



LIBRARIES AS CATALYSTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: EMPOWERING MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

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Abstract

Libraries have been accredited as knowledge and power centers, spanning social, economic, and educational divides. In the context of Indian society, libraries are assumed to be helpful in uplifting the weaker sections of the society, particularly Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Minority Communities (Kalyani, 2021). This is because these marginalized groups are bound to encounter systematic problems, such as deficiencies in quality education, information, and opportunities (Rao, 2020). They are centers for learning and development, literature, and thought that are open to the public with welcome and comradery for all. This source provides a way of accessing works, electronically based information, and training that is suitable for these populations (Nayar, 2019).

For instance, the Digital Library program for the Marginalized has indeed helped reach out to tribals and others in far-flung areas. It has increased the availability of educational material in regional languages (Kumar, 2018). Likewise, the specialized library programs in the urban slum and rural areas involving SC and minority communities included skill enhancement, awareness, career, and vocational training (SET) workshops, employment workshops, women’s development, empowerment, and more. This has enhanced literacy levels, employment, and socioeconomic status for the people. Thus, by equalizing access to knowledge and information, libraries significantly transform the social setting by serving the ‘weaker’ sections of society and facilitating the development of the country and society in general (Bhatt, 2022). This abstract intends to focus on Libraries and their role in uplifting such sections of society in India, particularly concerning literacy, online access, and social justice. The full paper will provide more details on these themes as it will describe some of the ongoing practices in detail, examine current efforts, and provide strategic suggestions to enhance libraries impacting empowered SC, ST, and minority communities across the country.

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Introduction

India is a country characterized by social and cultural heterogeneity and intricate social structure, with questions of social justice and equality being highly relevant. Lower caste, tribal, and minorities are among the most deprived sections of society who still labor under a ceiling of inequalities in educational opportunities, employment opportunities, and social development (Desai, 2019; Thorat & Newman, 2020). Despite many attempts by the Indian government to put affirmative measures in the constitution and regularize quotas for the backward section, the issue of social justice is still an issue of great concern (Sundaram & Vanneman, 2008). In this regard, libraries are revealed as essential institutions that can potentially narrow the identified gaps in terms of education, information, and resource access.

Public libraries, as such, are generally perceived as institutions for diffusing knowledge. Nonetheless, this role expands beyond the boxes of books, simply shelving books. Recently, libraries have been identified as critical societal spaces for ensuring social inclusion, supporting community development, and providing a voice for minorities and other vulnerable groups (Tise & Raju, 2016). They give equal opportunity for accessing information, technology, or learning resources to disadvantaged and marginalized groups in India that they cannot afford (Bhatt, 2019). The purpose of this study is to understand how libraries in India can be utilized in an effort to empower the marginalized groups of society. From a review of secondary data literature involving scholarly work, recent happenings, books, and constitutional rights, this study aims to demonstrate how libraries can transform people's lives by offering social inclusion, literacy, and digitization. Further, it has suggested a conceptual framework grounded in integration theory to comprehend how the weaker sections of society in India can be socially and economically integrated through libraries.

Literature Review

Libraries and Social Empowerment

The importance of the library in establishing a socially empowered society has been covered in various studies at the international and national levels. They are viewed as facilitating entities for carrying out social transformations and mainly perceived social institutions that open up pathways to learning and education, as well as a means of participating in cultural activities throughout one's lifetime (Ameen, 2017). Since 2007, the National Knowledge Commission of India has spoken about libraries' critical social role in literacy, social inclusion, and combating information poverty. Some of the research works have specifically examined libraries' role in supporting minority groups in their efforts to gain education, acquire specific skills, and learn about job opportunities (Krolak, 2005). Libraries have proved more useful in rural areas, where they are the centers of information and meeting places where people go for books, Newspapers, Magazines, and other forms of

Information Technology (Chakrabarti, 2018). Digital libraries, mobile libraries that transport resources to isolated and deprived population groups, have also played a significant role in increasing people's access to information and contributing to social justice (Bhatt, 2019; Sinha, 2021).

