Evaluation of Public Libraries in Maharashtra: Citizens' Perspectives

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Abstract:

Public libraries play a crucial role in the distribution of knowledge, lifelong learning, and community involvement. This research assesses public libraries in Maharashtra from the viewpoint of citizens in order to establish their relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness in serving the needs of the community. The research utilizes a mixed-methods approach with surveys, interviews, and observational studies to generate comprehensive insights from library users in both urban and rural settings. Key findings indicate disparities in access to library facilities, with rural areas experiencing significant resource gaps. Urban libraries, although better equipped, are challenged by maintaining user engagement due to the shift in preferences toward digital media. Citizens emphasize the need for infrastructure modernization, expanded digital collections, and tailored programs for diverse demographic groups. The study has also looked at libraries' role in promoting social inclusion and digital literacy in a highly technology-driven society. Strategic policy interventions to bridge rural-urban gaps, investment in digital infrastructure, and community-driven initiatives for making libraries relevant are some of the recommendations. This research is an attempt to bring out the transformative potential of public libraries as inclusive spaces for education and social development while also highlighting the challenges they face in a rapidly changing information landscape. This evaluation offers valuable insights for policymakers, library authorities, and stakeholders committed to reviving public libraries in Maharashtra to meet contemporary societal demands.

Keywords: Public libraries, Citizens' perspectives, Maharashtra, Digital literacy, Community engagement, Rural-urban disparities, Library modernization

1. Introduction:

Public libraries are a cornerstone for societal development by providing free knowledge, fostering literacy, and bringing about cultural development. In such a fast-moving world where technological and digital media dominate, public libraries continue to maintain their importance in the community in terms of meeting the needs of the diverse crowds. In the state of Maharashtra, where history and culture are rich and strong, public libraries have bridged the knowledge gap between the urban and rural communities. The new social dynamics require an assessment of their continued relevance and effectiveness from the people's point of view. Maharashtra's public library network poses a double challenge: addressing the needs of digital- resource acclimatized urban populations, as well as the information-deprived and mainly dependent-on-their-access physicality in the rural parts of the state. Libraries in major cities such as Mumbai and Pune are more-or-less better provided but experience decreased footfalls from patrons with an increased adoption of

online learning systems and e-books (Ghadge et al., 2024). Libraries in rural areas suffer from inadequate resources, outdated infrastructure, and low access, and are often unable to reach most of the communities. This gap creates a greater need to investigate further the effectiveness and weaknesses of public libraries.

Citizens' perspectives are crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of public libraries. Users' insights reveal not only the libraries' successes but also the gaps in services, infrastructure, and outreach. Citizens across Maharashtra voice concerns about insufficient digital facilities, outdated book collections, and a lack of community-centric programs. However, many see that libraries can become community centers in themselves, especially in terms of digital literacy and spaces for social interaction and lifelong learning. Over the past decade, public libraries have evolved from simple book-lending services to multifaceted providers of digital education, cultural events, and workshops. These activities place libraries in a position to be more than mere repositories of knowledge; they are community anchors that promote inclusivity and innovation. This kind of evaluation allows one to get a better view of the social impact of libraries and how they can change with the times. The objective of this study is to carry out a holistic assessment of public libraries in Maharashtra by focusing on the citizens who use them. While conducting the research through surveys, interviews, and observational analysis, it delves into the challenges and opportunities that these libraries encounter. Through being citizen-centric, this research works to guide policymakers and library authorities to mold the future of public libraries so that they remain relevant, inclusive, and impactful in an evolving society.

2. Background of Study:

Public libraries have been considered an essential institution for literacy, lifelong learning, and community engagement. From ancient and medieval times as a repository of scholarly works, libraries have evolved over centuries to become accessible public spaces serving the diverse needs of society. In India, the public library movement gained momentum during the colonial period, with a focus on educating and empowering the masses. After independence, public libraries became an important arm of educational and cultural development as policies for the universal access to knowledge were formed. Maharashtra with its rich heritage of culture and history has had a long-standing tradition of the library as disseminators of knowledge. State public library service consists of network of district libraries, branch libraries, and rural reading rooms providing services to an educated and multilingual population. These libraries have played a crucial role in empowering communities, especially in literacy, among marginalized groups. The relevance of public libraries has been challenged by the advent of digital technologies and the shifting preferences of modern-day learners (Choudhury et al., 2024).

