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Role of Public Libraries in Empowerment and Sustainability of Rural Population of India



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ABSTRACT

The world around us is transforming rapidly with new technological advancements and introducing an alternate solution to the traditional way of doing things in every sector. Knowing the trends and acting accordingly will create new job opportunities in the community. Due to the lack of networks and infrastructures, keeping updated about these new-sprung opportunities as an individual is limited, especially in the rural areas. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the local gateway to learning is an essential requirement for continuous learning, decision-making, and the autonomous and cultural development of individuals and social communities. The role of a library as a social entity to provide a solution to individuals' financial sustainability in a particular community is relevant. In this situation, public libraries in rural areas can act as intermediaries for disseminating information to the targeted users by providing information and guidance to attain social and economic sustainability. This research examines the role of libraries in the empowerment of rural communities via outreach programmes that the libraries organise. Then the librarian's role in encouraging the community to foster their creative ideas into action also needs to count. Data collected from previous review articles, news reports, and other primary and secondary sources are reviewed and analysed for this study. In India, the public library plays a vital role in the country's growth because it brings people together and gives them the help they need to learn, grow, and improve their lives. It also acts as a hub for people to come together and provide them with the education, culture, and information they need to live better lives through the minds of both men and women. Public libraries are helping to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals by giving literacy a new face. Literacy is more than just being able to read and write in your language. It also means living in the digital world and adapting to changes in technology. In India, there is evidence of librarians' leadership that ignited a spark of transformation in a rural community through services and activities in association with international organisations like IFLA and INELI. This encourages others to follow the same path of success.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the present-day condition, the need and requirements of a person changed with the availability of digital infrastructure and its widespread availability. The flux in digital trends from traditional to modern technologies has opened new job opportunities everywhere. Acknowledging these changes is very important in the present scenario to acquire new job opportunities or start a new business independently. But people in the rural areas are not up-to-date about the recent changes, making them incompatible. According to the World Bank statistical report, in 2020, 65% of India's population is from rural areas, a significant contributor to the GDP by agriculture, self-employment, services, construction, etc. This information points out the critical role the rural population plays in the development of India. In the coming statistical reports, empowering the rural community to educate and qualify to the present technologies will have a good number. There are several definitions of the term rural population. The RBI defines rural areas as those with fewer than 49,000 people. Whereas The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) defines 'rural' as; "an area with a population density of up to 400 per square kilometre, villages with clear surveyed boundaries but no municipal board, a minimum of 75% of male working population involved in agriculture and allied activities". This is an excellent market for companies to invest in. To say a few, farmers need to know how to search weather forecasts for cultivation and understand the market price of farm products and other related information. It's all available immediately, but you need to use the right tools. For that, they need some assistance. Through the library, connecting the community via service to difficulties they endured in the past and eliminating them forever is possible.

In the past, library services were limited to lending printed books and reading magazines and newspapers. Along with essential services like lending books and reading centres, libraries are also slowly reaching out to other benefits, such as social interaction, political discussions, cultural programmes, and many other services. These are the duties of the library in nurturing the community as a whole and a dynamic force of community life. People of all ages and gender are advised to make use of library services, thus contributing to the nation's development as a whole. According to the UNESCO Manifesto, the public library is defined as "the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups. This Manifesto proclaims public library as a living force for education, culture and information; and as an essential agent for fostering peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women". Over 50 thousand public libraries are active in India, occupied in a single room with sizeable colonial architecture.

1.1 Literature Review

The Bill Gates and Melinda Foundation developed the Global Libraries (GLs) initiative, and its case study technique helped promote the program's long-term sustainability (Cottrill *et al.*, 2015). Following the grant allocation at the local, country and regional levels as a method to observe the progress of GL, they found the importance of public libraries in addressing the need and the variety of practical ways the evidence impact can be used to advocate for the public libraries. Applicability of this technique countrywide and regional wise is also suggested to be effective.

Hoq (2015) discussed rural libraries' success, failure, and sustainability in developing countries. With the different examples of rural library initiatives distributed throughout the article, the author believes that libraries should rethink and shape their approach according to the changing world. The focus should be given to the need of the local community. Only with the constant improvement on the part of librarians' attitudes a library can sustain itself in the future. In India, some libraries made it possible with their activities such as the innovative approach to inculcate

computers and telecommunications, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). [Hoq \(2012\)](#) highlights that the information is essential in many different rural areas of Bangladesh's society, politics, and economy. Due to varying Acts of government to introduce digitisation in Bangladesh, information-oriented activities are reaching the country's remote areas. Quoting the author's words, "the article indicates how an informed, and knowledge-empowered rural people could carry their way forward towards ensuring the country's socio-economic advancement and thereby recognizing the role of information for sustainable rural development." A promising approach only is successful with the active participation of the whole people alike.

