

Library notes

Scholars today wear many hats, old-timers grab many desks

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The demands of scholarship are such that these may deter ordinary folk. For one, even while undertaking the most serious research in the library, the scholar must fulfil his or her social obligations. Most libraries allow scholars to bring their phones inside and use these with discretion. At times hectic texting by the scholar may give the impression that he is not serious about

his work, but the grim expression on his face should dispel such a notion.

The day is long. In the throes of work, a scholar may wear many hats. If you lift your eyes and view the laptop screens in the neighbourhood, you may even see a shopping website or a movie playing. It is necessary for the scholar to rest his mind after grappling with a difficult academic challenge. Occasionally, a web page with a stock market trading account seems to pop up, but it is probably a mathematician working on an algorithm, or beta-testing a data exchange tool.

Today's libraries are well-equipped and comfortable. Unbearable summer and dreary winter days inspire intense scholarly engagement. On such days, finding a seat in coveted public libraries is extra difficult. Some scholars reserve desks by leaving laptops and books on them. It is a coincidence that the couple you saw strolling near the trees, or sipping coffee outside, returns to claim these desks.

One may try to move to the upper floor, but the few desks there are taken over by old-timers who arrive first and leave at the end of the day.

Such scholars go through the demanding post-lunch hours with practised ease. One may find someone drooping in front, their eyes closing. But then a finger that moves on the keyboard, and a head that nods just when you thought he was napping, are evidence enough that academic rigour was not abandoned on a soporific afternoon after a sumptuous lunch in the nearby canteen.

The scene outside is one that can lift a sagging spirit. It is like a lounge where people talk and exchange greetings, like a ship's deck minus food and drinks. After a day of study, when the scholar stops here briefly, the eruption of greetings by other scholars makes him forget disappointments such as the congested academic space and limited funding. He says his goodbyes and returns home to a restful evening.