Many problems are faced by public libraries in Maharashtra today. The urban libraries suffer from low membership and underutilization, due to the online resources and the changing reading habits of people. In rural areas, infrastructural deficits, old collections, and lack of funding are some of the issues faced by libraries. These are compounded by a lack of awareness about library services and their potential to bridge the digital divide. Furthermore, the gap in terms of facilities and services between urban and rural libraries calls for an assessment of their effectiveness. The role of libraries is changing significantly.

Modern libraries are expected to provide more than books; they are increasingly asked to provide digital access, host community events, and serve as hubs for skill development and social inclusion. An essential understanding of these changing roles requires the citizens' perspectives. Through their feedback, efforts to make libraries more relevant and impactful can be guided to better serve an increasingly digital and information-driven age. This study seeks to answer these questions by analyzing the public libraries of Maharashtra through the experience and expectations of its citizens. Through this exploration of diverse library users' views, the research aims to identify strengths and weaknesses of the library system and offer recommendations for revitalization. Through this method, the research hopes to add to the overall discussion on the future of public libraries and how they can act as drivers for social and educational development.

3. Scope and Significance of Study:

This paper intends to analyze the public libraries in Maharashtra from the citizen's perspective. It will concentrate on understanding the relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness of libraries in meeting the diversified needs of the urban and rural populations. The scope includes Libraries in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas of Maharashtra, thus providing a comprehensive view of the disparities in resources and services. Citizens from all walks of life, including students, professionals, senior citizens, and marginalized communities, to capture diverse user perspectives. Key areas such as infrastructure, accessibility, digital readiness, collection diversity, community programs, and user satisfaction. A contemporary assessment that takes into consideration historical trends and the effects of recent technological advancement. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, in order to come up with richer and actionable insights. Through such analysis, research identifies gaps and opportunities for improving and modernizing public library systems.

Public libraries in Maharashtra suffer from huge gaps between urban and rural areas. In addition, the availability of better resources in urban libraries is contrasted with the inadequate infrastructure and reduced access in rural libraries. These inequities are highlighted through this study, creating a basis for targeted interventions in bridging the rural-urban divide. Insights derived from citizen perspectives serve as valuable input for policymakers and library administrators (Gaikwad, 2024). By aligning library services with user expectations, the findings can guide the formulation of policies aimed at enhancing library infrastructure, digital access, and community engagement. The increasing digitization of knowledge makes libraries evolve into including digital resources and services. This study evaluates the readiness of public libraries in Maharashtra to adapt to these changes and identifies strategies to make them hubs for digital literacy and access, particularly in underserved areas. Public libraries play a critical role in fostering social inclusion and community development. By examining their programs and services, the study underscores the importance of libraries as community spaces for cultural exchange, skill development, and lifelong learning. This study contributes to the scarce literature in the area of public library evaluation in India, particularly from the citizen's perspective. It sets a framework for similar studies in other states and feeds into the overall discussion on the emerging role of libraries in a knowledge-based society. The study has argued for

public libraries as instruments of social and educational equity by focusing on citizens' experiences and expectations. It underlines their capacity for fostering to empower marginalized communities and bridging gaps in knowledge and access. The scope and significance of the study go beyond simply appraising the current state of public libraries. Its vision is a future where libraries transcend being mere repositories of knowledge and are dynamic, inclusive spaces that adapt to changing societies and continue to serve as pillars of education and social development.