[Varghese and Thirunavukkarasu \(2021\)](#) conducted a case study on Valapattanam grama panchayath public library through monitoring, interaction with the librarian, and data collected from the library. The public library's role in the lives of the local population is visible in this case study. The impact on people of all ages is visual as it facilitated students to learn and acquire government jobs in Kerala State. Library activities, along with the librarian's dynamic spirit, this public library has become the central hub of that locality.

1.2 Objective

- To understand the public library's role in the development of the rural population.
- To know the methods library adopted to empower the community as a whole.
- To identify the importance of librarians in rural empowerment.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Both primary and secondary data sources were used to gather the required information for this research. The data collected for the study are obtained from previous works such as reports, articles, news reports, brochures and other related materials from both national and international sources. The researcher also used electronic resources like websites of the United Nations, national and international library associations and institutes that provide standards and guidelines related to this study. Information from various sources which are relevant to the topic is obtained and analysed by giving priority to the latest studies because of the novel concepts it carries.

2.1 Empowerment of Women

Men and women have an equal role in contributing to society, and the lowest literacy rate among women has a negative impact not just on their lives but as a whole. It will impact the country's economic development. Becoming self-sufficient in male dominant society will have a voice for women. The library should be involved by encouraging women to cultivate their creativity and ideas into reality. They can join as a group and start a small business of their taste ([Cabanilla, 2014](#)). This will slowly demolish the patriarchal values in society.

2.2 Capacity Building in Library

In the change in the technological era, libraries also need to upgrade along with the transformation. Modifying library infrastructure, introducing new hardware equipment to the library, such as a new computer, and installing necessary software in it are essential things to do. It's all in vain if there is no one to operate them. The advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has elevated the process of capacity building to the status of a critical subject to consider. [Mannan and Anugrah \(2020\)](#) state that the competence and capability of librarians

determine the quality of services offered in the library. Capacity-building at the library is required for librarians to obtain new knowledge and skills appropriate for their roles and those of the community as they interact with the rural library.

2.3 INELI - India

INELI - India and South Asia is an all-inclusive capacity building program. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has founded a global library programme that helped more than 70 public librarians in South Asia. The global model has taken the idea from that programme and used it. Through their participation in online courses and face-to-face meetings, the chosen librarians demonstrated their ability to become library innovators. Open-source electronic platform developed to make several improvements in the way librarians think, design, inventive and provide learning possibilities beyond books. M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) is a pioneer of INELI – India and South Asia, with 74 public librarians from Six South Asian nations (Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, and the Maldives) were participating in its operations. The main achievements of INELI are:

- 37 Indian public libraries have undertaken 1,236 programs from April 2017 to March 2019.
- Within 18 months, a single Panchayat Trailblazer (innovator) has reached out to more than 3,696 individuals.
- 3,44,893 community members were reached out in the process.
- 15 target groups - farmers, Irulas, Entrepreneurs, Ex-service Army, Jail inmates, Transgender, visually challenged, physically challenged, Juveniles, Youth, Senior Citizens, Sex workers, Research scholars, School children and diverse community benefited through the different library services.
- ICT based innovative services were delivered through public libraries.
- Trailblazers continue to build inclusive, resilient communities through their respective libraries by providing access to relevant, indigenous knowledge through local collaborations.
- Branch, Village and NGO libraries have outperformed State/ Central libraries.
- Thematic Areas covered through public libraries are Education, Skill Development, Health, Nutrition and Well-Being, Culture and Heritage, Empowerment of Women, Agriculture, Environment Protection and Climate change, Building Inclusive Spaces, Employment Opportunities and Disaster Relief.
- Librarians represent in legislative meetings and suggest policy inclusion (Tamil Nadu).
- South Asian Regional Network of trailblazing public librarians formed the Asia Network of Library Innovators' Foundation.
- The digital infrastructure of 50 libraries in 22 states was enhanced and strengthened to improve social and economic development.
- Three libraries have introduced ICT enabled innovative services to support the farmers like Plant Clinic, Phone-in-a-Query, Tele-Health, and programs to improve Digital Literacy.
- Two libraries from the districts of Tamil Nadu (Villupuram and Pudukkottai) were integrated as a part of the hub and spoke model of the library system.

