

Library and Information Services for Divyangjan in Northern India: An Inclusive Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Providing equitable library and information services to Divyangjan (people with disabilities) plays an important role in establishing an inclusive society. Libraries and institutions in Northern India are gradually working towards meeting the requirements of Divyangjan through effective accessibility mechanisms, assistive technologies, and special services. The present paper examines the status-stake afforded to those services, the key initiatives involved, the hurdles, and the ways forward. It argues the case for the empowerment of Divyangjan by libraries and makes some recommendations to advance the direction of accessibility and inclusivity..

KEYWORDS: Divyangjan, Library Services, Assistive Technology, Inclusive Resources, Northern India, Accessibility, Empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Libraries are major gateways to knowledge, education, and information central to the development of an individual intellectually, culturally, and socially. For Divyangjan (the government's term for persons with disabilities), libraries are essential because they guarantee that the resources are available for education, vocation, and recreation. However, Divyangjan often encounters steep barriers when accessing traditional library services due to infrastructure, inaccessible resources, and lack of training for library staff.

In northern India, where Divyangjan makes up a huge portion of the population, there has been a groundswell of desire in recent years to provide inclusive library and information services. The analyzes the evolution of such services, including the role of assistive technology, government initiatives, infrastructural, and institutional expertise, as well as a look into key challenges and pragmatic recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Library and Information Services for Divyangjan in Northern India

The literature on library and information services extends to Divyangjan (persons with disabilities) in Northern India, highlighting key developments, challenges, and opportunities. This section deals with scholarly studies, reports from the government and institutions, and global frameworks to envisage a comprehensive view of the current state of services for such a marginalized group. The review emphasizes disability access measures, assistive technologies, institutional efforts, and relevant policy frameworks for Divyangjan.

Definition and Scope of Divyangjan

The term "Divyangjan," meaning "divine body" was introduced by the Government of India in 2015 to replace "persons with disabilities" and promote dignity and positivity. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, expanded the definition of disability to include 21 conditions, such as blindness, low vision, hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities, and specific learning disabilities. Literature shows that addressing the diverse needs of Divyangjan in libraries requires a multifaceted approach involving physical, technological, and digital accessibility (Gupta & Mehta, 2020).

Importance of Libraries for Divyangjan

According to Koganuramath and Choukimath (2016), libraries are essential in empowering Divyangjan by providing them access to information, education, and inclusion in society. Libraries act as knowledge centers that help the Divyangjan to blossom, become employable, and take part in cultural and recreational activities. However, the traditional models of libraries often overlook their needs, creating systemic barriers to access.

Physical Accessibility

Physical accessibility in libraries has been considered a serious obstacle for Divyangjan in Northern India (Sharma, 2019). Some urban libraries, like the Delhi Public Library and Punjab University Library, has provided ramps, elevators, and tactile signage; however, rural libraries do not usually have such arrangements. Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan has done a lot to promote inclusiveness in infrastructural development, but implementation is hit or miss (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023).

Digital and Technological Accessibility

Digital accessibility, a focus area that seems to be growing, features Sugamya Pustakalaya as a key initiative. This initiative aims to promote the idea of an online library accessible to all, which houses more than 1,00,000 books in DAISY, EPUB3, and Braille formats (Sugamya Pustakalaya, 2023). The libraries, although mostly prominent ones are equipped with screen readers (JAWS, NVDA), refreshable Braille displays, and magnification devices (Choudhary & Yadav, 2021).

Resource Accessibility

Accessible books for the Divyangjan, along with a few others, should be in Braille, audiobook, and tactile diagram formats. Members of the National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities (NIEPVD), located in Dehradun, and the All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB) in Delhi, has undertaken initiatives to create such resources. Unfortunately, that effort has not yielded adequate results in terms of accessible book production, especially material in regional languages (Singh & Rana, 2018).

Assistive Technologies in Library Services

The integration of assistive technologies is a crucial development in libraries for Divyangjan. Kumar (2018) identifies screen reading tools, DAISY players, and optical character recognition (OCR) systems as transformative innovations that enable visually impaired users to access digital content. However, the adoption of these technologies is uneven, often restricted to a few public and academic libraries in Northern India. NIEPVD and Delhi Public Library are noted for their advanced use of assistive technologies (Vashishta & Dhingra, 2016).

