

Public Libraries in the Internet age: Indian scenario*

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Abstract:

In India majority of people live in rural areas and new technologies are not accessible from remote villages, therefore a wide gap has been evolved between the libraries of 'knowledge haves' and knowledge have-nots. Today Internet and web technologies open up new ways of interactive communication between public libraries and the civil society. The progress in the Information and communication Technologies (ICT) enable remote people can be connected by several technical options in a more affordable manner. Based on the widely accepted conceptualization of "ICT for development," this article suggested various ways where convergence technologies can be used to improve and promote the existing library services. An attempt is made here to make a proposal for ICT driven public libraries for Indian states with suitable library extension programs to help the entire rural as well as urban community especially unprivileged masses.

Key words: ICT, Public libraries, India, convergence technologies, library Extension Program

Introduction:

The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto defines the public library 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" [12].

The public libraries happen to cover the widest population possible; their role in spreading literacy & education has long been acknowledged and is considered to be indispensable. The public libraries in our country are in an abject state without a constantly refreshing print collection and vibrant non print multimedia sources that lure illiterate and semi literate folk due to various infrastructure, manpower and monetary constraints as well as lack of priority on the part of policy makers and implementing bodies.

Information and communication Technologies (ICT) are a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, bring value addition and manage information. In bridging the digital divide Public libraries have a major role to play. Quality of Infrastructure, collection, information Technology use, manpower, etc., in public libraries of India is very poor, barring few facilities in cities. All these aspects were comparatively better in research, academic and special libraries. Computerization will provide high speed of communication, online access, accurate and better service to their users. It is of vital importance that network is to be developed in such a way to reach to the remotest corner of the country.

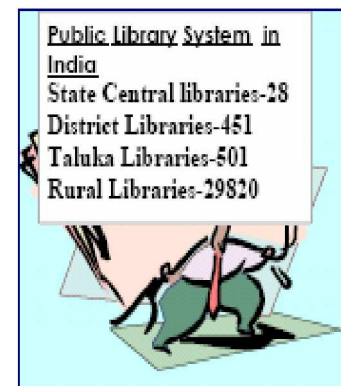
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Modernization and up-gradation of Public libraries in terms of staff proficiency and ICT application with the view of meeting informational, cultural and past time needs of unprivileged rural masses and increase their number as registered member. The information society is built on a foundation of collaboration and communication enabled by electronic networks. Public libraries in India should adopt latest convergence technologies and have well maintained infrastructure ably supported by professionally trained competent staff; and have motivation to work greatly towards removing cultural inhibitions among its users.

During recent years though several public library systems have developed but the irony of the situation is that neither any effective public library system providing meaningful library services to the enormous rural masses nor an integrated chain of library network has so far developed in the country. There is an urgent need that Public libraries in India must shift its focus from collection to connection. Although Information & Communication Technologies (ICT) was introduced in rural development in the year 1986, rural Public libraries largely remained as a forgotten asset in the dissemination of information to the rural population. Secondly the IT policy formulated in the year 2000 shown little interest in the development of rural libraries. The scenario need to change, we the information professionals need to come forward and study the present system of operation and find a better solution to transform these reading rooms in to an information/knowledge centre where people, crippled with illiteracy or limited education, find value.

Current status:

On a Look at the existing library scenario prevailing in the country it appears that there are different types of public libraries prevailing in the different parts of the country. The condition of the majority of rural libraries is extremely miserable. Many of them do not have their own buildings, some are located in small thatched huts and some share a room & time with their institutions. Storage facilities are very poor & stock of reading materials is also insignificant. It is observed that out of 29 States and 6 Union Territory Administrations, only 11 states, have so far passed library legislation, enabling the concerned State Government to provide a public library system. There are twenty-eight state central libraries situated in different cities are funded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy library Foundation, Calcutta, established by Govt. of India. Presently RRRLF is working to spread library services all over the country in active cooperation with state governments and Union territory administration and voluntary organizations (NGOs) working in this field.



