Digital Era and Status of School Libraries: A Case Study of Schools of Kashmir Division

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Abstract

In today's digital age, libraries have evolved from physical repositories to dynamic digital knowledge hubs, providing seamless access to vast information resources. Digital libraries play a crucial role in enhancing learning, offering users instant access to a diverse range of materials, fostering information literacy, and accommodating the needs of modern learners. However, most of the studied school libraries in Kashmir still lack this digital transformation, impacting their effectiveness in meeting students' educational needs. Without sufficient resources or up-to-date educational content, including current magazines and materials tailored to diverse learning interests, these libraries struggle to captivate young readers.

Additionally, most school librarians are not yet equipped with the digital training needed to leverage technology effectively in their roles. This study examines these challenges and emphasizes the importance of digitizing school libraries and developing librarians' technical competencies. The research findings indicate that digital resources and capacity-building for librarians could greatly enhance student engagement and access to relevant information. To support a vibrant learning environment, school authorities and SCERT-J&K are encouraged to prioritize the digital transformation of libraries and invest in training librarians of School education across Kashmir division. This approach will help align school libraries in Kashmir with 21st century educational standards, creating an accessible and enriched learning experience for students.

Key Words: Digital library, librarian, capacity building programmes, Kashmir division.

Introduction:

In the digital era, marked by a surge in information and the rapid advancement of technology, libraries are experiencing a profound transformation. Historically, libraries served as custodians of printed knowledge, with librarians guiding users through physical collections. However, the digital revolution has introduced a paradigm shift, redefining the library as a "Digital Paradigm" and repositioning the librarian's role within an evolving information ecosystem (Thiruppathi, K.). This shift from traditional, print-based libraries to digital libraries has been catalyzed by the growing capabilities of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), reshaping how information is created, stored, accessed, and shared.

ICT has become a cornerstone for modern information handling within libraries, driving efficiency in data management, storage, and retrieval. This technology enables libraries to offer diverse services beyond physical walls, allowing users with internet access to reach a global repository of resources. ICT's various components—including telecommunication, broadcasting, software, and electronic media—have created a robust framework for accessing and disseminating information worldwide (Marcelle, G.). The Internet, a critical element of ICT, has empowered users, scholars, and professionals to access a wealth of digital resources, collaborate on research, and interact with global experts, significantly expanding the traditional role of libraries.

Today, libraries must meet the growing demands of an information-centric society. The traditional concept of a library as a mere storehouse of books has evolved into a complex, networked digital library system that offers access to electronic journals, databases, multimedia resources, and Open Public Access Catalogs (OPACs). The internet and web-based resources have turned libraries into gateways to global knowledge, making resources accessible at users' fingertips. This transformation has also shifted the role of librarians from gatekeepers of printed information to facilitators of digital literacy and curators of knowledge (Wathore, A. R.).

The emergence of digital libraries has also expanded the library's purpose beyond storage and preservation; modern libraries now play a critical role in organizing, distributing, and providing information across digital platforms (Vishwakarma, M. L.). This shift has required librarians to adapt by gaining new competencies in digital resource management and knowledge dissemination. As libraries increasingly adopt emerging technologies, the focus on digitization allows for greater inclusivity, enabling access to information that meets the needs of a diverse user base. Libraries without physical walls, or "Libraries without Walls," now provide a network of knowledge that supports scientific communication, collaboration, and universal access to information resources. In this context, libraries serve as vital bridges connecting users to the knowledge they seek, supporting society's needs in an era where information is a fundamental asset.

The present paper explores the ongoing transition from traditional to digital libraries, the evolving roles of librarians, and the crucial need for professional training in ICT skills. It argues that, in the digital age, libraries must continue to evolve, offering users timely, organized access to digital collections and effectively meeting the needs of modern knowledge seekers

Review of Literature:

The digital age has profoundly transformed the role of librarians, challenging traditional views of librarians as mere custodians of physical collections. Libraries, once associated primarily with shelves of printed books, have evolved into dynamic hubs of digital information. This transformation has been extensively documented, with researchers such as Borgman (2003) and Lankes (2011) highlighting the active engagement of librarians in managing digital resources, guiding users in information literacy, and fostering digital communities. This shift aligns with a broader societal trend toward digital information consumption, emphasizing the adaptability and innovation within the profession.