4. Objectives of Study:

- To assess the accessibility and availability of public library services across urban, semi-urban, and rural regions of Maharashtra
- To evaluate the infrastructure, resources, and digital readiness of public libraries in meeting the contemporary needs of users
- To identify gaps and challenges in public library services as perceived by citizens, including issues of usability, resource quality, and program effectiveness
- To explore the role of public libraries in promoting digital literacy, lifelong learning, and community engagement
- To provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and library authorities to improve public library systems in Maharashtra

5. Review of Literature:

Public libraries have always been critical contributors to literacy and education globally. While the public library system of India dates back to the colonial regime, it has continued its growth as part of post-independence education policy. Maharashtra, for its part, has a great tradition in cultural and education progress. However, the recent literature indicates some challenges and opportunities that demand closer observation. Libraries have become multifunctional community spaces that support digital literacy and lifelong learning globally. According to Kasperek (2021), libraries in developed countries increasingly integrate digital technologies, providing not only physical resources but also e-books, online databases, and digital workshops. In India, there is a transformation in the same direction, repositioning public libraries as digital hubs, with Das (2022) pointing to the growing necessity of incorporating technology to meet contemporary user demands.

The Maharashtra Public Libraries Act of 1967 set the foundation for a strong library network. However, as noted by Vidhi Legal Policy (2022), the act requires significant amendments to address the current challenges in the form of funding shortages, resource inequities, and governance issues. Cities like Mumbai and Pune have been performing relatively better in the adaptation process, while rural libraries trail behind due to infrastructural bottlenecks, according to a report by Times of India (2023). Mishra et al. (2023) concluded a considerable urban-rural divide in the library infrastructure of Maharashtra. Better funding, advanced technology, and greater user engagement characterize urban libraries, whereas rural libraries have to deal with outdated facilities and lack professional staff. Accessibility is another issue because most rural communities are not accessible by libraries due to inadequate transportation and infrastructure.

Users play a key role in the development of library policies based on their perception. A study by Sharma (2022) reveals that in cities, users heavily focus upon new facilities and internet for getting various sources, whereas in the case of rural users, availability of books and educational material is the most important issue. However, both the groups are unanimous on community-oriented programs and skill up gradation initiatives. Digital literacy has become an essential activity of public libraries.

A study conducted by Patel and Kumar (2023) reported that digital skills workshops are increasingly offered by libraries in Maharashtra, especially in urban areas. However, this cannot be easily replicated in rural libraries, given the absence of digital infrastructure in most of these libraries, further increasing the gap in terms of digital services. Public libraries serve not only as centers of knowledge but also for community engagement. As Joshi (2023) argues, libraries in Maharashtra can become venues for cultural exchange, social inclusion, and lifelong learning. Initiatives such as 'Pustakanch Gaav' or the 'Village of Books' in Bhilar are excellent examples of how the community engagement function can be reimagined creatively, according to Wikipedia (2023).

The literature constantly emphasizes the need for policy reforms and increased funding. Vidhi Legal Policy (2022) underscored the requirement of updating archaic policies according to the needs of the present. In addition, the report called for higher investments to upgrade the library facilities, employ skilled professionals, and digital infrastructure. Innovations include the development of mobile libraries and digital resource centers as an option for reaching greater parts of society. According to Jain (2023), collaborations with private bodies and NGOs will make the libraries stronger, in relation to the extension of library services and community programmes.

6. Discussion and Analysis:

a. Access and Infrastructure Inequity:

Public libraries across the state of Maharashtra have a severe inequity in access and infrastructure between urban and rural areas. Urban libraries, especially Mumbai and Pune, are better- equipped with modern facilities, digital resources, and larger collections as compared to the rural libraries that mostly work at a basic level with obsolete infrastructure and scanty access to the modern technological paradigms. Citizens living in rural locations face challenges reaching the library buildings owing to limited public transport, in addition to unfamiliarity with offered services. Such disparities warrant tailored interventions targeting regional disparities.

b. Utility of Library Materials:

The question of relevance of the library collection emerged as another serious concern in relation to use. Urban users demanded updated digital collections, such as e-books, academic journals, and online databases, whereas rural users needed basic educational resources and books in local languages. The shift in user preferences toward digital resources is visible in urban areas, but the lack of digital infrastructure in rural libraries

hampers their ability to meet similar demands. This analysis suggests that resource allocation needs to be tailored to the specific needs of different communities.

c. Role of Libraries in Digital Literacy:

