M in 1984 stated that ‘the provision of information or assistance in finding information by a librarian or information specialist, when requested by a library patron or customer. Services should be provided promptly in a professional manner, in as simple query as possible.’(Sable, 1984)

Weech, T.L. & Goldhor, H. opinioned as reference transaction in 1984 in his paper, he categorizes the reference transaction in three categories; i. readers advisory ii. Ready reference – simple and factual inquiries and iii. Search questions – require more complex answer. According to these professional’s reference transaction are exploratory in nature and require an interview or negotiation. Bunge, C.A. in 1985 stated that “the proper role and the purpose of the reference librarian is to provide personal assistance to the library users in their pursuit of information”. By observing the various different statement provided by different library professional during the period it is found that all the discussion leads to the technical aspect of reference service, how the reference service or transaction is performed and ultimately provides and overview definition of the period. Here the importance of library professional involvement is also acknowledged with technical explanations and methods. All these discussions were again followed by Kesselman, M. and Watstein, S.B. in 1987 in his article “the measures of reference and information services” in the paper they even include the technical aspect of data reporting as a measurement system in reference service. Again in 1989 Robinson B.M. sated in his paper about the importance of careful handling of reference questions according to the level of reference services, in his paper he mentioned about four (4) levels of reference services i.e., Ready reference service, references, research, and referral.(Robinson, 1989)

Though the use of electronic based library system was introduced during 80s to make it available and understand from the user’s side was delayed and in such library, environment using various sources of communication technology was inevitable. And same was applied in providing reference services or some other library service by using e-mail, telephone, fax etc.

1990s was marked with full fledge involvement of information and communication technology in library specially in developed countries. At first technological involvement was on information storage or database management than later on developed towards information retrieval, after successful implementation of these two aspects in library system and after the acknowledgement of information and communication technology by the general mass the library users were not left behind. So, one aspect of library i.e.,

services where maximum interaction between library professionals and the users takes place and more specifically reference service since it requires point to point interaction or transactions, the ICT involvement became a dynamic change from users' point of as well as the professional point of view.

Even during this period also though various aspect of reference service was discuss by various professionals, few professionals does not provide a distinct definition, instead they highlighted technical aspects of reference service by analyzing questions or query and response system in reference service. In 1991 library professional Baker, S.L. and Lancaster discussed about the various way by which the reference questions can be categories in their paper "the measurement and evaluation of library services" but they did not mention any definition of reference service. The same trend was followed by Shontz, M.L. in 1994, in his paper "measuring reference transaction in school library media programs" instead of stating definitions he gave more importance on analyzing reference questions.(Shontz, 1994) During these short periods most of the professional gave emphasis on analyzing and understanding the sequence or procedure of reference service and least importance was given on defining reference service.

After that period the discussion on concepts and definitions of reference service again started but with a different perspective and understanding by acknowledge the library system and library and information system and with the advancement of information and communication technology in this system. During the period of mid 90s onwards different terminologies came up in the field of library and information science, and terminology which changes the structure of overall library system was "Digital Library". Before digital library there has been a lot of changes in library system from time to time; there have change in library collection development, changes in collection medium, technical change like involvement of information and communication technology etc., these changes were gradually evolving but after the involvement of information and communication technology these changes became very rapid from both the aspects i.e., from the library professionals point of view and the users point of view. The change or the development brought by the information and communication technology in library structure remain quite active and even behavioral changes was also noticed.

After different upgraded library like, electronic library, automated library, digital library etc., during the period of early to late 90s there have been few discussions and analytical view on definition of reference services again emerges. The definitions developed during these periods were more a practical nature. In 1996, Alafiatayo, B.O, Yau, and Blunden-Ellis, J.C.P. discussed in detail about the different categories of reference transactions in regards with the various factors involves in reference service or truncation, they put up a practical and logical aspect of reference service by categorizing the different factor one by one(Alafiatayo, Yip and Blunden-Ellis, 1996). In same year Chu, F.T. mentioned about the importance of library professional in reference service, according to him the librarian serves as a filter or mediator between the user and multiplicity of information source available. He stated that "the role of librarian is to clarify the need or complete the reference question."

