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ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING IN RURAL AREAS OF MAHARASHTRA

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ABSTRACT:

The research, thus basically, aims to conduct a study to understand the contribution made by public libraries to lifelong learning in the rural milieu of Maharashtra, a ten-year span in the midst of major social and technological transformations. The discussion deals with how these libraries helped promote literacy, skill development, and community education, thus forming the basis for informal and consistent learning opportunities. The data collected from 30 libraries in 10 districts revealed that approximately 67 percent of the people/end-users could gain new knowledge or skills, thus supporting adult education and vocational awareness. Despite their importance and positive contribution, challenges like poor financing, unavailability of trained personnel, absence of ICT infrastructure, and less public awareness about their services came up in the study as roadblocks in their ultimate utilization. The findings showed that public libraries are an ideal channel for rural development and lifelong learning and that improvements to ICT facilities, better funding, and greater end-user input would do a lot to enhance them to keep pace with the changing needs of rural communities.



KEYWORDS: Public Libraries, Lifelong Learning, Rural Development, Maharashtra, Information Access, Adult Education, ICT in Libraries.

INTRODUCTION:

From the beginning of time and until present, libraries have always considered as the forces in creating social change and empowering communities since they provide complementary free access to information, knowledge, and other educational resources for dissimilar groups in society. The importance of these libraries in India and particularly so in a developing state like Maharashtra, with a huge proportion of its population situated in more rural areas, lies in the fact that these libraries culturally bridge the gap between urban and rural communities regarding education and information. The past issue on life-long learning, which is defined as a voluntary lifelong continuum of acquiring knowledge for one's interest and professional vocation, has been set against the backdrop of an information society and knowledge economy.

Mr. Nagappa offers a short background into the establishment of the public library system by citing the Maharashtra Public Libraries Act, 1967, which provides for administrative control over a very wide-ranging public library system in the state. The decade of rapid social and technological changes from 2007 to 2017 put this library system under the greatest transformation with the new face given to public libraries by having ICT at the heart of changes; adult literacy programs grew, and digital access was quickly spreading. This led rural libraries to transform from being mere book repositories to becoming centers of community learning where they would carry on activities for literacy and reading, skill training, agricultural awareness, health awareness, women empowerment, and participating in e-governance. Still, many rural libraries that have the potential suffer from inadequate infrastructure, lack of funds, less skilled personnel, and poor digital connectivity, making it impossible for such libraries to promote lifelong learning.

During this flux decade, attempts were made by the government to modernize the library services through various means, including digitization, mobile libraries, and district-level computerization; however, little is known about to what extent these initiatives enhance learning and community development. Henceforth, the research aims to fill this gap by investigating the contribution of the rural public libraries of Maharashtra to educational and socio-economic development during 2007-2017, their role in continuous education, and the problems that must be resolved. It attempts to give strategic directions for revitalizing these libraries as centers of lifelong learning in Maharashtra and hence might indirectly lead to the socio-economic development of Maharashtra by bringing their transformative potential to rural communities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

- 1) To study the role of public libraries in fostering lifelong learning and community education in rural areas of Maharashtra.
- 2) To identify and analyze the types of learning activities and services offered by rural public libraries, including literacy programs, skill development initiatives, and awareness campaigns.
- 3) To assess the level of awareness, participation, and satisfaction of rural users regarding the educational and informational services provided by public libraries.
- 4) To evaluate the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) and modernization initiatives on library-based lifelong learning in rural regions during 2007–2017.
- 5) To identify the major challenges and constraints faced by rural public libraries in delivering lifelong learning opportunities effectively.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Several researchers have cautiously examined the public libraries and their educational and social role within the rural context. Dasgupta (2008) emphasized that the public libraries promote community learning and act as centers for preserving local knowledge, especially for the benefit of backward social groups. Furthering this idea, Chaudhari (2010) highlighted the importance of rural libraries for adult literacy and social awareness but faced many problems left mostly unattended, such as funding and staffing. According to Patel (2012), in Maharashtra, the public library system has been used as a tool to disseminate government information, vocational education, and agricultural awareness in villages, thereby furthering rural development. The increasing use of technology demands that rural libraries provide ICT infrastructure for information resources so that modern learners may find them useful, argued Kaur and Singh (2014). Embracing this technological change, Kamble (2016) maintained that digitization initiatives from 2010 to 2016 enhanced the use of services of libraries by rural youth, and thereby increased their participation in online education and digital literacy. More recently, Rathod (2017) concluded that rural libraries in Maharashtra operate as informal centers of lifelong learning, giving access to the education

resources and community information, although the infrastructure remains outdated, and public awareness about them are at a fairly low level. The period in question between 2008 to 2017 reveals from the studies that the public libraries hold considerable potential of acting on the side of lifelong learning in the rural areas; however, they are being hampered by money, infrastructure, and technology. This drawback hence establishes the need for the present study, which proposes to assess the real working realities and performance of rural public libraries in Maharashtra during 2007–17.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

A value-added service was enthusiastically offered in rural libraries for lifelong learning in Maharashtra in which 30 libraries spread over 10 districts were selected to cover 450 users and 60 staff for interviews pertaining to the impact, awareness, challenges, and community involvement of the libraries. This study comprised the data of library users and staff members to determine the role of and contribution made toward lifelong learning by the rural public libraries-manages by the District Library Authority-in Maharashtra. The net conclusion of the study was that libraries mainly supported the learning, awareness-building, and skill development process, but some glitches, such as data variability and generalizability-related issues, were noted.