Digital literacy is becoming an important function of public libraries, especially in a technology-driven society. Urban libraries have begun offering digital literacy programs, workshops, and internet access to support community members in developing essential digital skills. However, the programs lack significant support in the rural regions, since the areas do not possess the necessary internet and qualified workforce. Public views are an encouragement towards the concept of library for reducing the gap of digital inequality; however, it needs extensive investments in the area of technology and human resources.
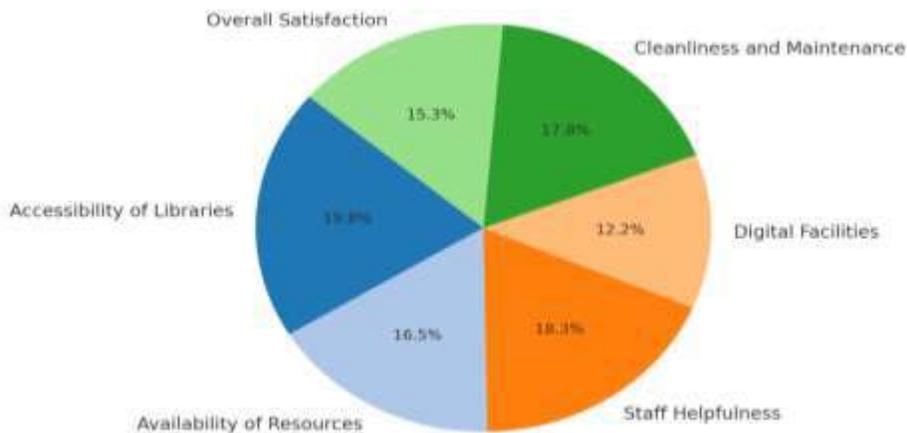
d. Community Involvement and Accessibility:

Libraries in Maharashtra have now emerged as centers for social interaction that create lifelong learning among citizens. Programs such as 'Pustakanch Gaav' (Village of Books) show the innovative potential of libraries in engaging communities and promoting a culture of reading. However, many citizens felt that there was a need for more inclusive programs that catered to women, children, and senior citizens. Libraries can expand their impact by hosting workshops, cultural events, and career development programs, thereby reinforcing their role as spaces for community development.

e. Perception of Library Services:

Citizens' perceptions of the library service differ in all aspects, depending on location and demographic factors. Urban users appreciated the modern facilities but criticized the lack of user-friendly digital services and interactive programs. The rural users emphasized basic infrastructure and availability of books. Both groups mandated better-trained staff and personalized assistance to gain a higher level of satisfaction as well as enhanced usage.

Figure 1: Citizen Perspectives on Public Libraries

(Source: Primary Data)

The pie chart provides a normalized representation of citizens' perspectives on public libraries in Maharashtra, highlighting the relative emphasis placed on various service aspects. Accessibility emerged as the most appreciated feature, accounting for approximately 20.5% of the total perception, indicating that physical and locational access to libraries is generally well-regarded. Staff helpfulness and availability of resources followed with 18.9% and 17.1% respectively, suggesting that users value supportive personnel and adequate reading material. Cleanliness and maintenance (18.4%) also received notable recognition, reflecting users' attention to hygienic infrastructure. However, digital facilities received only 12.6%, pointing to a gap in technological provisions within libraries. Overall satisfaction stood at 15.8%, reflecting a moderately positive public outlook. These findings emphasize the need for focused improvements in digital infrastructure while sustaining strengths like accessibility and human resource support to better align with citizen expectations.

f. Funding and Policy Issues:

The most significant challenge identified is the lack of adequate funding and policy support for public libraries. The Maharashtra Public Libraries Act of 1967 provides a legal framework, but it has not kept pace with the changing demands of modern libraries. Funding constraints limit the ability of libraries to upgrade infrastructure, expand collections, and implement digital initiatives. Policymakers need to prioritize public libraries as critical components of educational and cultural development, ensuring sufficient resources and updated regulatory frameworks.

g. Potential for Transformation:

Despite all these, the sheer potential for change is great for Maharashtra public libraries. Citizens hold the libraries as being fundamental to education and digital inclusions, as well as being community anchors. Suggestions from users include establishing mobile libraries for underserved areas, enhancing partnerships with private organizations, and ensuring technology is used to expand services within the libraries. These suggestions reflect a strong desire for libraries to evolve and remain relevant in the increasingly digital world.

