1.1 What is a public library? Describe its features. Discuss the social factors which have influenced the growth of public libraries as social institutions.

Ans: A public library is a library that is accessible by the general public and is usually funded from public sources, such as taxes. It is operated by librarians and library paraprofessionals, who are also civil servants. There are five fundamental characteristics shared by public libraries: they are generally supported by taxes (usually local, though any level of government can and may contribute); they are governed by a board to serve the public interest; they are open to all, and every community member can access the collection; they are entirely voluntary in that no one is ever forced to use the services provided; and they provide basic services without charge.

Public libraries exist in many countries across the world and are often considered an essential part of having an educated and literate population. Public libraries are distinct from research libraries, school libraries, and other special libraries in that their mandate is to serve the general public's information needs rather than the needs of a particular school, institution, or research population. Public libraries also provide free services such as preschool story times to encourage early literacy, quiet study and work areas for students and professionals, or book clubs to encourage appreciation of literature in adults. Public libraries typically allow users to borrow books and other materials, i.e., take off the premises temporarily; they also have non-circulating reference collections and provide computer and Internet access to patrons.

Library as a Social Institution: In modern societies all activities of the people are organized through institutions. So, social institution is a product of the society. It is created to work as a medium for expressing its social processes and it carries them out through its techniques developed for the purpose. It is a form of social order. Lowell Martin states: “A social institution is an integrated pattern of human relationship established by the common will and serving some vital human need.” This definition indicates that social institution deals with the integrated pattern of human being in the society. Their pattern is caused through the interaction among the people as a vital social need. For example, religious institution looks after the belief and unity, educational institution like school, college, and universities promote knowledge, skill and socialization processes of the society. These institutions incorporate a body of formal or informal rules and regulations through which activities of a society are carried out or regulated.

We are living in an information age in which information plays an important role in the complex, economic, political and social environment. Information plays a crucial role in keeping the citizens well informed so that they can exercise their right as citizens of a democracy properly. It is the information which allows us to change and improve the society. Decision makers always seek information. Modern executives, farmers in the field, workers in the factory and others need information while launching a new product, plugging the field or building a skyscraper about the state of resources and knowledge about the uncertain future events that may have to face. The researcher, the teacher, the student, the administrator, the industrial and business managers, the entrepreneur, the farmers, the workers in a factory etc all need information to equip themselves better for the fruitful pursuit of their respective vocations.

In a modern society, every human activity is organized through institution. The society also needs the institution to look after the above matters. The said institution in the broadest and most practical sense should be a force for social betterment. No one can imagine other social institutions except the library that can be entrusted with such type of responsibilities.

Libraries and other similar type of institutions collect, process, organize and disseminate information and knowledge recorded in document. Since knowledge and information are vital for all round development of human beings, libraries and other institutions that handle and manage information and knowledge are indeed invaluable for the welfare of the society.

The libraries acquire, organize, offer for use, and preserve the reading material irrespective of the form in which it is packaged (print, CD-ROM/DVD, Web form) in such a way that, when it is needed, it can be retrieved and put into use. No other institution carries out such long-term, systematic work.

The study of libraries as an institution provides us an approach to analyze the past of a society. Its growth is not an isolated instance of society. It originated and grew out of the necessities of life and in response to the society’s needs i.e. library grows with the society. The location, the population served, the demand made upon the library, the nature of collection, financial support, status of librarian, attitude of authorities towards the library, all over a period of time reflects the growth pattern of the society. The story of the library gives indication of the educational, social, economic and technological changes. Library collections in the different countries represent their cultural identities. Language is at the heart of these institutions. They are the collectors and stewards of our heritage.

Library history is an essential chapter in the history of the intellectual development of civilization. It parallels the history of writing and forms a component of the history of human civilization. It is the basic metaphor with which the cycle of civilization began the step from the dark into the light of the mind.

The story of the growth and development of libraries forms an integral part of the history of the peoples being served by it. A library does not exist for its own sake. Its objectives, role, functions, services and kinds depend upon the needs of the people served by it. It is an extension of the human memory. It is the repository of human culture, oral and written. The heritage of man has been preserved for posterity in different containers of information.