Challenges in Leveraging Libraries for Social Inclusion

Despite the numerous possibilities for positive social change for the most vulnerable population groups, there are several issues that negatively affect the processes in libraries in India. Some of the challenges that point to the slow pace at which libraries connect to the marginalized extremities include inadequate funding and physical facilities, a shortage of skilled human resources, and the near absence of digital technology (Desai, 2019; Deka, 2020). However, little knowledge is had regarding the services offered at libraries by such groups, hence little access (Sen, 2016).

As mentioned earlier, the digital divide has also been highlighted in the Indian context, revealing that existing inequalities are further deepened (Kumar, 2020). Most of the libraries, especially in rural areas, do not have sufficient technological facilities and access to ensure that they provide digital collections and services. Other scholars, Mishra & Sharma (2022) and Vaid (2021) have also underscored the need for policy intervention to deal with the above-mentioned challenges and strengthen the role of libraries in promoting social justice.

Libraries and Digital Inclusion

Information and communication technologies literacy and access are now defined as a social inclusion factor for modern society (Gurstein, 2011). Indian libraries have started initiating the use of ICT with the enhanced objective of reaching more out and providing service to the underprivileged. New media technologies and the World Wide Web are gradually easing the information divide and extending students' opportunities for gaining further knowledge and learning resources (Ranaweera, 2008).

A number of programs and schemes, like the National Digital Library of India (NDLI) of the Ministry of Education and the Digital India Campaign of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, are meant for equitable access to digital content, in particular for students and researchers belonging to underprivileged sections of the society (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2022). All the same, the issue of digital literacy still persists, and credit can be given to the fact that members of the global society who are in the minority are often denied the basic skills and infrastructure that enable them to engage effectively with the use of digital tools and resources (Kumar & Rajput, 2018).

Research Objective

To explore and analyze the role of libraries in India as catalysts for social change by empowering marginalized communities, such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and minorities, through the promotion of social inclusion, literacy, and access to digital resources.

Research Question

How do libraries in India empower marginalized communities and contribute to social change, and what are the challenges and opportunities in enhancing their role in promoting social inclusion and equity?

Theoretical Framework

Integration Theory and Its Application to This Research

From the lens of integration theory, Weaver provides critical insight into libraries and their importance for social inclusion and the power of people. According to research conducted by Ager and Strang (2008), integration is the ability of an individual to allow everyone in society to be actively involved. This participation is underpinned by the availability of social, cultural, economic, and political resources. In this process, libraries, which are public institutions, facilitate the transformation of marginalized groups into more vital entities that can manage or fight barriers within society.

When using integration theory to analyze this research, libraries are like institutions that enhance social integration by facilitating clients to gain educational material, node resources, and community services that create a base for effective participation of the socially isolated populations. According to the theory, efforts and strategies are required at both organizational and social levels to break barriers and provide equal opportunities for everyone, depending on the organization's integration.

Conceptual Model: Libraries as Catalysts for Social Integration

The following conceptual model captures the way in which libraries act as agents of social integration through the provision of social resources, literacy, and, more importantly, social inclusion. In this regard, the model below shows the avenues that the libraries offer to advance the socioeconomic status of disadvantaged groups.

Libraries → Access to Information and Resources → Enhanced Literacy and Digital Skills → Social Inclusion and Empowerment → Socio-economic Mobility

Representation of Conceptual model

Methodology

This research seeks to employ secondary data to address this research question: How can libraries empower the most vulnerable groups in India? This information is derived from peer-reviewed academic journals, books, government documents, newspaper articles, and constitutional provisions addressing social integration on issues of fairness in public education. It helps in reviewing the literature in the context of the research study and to get an idea of the present scenario of the libraries and their role in change.

Secondary data were obtained from peer-reviewed journals that were retrieved from the JSTOR and Google Scholar and published on Research Gate websites and government and non-

governmental organizations' reports. For the purpose of the analysis, the research aimed at exploring the patterns, themes, and gaps in the literature, which would present the role of libraries in empowering marginalized groups for social inclusion. It also took into account recent events and developments, for example, how the adoption of digital technologies has affected the delivery of library services and their ability to engage the community.