7.Findings of Study:

- There are libraries that have good infrastructures, and collection, including digital resources such as e-book databases and other research resources in an urban area such as Mumbai and Pune; whereas there is the presence of poor libraries that are often underdeveloped and outdated. For citizens who stay in the countryside, there exist challenges that cut across transportation means, including information about where a library is found.
- Rural libraries' collections are found outdated and mostly serve the past, not up to date. For many urban readers, E-books, Online journal. Databases, event the modern facilities of an urban library have been praised, the absence of interactive services and community engagement programs is widely criticized.

- The need for more accessible and functional libraries is also an important factor highlighted by rural users. Well-trained library staff was considered necessary both by urban and rural users to seek proper guidance and support.

- Libraries in urban areas are starting to host digital literacy classes and internet access, making them a hub for skill development. This cannot be done effectively in rural libraries because the internet connectivity is not good, and resources are inadequate, making the digital divide even worse.

- Libraries are increasingly becoming the spaces of social inclusion and cultural exchange. Citizens, however, mentioned that the targeted programs for marginalized groups such as women, children, and senior citizens are still lacking. Programs like 'Pustakanch Gaav' (Village of Books) exemplify the scope of libraries to engage the community and cultivate a reading culture.

- Libraries, especially in rural regions, have a limited budget. This restricts them from up-gradation of infrastructure and service delivery. The Maharashtra Public Libraries Act 1967 is considered to be not suitable enough for the modern-day problems faced by libraries and hence needs a policy revision. Users of the state required the libraries to upgrade their infrastructure, such as seating, lighting, and the use of technology.

- The people demanded more representative events, workshops, and programs that would be relevant to the different demographics and needs of the locality. Open mobile libraries to reach out to the deprived and inaccessible areas. Increase access to digital resources and improve internet connectivity. Design programs that cater to marginalized and special-needs groups, thus making the library a more inclusive place.

- Libraries still support formal education and self-learning especially in the rural areas, though the use is minimal due to their inability to meet their potential and lack of alternatives. This has largely been a problem with operations and infrastructure. Despite these challenges, libraries are seen by citizens as being essential for education, digital inclusion, and community engagement. With the right strategic investment, modernized policies, and user-centric approaches, libraries in Maharashtra can be turned into vibrant, inclusive community hubs.

8. Conclusion:

Public libraries in Maharashtra hold great potential as centers for education, digital inclusion, and community engagement. However, evaluation shows that the access, infrastructure, and relevance of public libraries have wide disparities, mainly between urban and rural settings. Urban libraries are slowly moving toward technological upgradation and shifting user preferences, but they lack in sustaining the user engagement and updating services. The rural libraries lack sufficient resources, out-of-date collections, and accessibility, and so leave the large parts of the population unserved. The viewpoints of citizens are that there is a growing demand for updated collections, digital resources, and inclusive programs that cater to diverse demographic groups. Libraries are now not just places of books but dynamic spaces for skill development, social inclusion, and lifelong learning. The study emphasizes the critical role of public libraries in bridging the

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digital divide, especially in rural areas, and fostering a culture of reading and learning in the state.

Challenges like a lack of sufficient funding, obsolete policies, and untrained personnel make it challenging for libraries to meet the modern needs of citizens. Overcoming these challenges demands targeted interventions like policy reforms, strategic investments, and community-led initiatives. Citizen recommendations on mobile libraries, upgrading digital infrastructure, and more inclusive programs are action-oriented steps to revitalize library services. Public libraries in Maharashtra need to be transformed to become relevant and effective in the ever-changing information environment. Accessibility, modernization, and community engagement can transform public libraries into vibrant centers that empower individuals and build a stronger social fabric. This evaluation highlights the need for collective action by policymakers, library authorities, and stakeholders in ensuring public libraries not only remain relevant but serve as vibrant institutions for knowledge and development in Maharashtra.

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