Key trends in the evolving landscape of librarianship include a shift from collection-centric to user-centric services, as described by Casey and Savastinuk (2006). Librarians increasingly prioritize the personalized and responsive delivery of information, focusing on meeting the diverse and specific needs of their users. Another trend is the deep integration of technology into library services, which encompasses digitization efforts, virtual reference services, and the development of digital libraries (Chowdhury, 2010). Through technology, librarians have enhanced access to resources and played a pivotal role in promoting digital literacy.

Despite these advancements, the digital age has introduced challenges, including information overload from the vast array of online content, which can be daunting for both librarians and users (Hilbert, 2016). Ensuring the quality and credibility of digital information sources has become increasingly critical, while privacy and security concerns present complex ethical challenges that librarians must carefully navigate (Broughton & Thomas, 2017). These issues underscore the evolving responsibility of librarians to uphold standards of information integrity and ethical resource management.

Amidst these challenges, new opportunities have emerged. Librarians are uniquely positioned to curate digital collections, manage metadata, and guide users in evaluating digital information. Aharony (2019) notes that librarians' expertise in these areas supports the development of information literacy skills in users, making them invaluable guides in the digital age. Moreover, collaborations with educators and researchers have expanded the role of librarians as partners in knowledge creation (Haddow, 2015), while the preservation of unique digital collections has become a central focus. The efforts to make cultural heritage accessible for future generations highlight librarians' essential role in digital archiving and cultural preservation (Witten, Bainbridge, & Nichols, 2010).

In sum, the literature underscores the dynamic evolution of librarianship, illustrating how librarians are actively reshaping their roles to address the demands and opportunities presented by digital transformation. This body of research offers a foundation for understanding the complex interplay of trends, challenges, and opportunities that define the profession in an era of abundant information.

Results and Discussion

The study shows that, even though there is a national focus on digitizing libraries, schools in Kashmir face major obstacles in going digital. Although computerization in Indian libraries began as early as the 1980s (Angadi, S. S., 2021), the lack of financial resources, infrastructure, and skilled staff has kept school libraries in Kashmir far behind from making similar advancements. The findings from this study reveal that most of the sampled schools do have basic libraries but they lack digital access, modern resources, and engaging books in Indian languages and thereby do not encourage students to explore and enjoy learning. The findings of the National Achievement Survey 2017 also highlighted that students with access to a school library and storybooks achieve the highest levels of learning (MHRD Guidelines, 2019-2020).

1. Infrastructure and Physical Facilities

The physical conditions of many school libraries in Kashmir need immediate attention in terms of infrastructure development. Libraries are often located in single, inadequately sized rooms that can only accommodate a limited number of students at a time. In most cases, these spaces are poorly furnished, with only a few tables and chairs available, insufficient to meet even a small proportion of the school population. Without proper library furniture like

periodical display racks, newspaper stands, and adequate seating arrangements, the library environment is uninviting and struggles to support effective study or resource exploration.

Moreover, some schools assign non-professional clerical staff to manage the libraries due to a lack of professional librarians, a factor that further diminishes the libraries' effectiveness. This approach limits the quality of services and guidance students receive, as non-specialized staff lack the expertise to assist students in selecting appropriate materials, navigating information resources, or fostering a reading culture. National standards recommend that library staff numbers should align with school size; however, the data highlights a critical shortage of qualified staff across the sampled libraries in Kashmir, indicating a severe gap in professional resources.

2. Collection and Resource Limitations

Another significant concern is the limited, outdated nature of book collections, which consist primarily of older, less varied texts that do not reflect the current educational needs or interests of students. Most libraries lack age-appropriate & Child-friendly books, contemporary periodicals, newspapers, and a diverse array of national and international publications, which are essential for providing students with a global perspective. The literature highlights key shifts in librarianship, including a move from collection-centric to user-centric services, emphasizing tailored support for users (Casey & Savastinuk, 2006). Additionally, technology integration, such as digitization and virtual services, has transformed libraries, expanding access and promoting digital literacy (Chowdhury, 2010).

