Library Services for Disabled Users: Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide an overview of the library services provided to disabled users by public and higher education institutions. The review covers literature in the field of Library and Information Science. This study aims to assess the current state of public and academic library services worldwide. The review has covered library services delivered by public and academic libraries to all kinds of users with disabilities. The review will help to identify the gaps and opportunities for public and academic libraries to improve their services. The findings show that most studies have been conducted to assess the library services and facilities for the disabilities, viz., blind, deaf, physically handicapped, ADHD, learning disability and autism spectrum disorder. The accessibility, library collection, services and facilities are not satisfactory. The disabled students studying in premium institutions in India are not adequately.

KEYWORDS: disabled, library services, academic libraries, public libraries, health science information, visually challenged, blind, neurodevelopmental disability, learning disability.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the Census of India estimated that 26.8 million people in India, representing 2.21% of the population, were disabled. This figure suggests that over 2.2% of the Indian population has some form of mental or physical disability. Males constitute a larger portion of the disabled population, with 54% compared to 44% for females. Around 54.4% of the disabled population is literate, with 1.46 crore (14.6 million) individuals. As per The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, there are 21 types of Disabilities which includes Locomotor Disability, Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment, Speech & Language Disability, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Cerebral Palsy, Dwarfism etc. The RPwD Act, 2016, is a key piece of legislation in India that protects and promotes the rights of individuals with disabilities. It aims to ensure that people with disabilities can lead dignified lives, without discrimination and with equal opportunities. The key aspects of the RPwD Act, 2016 ensure equality and non-discrimination, emphasizes the need for accessibility in public buildings, transportation, and information and communication technology, guarantees the right to free education for children with benchmark

disabilities between 6 and 18 years of age, and provides a legal framework to address discrimination and ensure the protection of rights for people with disabilities.

At the global level UNESCO and IFLA have prepared the Public Library Manifesto, guidelines, and manuals for providing library services to differently-abled users. This research is an attempt to study the kind of facilities and services provided by the public and academic libraries.

2. OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND METHOD

This research intends to identify the library services provided to disabled communities. This is a review of the literature on library services with a specific focus on disabled users. The literature search was carried out using a variety of library resources such as print and e-journal articles, books, theses, and other forms of documents. The literature was restricted to the English language only. The topic under study is not limited to any period. Literature published in both print and electronic forms is considered for the study. The online literature was searched in databases viz. N-list and Google Scholar.

Several keywords were used for searching the literature in the databases. The keywords included: library services, disability, public library, academic library, health science information, visually challenged, blind, neurodevelopmental disability, learning disability, assistive technology and devices, hardware, software, inclusive libraries, physical accessibility, alternative formats. Boolean search techniques were used for the retrieval of relevant documents.

The full texts of all the documents applicable for the study were studied thoroughly to understand the nature of the research, the research methodology adopted, and the conclusions arrived. The review is divided and presented into two themes: public libraries and academic libraries.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Library Services provided by Public Libraries

Eakin, Jackson and Hannigan (1980), reported the results of a survey of medical library and public library providing health information. The public libraries confirmed that the public demand health information. The health information included requests for information about disease and medical procedures, physicians and hospital's names and address, library collection and factual information such as definitions, statistics etc. The authors believe that public library has an advantage over hospital library and health science library as public library is already serving the public and suggested that the collection of public libraries should consist of resources providing general health information such as normal human body and its functions, pregnancy and childbirth, nutrition and diets, the effects of environment or behavior on health, child development, and self-care, as well as information on specific diseases, tests, drugs, and treatments. The health science librarians should assist the public librarians in the collection development of health science resources.

An e-survey was carried out by Ross & Akins (2002), to ascertain the services, programs, and resources for given by the public libraries in Texas to children with disabilities specially invisible disabilities such as attention deficit

disorder ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, and other learning disorders. It was observed through the results that one library allowed the parents of dyslexic children to organize meetings in their library. The libraries conducted several programs such as story time, puppet shows, guest lectures, and library instruction. Internet facility, computer games, headphones, headset and special soft wares were owned by the libraries. Very few libraries provided training programs for the library staff to understand the needs of children with learning disabilities.

Bloomquist (2005), recommended autism resources for public libraries. The author pointed out that there is increase in the publications of books on autism, provided criteria for evaluating autism resources and recommended autism resources for public libraries.

Halvorson (2006), a psychologist and children's librarian working a t Carmel Clay public library has discussed the ways in which the public libraries can serve Asperger's Syndrome (AS), an autism spectrum disorder. She thinks that public library is the best place for these children as the setting of public library can engage the ASD children in reading, enhancing social and communication skills, and a valuable source for homeschooling parents. The author has suggested several do's and don'ts for library staff while interacting with ASD children.

Burke (2009), reported study conducted by U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics as a part of Current Population Survey 2002. The survey was to find out the challenges faced by persons having impaired physical, mental, or emotional condition in the use and perception of public libraries. The results showed that the person with a disability perceived that public libraries had made things easier for them. It was concluded that the public libraries should consider to improve assistive or adaptive devices and technology and continue to improve the physical facilities and the collections of alternative format materials.