Library professionals were using of two terminologies i.e., reference service and reference transaction parallelly from time to time in various concepts and definitions, but an analytical review on these concepts and definitions shows that the concept of reference transaction give emphasis on personal contact between the user and library professional. And concepts and definitions based on reference work give more emphasis on technical functionality of reference services.

Since the involvement of information and communication technology in the library during late 90s till the general awareness of information's and communication technology among the general mass which definitely including the users the overall concept of library changes so as in library services and specially in reference services. The changes were from various angles like library professionals, up to date library users, various formats of library collections specially reference collections etc., and these changes or developments made a great impact on the concept of reference services during these periods. One of the major changes in overall library structure was the concept of library beyond the wall or library building. With the effectiveness of information and communication technology library services beyond the wall of library building became an active aspect of library system, with the advancement in the technology library services became more of anticipatory, instead of waiting for the users to approach, the library staffs started to reach out to users. All these comprehensive changes brought changes or development in defining the concept of reference services and volume of needs of users also become more complex resulting a different level of reference services or transaction definitions.

In 1999, Rader, H.B. mention about reference service in digital environment in his paper 'Information literacy in the reference environment preparing for the future'. He stated that reference service provides the human touch in guiding information users in the digital environment.(Rader, 1999) In the same year Richardson, J. stated the reference transaction as "face to (inter) face process involving an enquirer and a librarian, or surrogate, within an information – seeking environment", (Richardson, 1999) following the concept; Tyckoson, D.A. opinioned that reference service in not just accessing but also quality service with regards to the latest trends and age.

During the late 90s and early 20<sup>th</sup> century another view and discussion evolves among the professional group, i.e., delegacy and competency of library professional for better and improved up to date library services quality.

In this period there was drastic change in library system structure in consideration with information and communication technology. Development of automatic library environment brought the concept of ICT based library services and the same applied in reference services also. In 1999, Janes, J., Carter, D. and Memmott, P. discuss about digital reference service in an article published in Reference & User Services Quarterly, where they opinioned about popularity of digital reference service among the study's academic libraries and its computability.(Janes, Carter and Memmott, 1999) The concept of reference service is again discussed by Horn, J. in 2001 as electronic reference services, by nature any type of reference service design for remote users and linked to a specific site on libraries website, which includes services via e-mail, chat, e-commerce, videoconferencing etc. (Horn, 2001)



RUSA a division of American Library Association formally discussed about the guidelines for virtual reference service in 2004, which have continuously updated time to time to fulfill the core context. During the same time a synonymous term as digital reference service also emerges, both the concept is based on information and communication technology.

Today in 21<sup>st</sup> century the acceptance of concept of reference service based on information and communication technology is more appropriate and accepted among the library professionals. By the latest trend the concepts and definitions are discussed considering the value of service and competency of the library staff, especially the reference service provider. One cannot deny that the current generic users are more aware and have more options of information since various sources are easily available to the users in their personal digital assistance devices with the help of communication technology. In this current trend it has become very necessary to understand the pattern of the users and their behavior in regards with information if one wishes to provide the cutting-edge reference service. Two of esteemed library organization IFLA and ALA have both acknowledge the change in the pattern provided updated concept-based guidelines for reference service.

21<sup>st</sup> century brought another dimension of reference service i.e. reference service via social networking sites or social media. The first initiation of social networking sites was in 1997 by SixDegrees.com which was followed by various other likewise platforms but only few remain active and successful with the time. Naming a few of current trends are Facebook.com, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, reddit etc. and the library have also not left behind in this trend, the social media became one of the most convenient effective platforms to connect with the users and likewise the users also find it easy and comfortable to access the library webpage or website with their social media accounts. Like any other people centric organization libraries also started taking advantages of the social media platforms and use the medium for different activities like, OPAC, current awareness service, library forums, users' groups, discussion forum, virtual library display board etc. and most efficiently as a medium for user interaction or communication, ultimately fulfilling the goal of reference service. So according to the latest trend the concept of reference service using these social media platforms are also discussed and acknowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Though reference service remains the core of library services to complete the whole library structure there have been arguments about the importance and necessity of reference service based on today's information era. Whereas few library professionals and even nonprofessionals started questioning about reference service and its requirement, to answer these arguments one must understand the current information scenario, information availability, its users, current library structure, its users and most importantly the acknowledgement of all these factors by the library professionals and competency to encounter all the situation from different aspects.

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