The Public library scenario is not uniform in India. It has been difficult to collect authorized statistics on public libraries in the country, as the same happens to be under the purview of different agencies and they never disclose such information on a national scale for various reasons. These figures force us to guess only about the number of public libraries and there is no doubt to imagine the difficulties of facilitating information and library support to the mass of over a billion population, spread over 32 lakhs sq. km., with a spectrum of literacy, intelligence, money, cultural and caste values. As states differ in size, population, literacy rate, status of books produced in the concerned regional language, economic growth, public library system also differ from state to state so far as its infra-structural facilities and patterns are concerned. Also there are administrative and maintenance problems such as the rural libraries in some states form a part of the public library

system and in some other states they came under the jurisdiction of Adult Education Department or Public Relation Department. Wide-spread illiteracy is the greatest handicap for developing library services in some urban and rural areas in the traditional pattern.

Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF)'s program of assistance is most helpful to the cause of public library services in the country. The program provides the best example of resource sharing between the centre and the state for the development of public library services at all levels. The Foundation has taken long strides in promoting library service in the country. During the last 28 years, the Foundation has covered, out of 60000 public libraries located in the country in a scattered way, more than 31000 libraries at different levels [10].

But many of these public libraries (approximately 70% may be rural) are mere reading rooms without much books or good infrastructure or trained staff. According to International Federation of Library Associations & Institutions (IFLA) standards, there should be one public library for every 3000 people [10], and thus with over 1 billion people India needs more than 3,43,000 public library units. India has around 568558 inhabited villages [11] and there may be just one public library for 8-10 of them. One of the IFLA standards stipulate with the nearest library unit should not be more than a mile away from the residential areas. The major constraints faced by the public library system to effectively disseminate information are manifold, essentially as a result of:

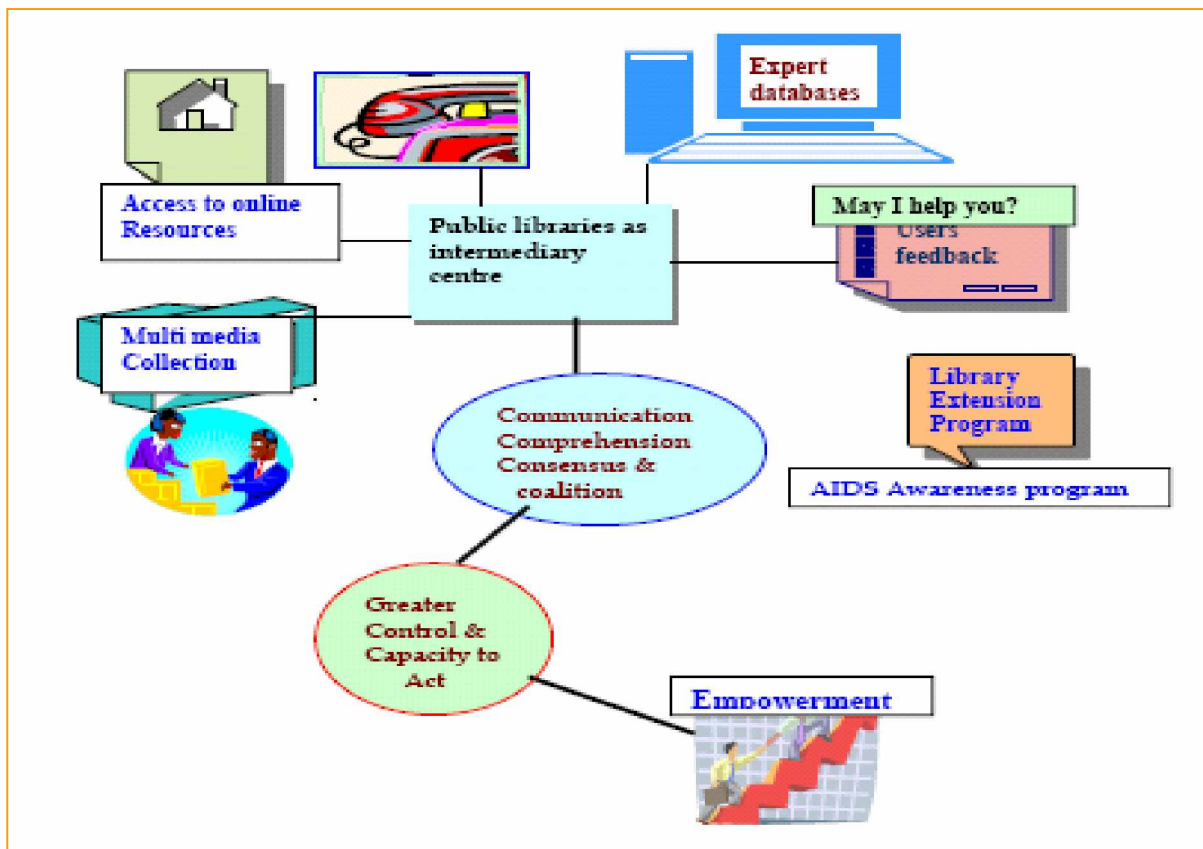
- Ø A considerable percentage of the population is illiterate or functionally literate forcing library to be of minimal use to them
- Ø Poor allocation for the infrastructure improvement and collection development for public libraries
- Ø Lack of enough sanctioned posts, forcing most of the services to be operated by voluntary non-professional staff, causing sufficient deterioration on information organization and servicing
- Ø There is also a problem of educated professionals preferring to work in special and academic libraries than public libraries.
- Ø Little emphasis on adoption Information & Communication Technology for public library systems and services.