Key Institutional Efforts

National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities (NIEPVD), Dehradun
NIEPVD is a pioneer in providing specialized services for visually impaired individuals, including Braille presses, DAISY books, and training programs on assistive technology use. Its library is a model for accessible library services in India (NIEPVD Annual Report, 2023).

Delhi Public Library (DPL), Delhi

DPL has been recognized for its inclusive services, offering Braille books, audiobooks, and assistive devices. Regular workshops and training sessions for Divyangjan demonstrate its commitment to inclusivity (DPL, 2023).

Sugamya Pustakalaya

Launched in 2016, Sugamya Pustakalaya is a national-level initiative for accessible online reading. It collaborates with over 500 institutions and enables Divyangjan to access educational and recreational materials (Sugamya Pustakalaya, 2023).

Regional Efforts

Institutions such as the A.C. Joshi Library at Punjab University, Chandigarh, and the Rajasthan Netraheen Kalyan Sangh, Jaipur, have also implemented noteworthy measures for Divyangjan. These include digitized resources, Braille collections, and community outreach programs.

Government Policies and Support

Accessible India Campaign

The Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan or Ready India program aims to make public buildings, including libraries, easily accessible for the disabled under the Persons with Disabilities Act, by mandating the provision of ramps, tactile indicators, and assistive devices to these libraries (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2023). Gupta & Mehta (2020) stated, however, that a number of libraries, particularly in rural areas, are still not complying with this mandate.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016

Among other things, the RPWD Act calls for equal access to education, employment, and public places, i.e. libraries. Accessible information services are considered a right with this Act. This provision within the Act encourages institutions to ensure availability of resources in Braille, large print, and other accessible formats.

Marrakesh Treaty

India's ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty in 2014 has eased the production and sharing of accessible reading materials. This has been instrumental in expanding Braille and audiobook collections nationwide (WIPO, 2023).

Challenges Identified in the Literature

Limited Infrastructure: Many libraries, especially in rural areas, lack the basic infrastructure needed to support Divyangjan (Sharma, 2019).

Inadequate Funding: Financial constraints limit the procurement of assistive technologies and production of accessible resources (Koganuramath & Choukimath, 2016).

Low Awareness: Librarians and staff often lack training in disability inclusion and the use of assistive technologies (Singh & Rana, 2018).

Content Scarcity: There is a significant shortage of books in Braille, DAISY, and audiobooks, particularly in regional languages (Choudhary & Yadav, 2021).

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- ✓ To understand the current library and information services ecosystem for Divyangjan in Northern India.
- ✓ Identify key libraries, institutions, and initiatives that are offering inclusive services.
- ✓ To analyze challenges faced in delivering such services.
- ✓ To provide suggestions that can help ensure sustainable and equitable access to information for Divyangjan.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach, combining:

- Literature Review: Referring to government reports, case studies, and journal articles focusing on library services for Divyangjan.
- Case Studies: Analyzing the initiatives of major libraries and institutions in Northern India.
- Interviews: Insights from librarians, disability activists, and Divyangjan users regarding the effectiveness of services.
- Policy Analysis: Review of the programs and policies like Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan (Accessible India Campaign).

4. Current State of Library and Information Services for Divyangjan**4.1 Physical Accessibility in Libraries**

In Northern India, libraries are gradually incorporating physical accessibility features such as:

- Wheelchair ramps, elevators, and widened doorways.
- Tactile guides and signage for visually impaired users.
- Dedicated Divyangjan-friendly reading spaces.

Some examples include the implementation of physical accessibility features at Dr. Zakir Husain Library, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and Punjab University Library, Chandigarh.

4.2 Accessible Resources

Braille Collections: Most of the libraries like the National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities (NIEPVD), Dehradun, maintain rich collections of Braille books.

Audiobooks: The lending of audiobooks is available from institutions such as the Delhi Public Library and All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB).

E-resources: Books are also available in accessible formats such as DAISY and EPUB3 through digital libraries like Sugamya Pustakalaya.