The small size of these collections and the predominance of teacher-driven selections mean that student preferences are often overlooked, failing to cultivate their interests or foster a culture of reading. Contrary to it, the MHRD has set National guidelines that emphasize age-appropriate & Child-friendly books with 50% of the books in local/regional languages (NEP Para 2.8, 5.9, 22.6). Additionally, because of limited funding, many libraries cannot update their collections or introduce new learning resources that align with modern curriculum requirements. This scarcity of materials is a barrier to promoting reading habits, as students are less inclined to visit libraries that lack relevant, engaging content.

3. Capacity Building Needs of Library Staff

The findings also underscore a pressing need for the professional development of library staff. Most of the librarians in Kashmir have not received any recent training or capacity-building opportunities that would equip them with the skills to implement digital resources, use ICT tools, or develop engaging library programmes. For those who have attended some form of training, additional orientation workshops and support are needed to keep pace with the rapidly evolving landscape of library science. Contrary to it, librarians are at the forefront of promoting digital literacy, equipping users with the skills to critically evaluate online information, distinguish credible sources from misinformation, and leverage digital tools for research and learning (Doyle, 2019). Pollock and Hockley (1997) examined the use of the internet by internet-naïve but PC-literate users and concluded that to execute successful searches, internet users need at least a basic understanding of internet searching concepts, but also very high levels of support - from a librarian or other experienced internet searcher.

ICT integration, which is at the core of modern library management and digitization, is mostly absent in these schools, leading to a scenario where even basic digital literacy remains unaddressed among library staff. Proper training and support are crucial for empowering librarians to adopt digital systems, such as automated catalogs, e-book access, and digital reference services, which are necessary for a 21st-century educational experience.

4. Rotational Access and Limited Student Interaction

Due to seating limitations and space constraints, access to the library is often arranged on a rotational basis, allowing each student access only once a month or less. This limited exposure diminishes students' opportunities to explore books, develop information literacy skills, or simply enjoy reading in a quiet, resource-rich environment. In most cases, the lack of periodicals and digital media severely restricts students' interaction with current educational materials, reducing the library's potential as a source of continuous learning and intellectual engagement.

Recommendations for Digitization and Modernization

The findings advocate for significant reforms to make school libraries in Kashmir division more functional, relevant, and engaging:

1) **Vibrant and Child-friendly Libraries**: School authorities and educational policymakers should prioritize infrastructural improvements, expanding libraries into multi-functional spaces that include dedicated reading areas having good ventilation, ample day light, sufficient floor area including circulation desks, reference sections, and even audio-visual sections.

2) **Enhanced Funding**: Increased funding is essential to procure contemporary books, digital resources, and library furniture that meet the standards of a modern library and support an engaging learning environment.

3) **Continuous Professional Development**: To enhance the skills of library staff, capacity-building programs should be provided, focusing on digital tools and effective library management. SCERT-J&K should organize training for library professionals, covering the core objectives of library services and various strategies to engage children with

books and increase community awareness. These programs would equip librarians to utilize ICT effectively, enabling digital cataloging, access to e-books, and support for virtual learning resources.

4) **Digital Access Initiatives**: Digitization efforts, including the creation of digital catalogs, online access to resources, and provision of digital devices, would transform school libraries into accessible, versatile learning hubs, even for students unable to visit in person.

5) **Library Management Committee:** Schools should establish a "Student Library Council" to involve students in selecting library resources. This approach ensures that the library's collection aligns with students' interests and needs, creating a more engaging and inclusive environment that encourages regular library use.

6) **Promoting a Culture of Reading:** Schools should encourage reading by creating a welcoming and safe environment where every student feels included and valued. Schools can make reading part of every class by setting aside a library period each week. In classrooms without a library, a cozy reading corner can be set up. Involving parents and community members in classroom activities also helps build a supportive reading environment. Additionally, students could be encouraged to write simple reviews of what they read, helping them engage more deeply with the material.

Conclusion

The current state of school libraries in Kashmir division reveals an urgent need for digital transformation, infrastructure improvements, and professional development. Addressing these areas would bring school libraries closer to fulfilling their role as dynamic centers of learning in the digital era. With adequate support and modernization, these libraries could become vibrant spaces that inspire a love of reading, facilitate information literacy, and equip students with the tools to thrive in a knowledge-driven world.

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