ICT driven Public Libraries –the need of the hour

H.K. Kaul (2002) opined that “Our public library system in the country failed totally in bringing knowledge to the doorsteps of every individual. It is advisable for us to look at the problem afresh, especially when the computer and communication technologies have now become available to us at a minimal cost [5].

ICT does not include only the Internet but a gamut of other tools which could be used individually or in convergence with each other. The convergence technologies include community radios, Internet radio, local area networks, tele-centres, information kiosks, mobile phones, WAP applications etc. Use of convergence Technologies reduces the skew in knowledge distribution between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, rural and urban and men and women. ICT driven public libraries should act as intermediary centre with suitable awareness programs. As the nerve centre for improving literacy, awareness, welfare and cultural awakening, it is the intention to put public libraries in the right perspective to arrive at a single window integrated environment for information dissemination concerned with all aspects of human life

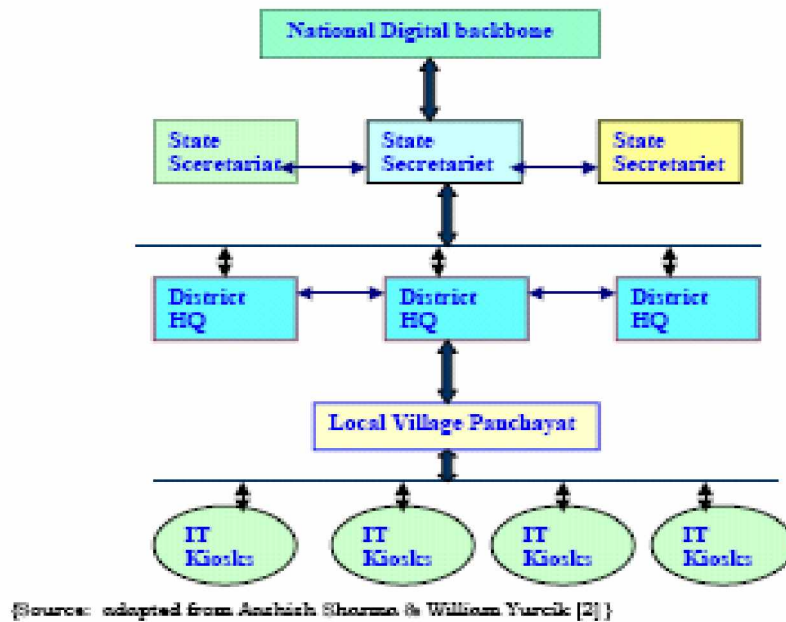
Fig-1: A proposed model of ICT- driven Public Libraries to empower unprivileged masses:



The emergence of Rural Digital Libraries in India:

The emergence of intranet based “Gyandoot” digital libraries in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh have changed the lives of unprivileged rural communities. “Gyandoot” is a unique form of G2C (Government to citizen) DL activity to address the hardship imposed by transaction costs associated with government services. It connects 21 cyber cafes called “Suchanalayas” which provide services to about 10-15 gram panchayats, 20-30 villages and aggregate population of between 20,000-30,000 people. The Soochanalayas are located at the block head quarters, haat bazaars and Bus depot centers and also on the road side where people normally travel. These cyber cafes are operated by local operator called Soochak, who is a local volunteer not a government person.

Figure 2: Government Network infrastructure to support rural digital libraries.



Factors inhibiting the development of Public Libraries:

Access to ICT in India continues to be marginal due to high cost of connectivity resulting in their exclusion from the emerging global system. Despite advances in ICT the benefits have not reached the majority of the population particularly economically backward classes. The main reason why the public library movement has not yet reached the take-off stage is the acute paucity of funds, lack of priorities on the part of government, and absence of an integrated approach to social welfare and community development.

- Lack of national policies promoting ICT as a tool for development

Governments have started framing IT policy and it may take time to put these policies into action. One thing is sure, at least by the indications given by some early starters, the involvement of public libraries is very small. It may be they are worried about the passive state of affairs in the system and the huge investments required to rejuvenate them. Being a multidimensional service facility, ICT introduction will benefit the community in the long run, unlike many other single purpose service arms of the government.

- Political Aspects

We are living in a time where everything is politicized and in a democracy, it's the numbers game which is dominant and all political parties try to make their social commitments in such a way they think would be in their best of interests. In many cases, such high profile wooing decisions taken with vested interests may not take the benefits to the people for whom it has been designed.

- Linguistic Diversity

There are many languages and even in one place more than one language is spoken. More over, the information required might not be available in the language in which one is proficient. We need fast and good translation mechanisms to get over this problem.

- Lack of resource is another serious bottleneck in developing library services.

The need of the hour to provide better library services is to make provision of free and compulsory public library service. In the wake of the slogan "Education for All" comes in the complementary battle cry of "Books for All". As a consequence of making education a fundamental right, free unhindered easy access to books and libraries also becomes essential. The right to have easy access to books is to be ensured. In the case of public libraries resources should be vast enough to cover print and non-print, text and pictorial, multimedia sources, films, and so on to attract all types of persons in the vicinity.

- Inadequacy and problems in transfer of Funds

- Lack of a joined up approach

Public library authorities must develop strong and sustainable working relationships with other Information centers, Special & Academic libraries in the region to develop collaboration for promoting and modernizing public library services in the country.



Possible solutions:

There are many challenges to the implementation of ICT in Public libraries in India. In a country of one billion people where millions of Indians are connected to the Internet but millions more are not yet even connected to electricity. Despite of all these contrast Government of India is convinced that ICT application can help revolutionize life in rural regions for a minimum cost.

- **Consolidation and expansion of Public Libraries network:**

Government should take steps for providing public access to the Internet through public libraries, encourage developing communication access centers, that will play an important role in bridging the digital divide. There are proposals from the telecommunications ministry to open cyber-cafes and it would be a good idea to put them in public libraries wherever there is one nearby. Public library authorities have a responsibility to ensure that library and information networks are as comprehensively available as other public utilities and provided at reasonable cost. The number of public libraries network in our country should cross one lakh mark within a couple of years and then to reach as per IFLA recommendations, by the year 2020. The new and existing libraries should be planned with the minimum infrastructure to access electronic information over national and international networks and to access local information in multiple formats. The social entrepreneurs who are actively working on ICT may undertake pilot projects to connect rural villages to Internet and established Rural Public libraries network.