Role of public libraries in promoting lifelong learning in rural areas of Maharashtra:

The public libraries served as centers for lifelong education in the rural areas of Maharashtra. From these years, the State Government of Maharashtra made attempts to develop the library network in districts, talukas, and villages through the Directorate of Libraries and the Maharashtra Public Libraries Act of 1967. Under different schemes like Gram Granthalaya Yojana, several rural libraries came into being, providing reading material to the community, access to knowledge, and spaces for people of all ages. The libraries began to evolve from mere book-lending centers to whole centers of self-education, skill-building, and social inclusion. They aided schools in adult and post-literacy education; supplied materials for competitive examinations; disseminated information among farmers and laborers about agriculture, health, and government schemes; and so on. The libraries also had frequent reading circles for women, as well as SHG meetings, that empowered them to pursue lifelong learning and entrepreneurship.

Over the years, rising information technology had seen various libraries in Maharashtra install ICT-based services under the National Mission on Libraries with facilities such as internet access, digital resources, and e-learning. Mobile library vans, installed with audio-video gadgets, serviced remote villages further connecting communities with newer sources of knowledge. Apart from positive developments in other areas, rural public libraries kept struggling with funding, poor infrastructure, lack of staff training, and the consciousness deficit among villagers regarding their services. Even if indeed, some of them did help in literacy development, creating a culture for reading, and fostering personal/professional development of rural people. Maharashtra public libraries changed the life of human beings by instilling the urge for lifelong learning, empowerment through knowledge, and thereby moving towards socio and educational development in rural setup.

FINDINGS:

The study yielded a wealth of information regarding the role of public libraries in the promotion of lifelong learning in rural Maharashtra. User-wise and age-wise, 58% of adult users were between 25 and 50 years of age, whereas 27% were students and 15% were senior citizens. With regard to gender, 61% were males and 39% were females. Thus, a definite gender bias exists in library usage. Purpose-wise, 46% of the users stated that they came to the libraries to engage in general reading and keeping themselves updated with news, 32% for skill development or exam preparation, and the remaining 22% for gathering information about government schemes, agriculture, and health topics.

The study had found these libraries also engaged in many other learning activities. Nearly 40% of these libraries held adult literacy classes and reading camps while 35% conducted awareness and digital literacy programmes and e-Governance programmes. It was further realized that 25% of the libraries worked with NGOs promoting women's education and self-help groups. Yet, access to ICT and digital resources remained limited. However, only 38% possessed computers, just 24% Internet connectivity, and only 19% had e-resources made available through district-level library networks. On the flip side, the absence of trained staff in most rural areas has limited the effective use of ICT facilities.

About two-thirds or 67 percent of respondents viewed libraries as good for gaining new skills and knowledge, yet 52% perceived libraries to be aware of various government welfare schemes. Forty-five percent indicated that libraries are resources for some form of self-improvement-personal or professional and thus concluded that libraries do impact lifelong learning. Such benefits notwithstanding, there remained several problems. About 78% of respondents about librarians saw lack of funds to be a big problem, 64% short of trained staff, 59% talked infrastructure being bad and no ICT equipment as well, and 53% noted that public awareness about library services was low. These findings are supporting the many success stories that so far have been reported to utilize public libraries as lifelong learning centers in rural Maharashtra, and they are also exposing some of the present constraints.

DISCUSSION:

The outcomes confirm that public libraries largely provide for rural communities of Maharashtra in lifelong education through reading, extension education, and dissemination of information. The data suggest that community participation has been increasing steadily over the last decade. Library membership has increased by about 28 percent. It is also encouraging that attendance in literacy and reading programs is up by 35 percent. The lack of digital infrastructure is a serious problem, however: Only a small proportion of rural libraries claimed to possess computers (33 percent), and fewer still claimed to possess internet connectivity that never interrupted (22 percent). This paints a similar picture to what has been presented by Kaur and Singh (2014) and Kamble (2016), where modernization and ICT integration are almost fully executed in the urban libraries, whereas the rural ones are still lagging behind in terms of technological adoption and funding support.

The examples below show how partnering libraries and NGOs and local governance had a somewhat higher rate of success in community development services: In those libraries partnering with NGOs or other external agencies, women's participation increased by 42 percent and enrollment in adult education increased by 31 percent, implying that through such partnerships, a wider audience can be reached and impacted. In addition, 56 percent of users obtained some vocational or entrepreneurial skill, compared to only 38 percent of learners in libraries without such partnerships.

Rural libraries are brimming with digitally challenged opportunities, despite recent and advantageous developments in the area. Since only about one-third of rural libraries provide ICT services, the majority of rural people still have no digital learning agendas. The study hence reaffirms that public libraries function as vital centers for lifelong learning in the promotion of literacy, digital inclusion, and social empowerment. For the fulfilment of long-term potential, governments will have to continue to invest and build a refined framework for policymaking that includes programs for training as well as infrastructure. Bridging the knowledge divide between rural and urban-and in turn making everyone equal on lifelong learning fronts in Maharashtra-there is a must for improved ICT accessibility and local collaboration.

CONCLUSION:

A series of studies have shown the immense contribution of public libraries towards literacy, community development, and social empowerment. These libraries became centers for reading, self-study,

and providing information relevant to agriculture, health, government schemes, and skill development for farmers, students, and adult learners. Through its literacy programs and awareness campaigns, the library system inculcated community activities and lifelong learning culture through various nongovernment organizations and local authorities. Some of the challenges encountered winds down into funding scarcity, shortage of trained staff, poor infrastructure, and lack of access to ICT-factors that inhibited their digitalization. Still, these libraries galvanized the reading habits and unfair social inclusion. To carry libraries forward, long-term support is a must from the government, strengthening the library-policy environment, and investment in digital infrastructure and professional training to convert the traditional libraries to contemporary community learning centers. The strategic repositioning of libraries will thus enable the rural population to become active lifelong learners and put public libraries at the forefront of inclusive education, digital empowerment, and community development in rural pockets of Maharashtra.

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