2.4 Sustainable Development Goals and Libraries

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) are 17 goals with 169 targets that all UN member nations have pledged to strive towards achieving by the year 2030. The 17 goals of sustainable development cover all aspects of world well-being. It is very much relevant to the rural population of any part of the world due to its goals interlinked to attain health and prosperity in different ways. Focusing on one goal itself will have additional benefits for other pursuits.

The first three SDGs, namely:

- (i) End all types of poverty across the world;
- (ii) Reduce malnutrition, increase food security, and encourage environmentally-friendly farming methods;
- (iii) People in rural areas may look forward to a better quality of life since these aspirations are integrated and linked without stress.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) headquarters in Hague, Netherlands, embraced the SDGs to exemplify how libraries and access to information can support and improve outcomes across all the SDGs. Indian Library Association, Asoka University and the Indian Institute of Human Settlement connect with IFLA's vision and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals. IFLA's focus on sustainability in economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainability and the introduction of the same in the library.

2.5 Valapattanam GP Library, Kerala

Over the last several years, a panchayath library in the tiny town of Valapattanam in Kerala's Kannur district has made a name for itself on the international stage by attaining sustainability in its broadest sense. Surrounding an industrial area without any agricultural practice in the village, this village encompasses 7988 people. A few achievements are a few achievements: a one-man library with limited means of resources transforming a community over a decade with assistance and encouragement, from a rooftop vegetable garden to securing a government job in Kerala. They achieved social inclusion by creating different forums to take care of the problems of other population groups. The five forums are; "children's forum, women's forum, youth forum, elders' forum and cultural forum".

The primary goal of the children's forum's activities is that today's youngsters will grow up to become tomorrow's leaders. Approximately 25-30 educational and cultural events were held each year.

Women's forum conducts around 5 to 10 programs on parental care and other relevant topics to induce confidence in women.

The youth forum focused on developing social responsibility in the younger generation and educating them about issues like GST.

Elders' forum gave space in the library for people in their old age by conducting health care and emotional stability programs.

Finally, in a cultural forum, they invite eminent persons from society to share their experiences with others. General programs, lectures and seminars are also conducted for people of all age groups and gender. (Balagopal *et al.*, 2021) even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Valapattanam Public Library was actively performing health-related services in the community to create awareness and mask and hand sanitiser making was also organised.

This is a fine example of the sustainability and empowerment of the rural population with a librarian's assistance. This library has shown how a library can have an impact on society without missing anyone.

2.6 Problem with Public Libraries in India

Academic libraries and university libraries are receiving funds from UGC (University Grants Commission) in India; print and digital book collections are available for students. At the same time, the allocated fund for the public library is from local administration and other limited means. The property tax, Municipal tax, Zila Parishad tax, and state government grant are the major sources for the public library and funds from the Raja Ram Mohan Ray library foundation established to develop public libraries in India (Singh, 2018). Only five could provide library cess among the state where the Library Legislation Act was enacted; Tamil Nadu supplied the highest state cess of 10%. In the era of technological advancement, public libraries need to reallocate their fund to sustain and provide a seamless service to society. To solve these problems, libraries can choose crowdfunding and donation from other organisations and individuals willing to contribute.

2.7 Inference

In the rural parts of India, the public library can achieve a great deal of development by focusing on knowledge-oriented programmes and activities. These activities must have an emphasis on user needs. Librarians have a crucial role in implementing and executing these programmes. With their professional contacts and knowledge, Visionary librarians will uplift the whole community to satisfy their needs. People in rural areas are increasingly taking new mobile connections too, and two out of the five new mobile contacts are in rural areas. This is very promising, but the problem is providing the exact information to the people at the right time. For example, people are investing in the share market as a profitable investment in urban areas than a fixed deposit. They have experts to consult before investing in a stock. But in rural areas, even though they have a network and mobile phones to access information, they will struggle to understand it. YouTube and other social media will have limitations in helping. Libraries can conduct orientation classes for people interested in new ways of business practice.

The rural population comprises the majority of the Indian population and is the key contributor to the GDP. In the changing scenario library, as a socially responsible institution, has a paramount role in developing and empowering the population by keenly observing the weak points inside the population and supporting them in the nation's development. Public libraries are in close contact with the community with the ability to interact with all alike. The public library can conduct specific programs to empower each group in the community. Understanding each member's requirements and acting will enhance users' skills and help them attain their necessities. INELI-India, IFLA, RRRLF, and ILA are diversely collaborating with libraries to achieve sustainability. Librarians should be creative and competent in the changing environment.

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