

# Correspondence

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## Disappearing libraries

Dr Pandya's *Letter from Mumbai* (*Natl Med J India* 2018;**31**:113–14) brought back some memories which I feel are worth sharing.

Many summers back, the responsibility of starting a library in my neighbourhood club fell on my reluctant shoulders. As it often happens, the responsibility often befalls on the individual who initiates the proposal.

A room that had been used to store unwanted materials such as broken-down pieces of furniture, torn curtains and other such items was cleared and given to me to start the library. The seed money given by the club went to make few shelves but there was no money to buy books. One member of the committee suggested inviting members to donate books. A notice was put up to this effect.

The response was overwhelming! Within a week, we had to remove the notice and put up a new one that we no longer can take any more donations. You may be under the impression that our club members were large-hearted and supportive of the idea of the library. Have no such fears. They only used the invite to dump unwanted books and it took the valuable time of the committee members to sift through the junk and to keep a few which deserved a place on the shelves.

Although in later years, the club allotted some money to buy new books which gave me lots of pleasure, the practice of inviting members to donate books continued once a year and as expected, as the years went by, the quality of donated books too improved.

Each year, we had to cull books and discard some and I had the final say in this. I rummaged through this pile of books before inviting the neighbourhood *raddiwala* to take the lot. Once, in this pile, I came across a 1906 edition of William Osler's *Aequanimitas* that was fairly well-preserved. For a few years, it occupied a pride of place in my personal library before I gifted it to my doctor friend, who collects old books. Another time I found a 1910 edition of a 450-page tome obviously written by a British author, meticulously documenting the Sepoy uprising of 1857 and in this, I found the mention of the war for independence!

Unfortunately, the book is in a dilapidated condition with the cover and the first pages missing, which may have had the author's name. I still have this and it is a fascinating read and tells the story of how nearly successful was the revolt of 1857.

With the advent of internet and cloud storage and a generation used to Kindle, Amazon Prime and ever-the-broadening reach of the smartphone, I suppose, it is inevitable that libraries as seen and used by us will disappear, and we too will begin using these new platforms. However, such reading does not give me the same pleasure as reading from a proper book!

### *Morbid thoughts*

Dr Pandya's comments on the non-availability of cadavers in medical schools for students learning anatomy, in the same *Letter from Mumbai* had me thinking. The preferred way of disposal from ancient times seems to have been one of burial. This, if done without encasing the body in metal, ultimately results in a kind of humus. However, this occupies some space which the ancients seem to have overcome by layering. Some time ago, the newspapers carried an item where an enterprising man had advertised small plots of land for burying you (after your death), and a sapling of your choice would be planted and looked after. I do not know what happened to this laudable venture!

Some burn their dead, but this method results in some pollution and consumes much-needed energy.

A Bengaluru-based individual has made it his life's mission to cart unclaimed dead bodies and give these a decent burial—a worthy competitor to the eminent surgeons who demonstrate surgical techniques on the dead. This individual, if I remember right, received a well-deserved state award for rendering service to the unclaimed dead.

Communities such as Parsis feed their dead to vultures. I was told that the paucity of vultures is making the community rethink this method. Incidentally, our favourite pain-killer diclofenac, also used in veterinary medicine, is the main reason for the reduction in the number of these scavenger birds.

There was another story of a so-called primitive tribe leaving the infirm old with a pot of water under a tree in the forest to be eaten by the wild animals, a kind of symbiotic act, I suppose. I cannot authenticate this source, though! Perhaps in future more practical and biodegradable methods may be used; like the ones we are currently using for domestic wet waste—pelletization and using these as manure.

*Conflicts of interest.* None declared

B.C. Rao  
Bengaluru  
*badakere.rao@gmail.com*