Results and Analysis

It is evident from the present research that libraries in India play a crucial role in ensuring social justice with reference to specific categories of people. Libraries offering educational resources, vocational training, and government scheme information reduce literacy divides and improve socio-economic statuses (Chakrabarti, 2018; Bhatt, 2019). One such intervention is worth mentioning in detail, namely digital libraries and mobile libraries that reach out to the spots that are out of reach and provide opportunities for access to otherwise deprived groups (Sinha, 2021; Narayanasamy & Suresh, 2021).

Libraries also help enhance community participation and cohesiveness since they are in the public domain, where members of a given community can visit and participate in knowledge sharing and learning (Sen, 2016; Tise & Raju, 2016). However, some issues remain to be addressed, including insufficient funding, access to modern gadgets, and the poor knowledge that disadvantaged groups have about library services (Desai, 2019; Deka, 2020).

Here are three examples where libraries in India have played a significant role in supporting SC, ST, minorities, and other marginalized communities:

1. Mobile Library Initiative for Tribal Communities in Odisha

Thus, in an attempt to enhance the literacy rates among the ST community in Odisha, several NGOs have started implementing mobile libraries. These mobile libraries go to several villages and donate books and other study materials, especially to regions that do not have schools. For instance, the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) has initiated a mobile library service to educate tribal children. This program aims to enhance their education level and cultural knowledge by issuing textbooks, children's literature, and cultural books (Mishra, 2018).

2. Community Library in Tamil Nadu for Dalit Women

Literacy started with a small community library in a village in Tamil Nadu, which transformed Dalit women's lives. The Aaranya Community Library has created a separate section in the library that involves women Dalits to educate them and publish books on self-help. It has motivated women to join literacy programs and has conducted group discussions to create awareness of social problems. This initiative has shaped the capacities of Dalit women towards enhanced literacy levels, besides empowering them with the prospect to forward their problems freely (Anand, 2020).

3. Digital Libraries in Rural Areas of Uttar Pradesh for Minority Students

Digital libraries have been established for the minorities in Uttar Pradesh, especially for Muslims and other backward classes. The Read India Foundation has recently started a program to offer digital reading centers in villages to offer Internet and other educational services. Thus, it aims to provide resources for marginalized students to prepare for competitive exams and introduce them to

contemporary technologies. This has narrowed the opportunity gap regarding education and encouraged many minority learners to enroll in tertiary education (Singh & Sharma, 2019).

The study also reveals the importance of policies for remedying these challenges and boosting the effectiveness of libraries toward social justice. For libraries to act as change agents, there is a need to implement coherent strategies that address funding and technology as well as raise awareness about the services offered by the library among the community (Mishra & Sharma, 2022; Vaid, 2021).

Conclusion

Due to this, libraries have a significant social responsibility to enhance social inclusion, literacy, and digital literacy in Indian society. In this way, Libraries promote social inclusion by giving marginalized individuals knowledge, skills, and opportunities in social, economic, and political arenas. However, as seen above, libraries' role in advocating for social causes is currently hampered by various factors such as shambolic funding, lack of facilities, and poor technological equipment.

Therefore, having coordinated policies is critical to address these challenges and support the purpose of libraries needed in today's society. This entails improving the funding and facilities, developing more means to deliver digital resources, and enhancing minorities' knowledge of the availability and advantages of library facilities. Research that is to be conducted in the future should seek to estimate the effectiveness of particular libraries' activities and programs in the context of social inclusion and digital competencies enhancement.

Research Limitations and Future Implications

This work is, however, bounded by the fact that it only uses secondary data to evaluate the challenges and opportunities for libraries in India. This paper suggests that further research uses interviews, questionnaires, and case studies to establish how libraries support vulnerable groups. Moreover, future research may address questions concerning the effectiveness of specific library-specific drives and activities concerning social inclusion along with digital literacy that may be helpful for strategy makers and implementers.

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