Public libraries can help the disadvantage communities in several ways with the help of ICT:

- Ø Access to online banking to those communities where there are no longer branches or banking services.

- Ø Online health services
- Ø Online Government disseminating information about benefits and simplifying the process of dealing with large bureaucratic governmental institutions.
- Ø Online shopping

- **E-learning through Public libraries:**

In a country like India e learning has more relevance especially for higher education. A large percentage of target population are beyond the reach of formal education channels due to various inherent weaknesses of the system and lack of infrastructure. The initiatives may further benefit the rural folk who are the victim to leave formal education channels either due to lack of facilities or due to lack of commitments.

- **Work for target groups, Setting of collections of special materials, introducing specialized information services**

The public library has to serve as a cultural and educational centre of the community in which it is located. It has to serve as a school, college or university of the community. In a developing country like India, the public libraries should have a very vigorous extension program.

- **Use of ICT in Library Extension Programs**

Libraries must publicize their services in their local community. There is a feeling among a section of people that illiteracy may not need libraries. It must be asserted that illiterate people are not ignorant people. Many of them are quite enlightened and are receptive to new ideas and currents of thought. The whole lot of them could be further enlightened by public libraries through their extension programs like lectures, discussions, film-shows, folk-dramas, exhibition, puppet-show and reading out books to them etc.

Public Libraries in India should begin its HIV/AIDS education service with a clearly defined concept on the part of the librarians to what the community needs in the way of library service with the best material collection the library can afford to fill that need. Realizing the seriousness of the problem libraries have to serve as powerful agencies for creating awareness and dissemination of relevant information among the people of the country. Till date only handful of organizations including NGOs are working in this area.

- **E-Governance/E-Commerce**

An example of Public Libraries have embraced the E-government initiative is Gateshead Council's Library, London. People who live, work or study in Gateshead, and have access to the Web, can use Library service 24-hours a day, seven days a week through internet. "Gateshead's 66,000 library users can get access to the system by calling into or telephoning any local library with their existing ticket number... unique personal Identification Number which will allow them full access to the 24-hour, seven days a week, library Internet Service"[1]

The PRAGATI project of Pravara village of Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra aims to connect a hundred villages covering a population of more than 2.5 lakh with a wireless MAN solution (WMAN).It will empower rural population specially women and improve their quality of life. "The seven lane program will help the villages in establishing local IT centers, dissemination of Information regarding Government schemes, marketing of Agricultural products, health care, education, agro-processing, economic development"[3]

- **Education and Training for Staff**

Training are crucial in opening up online services for people using public libraries. Staff working in public libraries must be encouraged to attend continuing education programs and skill enhancement to use ICT technologies to the fullest extent in delivering public library services. The public libraries must be under the control of a full time library professional and they should get allowances and service conditions comparable to the counterparts in academic, research and special libraries. What is needed most a competent librarian who can organize the services in a balanced manner for all sections of the community served by the library.

- **Creating virtual opportunities for rural communities**

KnowNet (<http://www.knownet.org>) is a virtual network for recognizing, valuing and sharing local knowledge. It has created some simple and easy to use online resources to enable communities and individuals to take full advantage of ICT revolution. KnowNet initiative is a virtual help point have a two way communication system for extracting and hosting information on the net with its entire activities being carried out through the help of remote volunteers.

- **Developing regional consortia for licensing and procurement**

Conclusion:

Public libraries are often talked about as the possible solution to information poverty as they are in a position to provide free access to the Internet for their communities. Public libraries in India should use new Information and communication technologies to create online world, which will further transform our lives. Christopher Edwards in his article has rightly pointed out “ Providing access to information has traditionally been about buildings, based around institutions offering services to onsite users. Building tomorrow’s libraries will not simply be a matter of installing rows of computers with Internet access: our users will increasingly expect to be able to access material from where they live and work. Providing access will increasingly be about developing electronic information services such as Internet portals and acting as a broker between content providers and remote users” [8]

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