4.3 Assistive Technologies

Libraries in Northern India are integrating assistive technologies for Divyangjan:

Screen Readers: Tools like JAWS and NVDA for visually impaired users.

Refreshable Braille Displays: Used for accessing digital content in Braille.

DAISY Players: Convert text into structured audio content for easier navigation.

Magnifying Devices and OCR (Optical Character Recognition):

Used by partially sighted users to read printed text.

4.4 Key Initiatives

Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan (Accessible India Campaign) aims to make public spaces, including libraries, accessible for Divyangjan.

Sugamya Pustakalaya India's first fully accessible digital library, containing a wealth of titles in a very large variety of accessible formats

National Digital Library of India (NDLI): Collaborates with educational institutions to provide accessible academic resources.

5. Central Libraries and Organizations for Divyangjan

5.1 National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities (NIEPVD), Dehradun

Houses a Braille library and produces DAISY books.

- Provides training for Divyangjan in the use of assistive technologies.

5.2 Delhi Public Library (DPL), Delhi

- Features Braille collections, audiobooks, and assistive devices such as screen readers.
- Organizes training sessions and workshops for Divyangjan users.

5.3 Punjab University Library, Chandigarh

- Provides e-resources and services for visually impaired users.
- Infrastructure is designed to accommodate wheelchair users.

5.4 All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB), Delhi

- Maintains a Braille press and a rich collection of resources for educational purposes.
- Offers free audiobook services.

5.5 Rajasthan Netraheen Kalyan Sangh, Jaipur

- Provides a Braille library coupled with skill development programs for visually impaired individuals.

6. CHALLENGES IN PROVIDING LIBRARY SERVICES FOR DIVYANGJAN

Despite progress, libraries in Northern India face several challenges:

Lack of funding: It results in an inability to buy the assistive technologies and build accessible resources.

Infrastructure Gaps: Rural libraries often lack basic accessibility features such as ramps and tactile signage.

Lack of Awareness and Training Many librarians and staff are uninformed about specific needs of the Divyangjan or how to operate assistive technologies.

Digital Divide: Divyangjan face the problem of accessing technology and internet-based resources in rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

Limited content: There are a few books in Braille, DAISY, etc. and most of them in regional languages in the accessible formats.

7. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

7.1 Technological Interventions

Libraries can introduce AI-enabled assistive technologies that facilitate real-time text-to-speech conversion and automated transcription. Mobile apps to access library resources will also increase accessibility.

7.2 Human Capacity Building

Recurrent training for the library staff on disability awareness and assistive tools can enhance the quality of services provided. The involvement of Divyangjan in creating and offering library services on their own.

7.3 Community Outreach

Mobile libraries that offer accessible resources will also be able to reach the Divyangjan population residing in rural areas.

Awareness Programs to educate Divyangjan regarding the services that libraries are providing.

7.4 Collaborations

Collaborate with NGOs, Publishers, and Technology companies to create more accessible contents.

Partnering with Global initiatives such as Marrakesh treaty to gain access on print-disabled resources

7.5 Policy Advocacy

- Advocating for increased budgetary allocations for Divyangjan specific library services
- Mandating accessibility compliance of all public libraries under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations would improve library and information services for Divyangjan:

Comprehensive Accessibility Standards: All libraries must meet infrastructure and digital accessibility guidelines.

Accessible Collections: Increase Braille, audiobooks, and DAISY resources and focus on local languages.

Leverage Collaboration: Private companies, NGOs, and international organizations can be sought to enhance technological and financial support.

Promote Digital Literacy for Divyangjan: Training on the use of assistive tools and digital libraries.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Services: Periodic assessment of library services to ensure that they are meeting the needs of Divyangjan.

CONCLUSION

In Northern India, libraries are adapting themselves to fulfill the needs of Divyangjan, and in doing so, NIEPVD, Delhi Public Library, and Sugamya Pustakalaya set examples. The challenges to the realization of completely inclusive library services remain limited funding, lack of awareness, and digital inequities. The realization of empowerment among Divyangjan can be seen through the adoption of advanced technologies, fostering collaboration, and providing increased accessible content for libraries. With continued efforts, libraries in Northern India can become truly inclusive spaces that uphold the rights and dignity of all individuals.

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