Bonnicci et.al. (2014), reported a study carried out to identify the services provided by 128 librarians of National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS/BPH) in US and District of Colombia. A total of 47 librarians responded to the survey. The data was collected using following criteria: Accessibility of materials (collection), quality of service, and demand for service. Human resources and information technologies were identified as major challenges to the future of information access for disabled persons.

Adkins & Bushman (2015), have discussed the about the survey results carried out to find out the library services provided by the medium and large sized public to children with disabilities. The report revealed that the child members had disabilities such as speech or language impairments, autism, mental retardation, hearing impairment, orthopedic impairment, and visual impairment. The services provided by them included story time, summer reading program, and crafts programs, open to children with and without disabilities. Some services were also provided 'upon request'. Special programs such as different time slot for autistic children under the program "Autism Night Out", acquiring sensory kits for Sensational Storytime were run for special children. Some programs were initiated by the libraries themselves whereas some programs had been requested the parents or caregivers. The special equipment procured for providing special services were computers with assistive technology, Kurzweil readers, sign language software, headphones, film captions and sign language interpreters, sensory and tactical items, audiobooks, large print books, talking books, and Braille books. Special funds were devoted for running these programs.

Challenges mentioned by the respondents included lack of library staff education, lacked money, time, or other resources, resistance from library staff, and even resistance from other patrons.

Flaherty (2015), compared the health information provision by two cooperative library systems of New York. The mission of these library systems is to support individual public libraries throughout the state to rural population. Twenty three libraries function under cooperative library system. The data was collected from the directors by phone interviews. The results revealed that the rural public libraries receive health inquiries but the quality and accuracy of information provided is uneven.

Joselin and Panneerselvam (2016), explored the possibility of public libraries to act as community information centres (CIS). The opportunities, challenges and ways of providing CIS through public libraries was discussed. The process of CIS, mode of distribution of information and several suggestions were given by the authors.

White (2018), evaluated the availability of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) programs and community support among public libraries in Mississippi's coastal region. The objectives of the study included the library services, collection for children with ASD, funds and training provided to staff of public libraries to serve ASD patrons. It was observed that only four libraries offered parent workshops, guest speakers, or finding resources within the library that were related to ASD. The author concluded that autism support groups should be invited to design library programs. The library staff had not been trained to deal with ASD patrons and the libraries under study were not aware of any funds meant for providing services to the special users.

In another study, Philbin et.al. (2019), tried to tap the potential of public libraries to improve the health of the population. The authors have identified areas in which health information could be provided viz. healthcare access, addiction, relieving stress, food, early life, social exclusion, disaster relief, and unemployment and so on.

Patil and Kumbar (2020), assessed the use of public libraries by differently-abled persons of Dharwad city in the state of Karnataka. A questionnaire was distributed to 50 respondents, most of which were physically disabled. The findings showed that the respondents rarely use public libraries and the information needs of 69.77% are unsatisfied. The reasons for not using the public library resources are lack of reading materials in alternative formats, special services and lack of assistive technologies with access to computers. The authors have recommended regarding accessibility both inside and outside the library, procurement of assistive technology and starting of special services.

Patil and Kumbar (2020), conducted an extensive literature review of public library services for differently abled persons. The findings revealed that the library services of public libraries in underdeveloped countries is discouraging. There is lack of accessibility, and lack of resources. There is a scope for lot of improvement in this area.

Feizabadi & Vaziri (2022), discovered the status of the public libraries affiliated with Iran Public Libraries Foundation with respect to their services to the disabled (physically disabled, blind and visually impaired, deaf and hard of hearing people. The findings showed that the majority i.e. 50% public libraries were serving physically

disabled, 11% to deaf users and 12% to blind and visually impaired people. The status of services of the investigated libraries included policymaking and budget, library accessibility and physical structure, advertising and service development, ancillary services and programs, collection, staff training, and auxiliary technologies and equipment) which was found to be average. The library staff was not qualified and was familiar with the types of disabilities and the services provided to them.

Ashilungu & Shuumbili (2025), investigated the dissemination of health information by public libraries in the Khomas region of Namibia. The aim of the study was to identify the types of health information being disseminated, explore the challenges and opportunities faced by public libraries in the dissemination of health information and find solutions to the challenges. The results showed that the staff distributed health information through various sources like pamphlets, brochures, leaflets, magazines, newspapers and books. The challenges identified included lack of health books and collaboration between public libraries and other organizations.

3.2 Library services provided by academic libraries

Carter (2004), discusses enhancing library services for students with disabilities through bibliographic instruction, web accessibility, and staff training. She suggested to develop specialized instructional sessions using multi-sensory techniques, using simple language and assistive technologies. Regarding web page accessibility, she has suggested to use tools like "Bobby" to evaluate web pages for accessibility, highlighting areas for improvement. She believes that training should assess needs and prioritize areas such as attitudinal, facility, service, and legal training. Attitudinal training can address misconceptions and improve sensitivity towards individuals with disabilities. Facility training focuses on accessibility and the operation of adaptive equipment, while service training aims to create universally accessible services.

Mulliken& Atkins (2009), shared the experience of "Access" services for students with developmental disability at Syracuse University Library. Special handouts were designed and tours were conducted to guide these students. The reading programs included activities such as partner reading or taking turns reading a book aloud, using books on tape, and using Kurzweil 3000 software that will highlight words on the computer screen and simultaneously read them aloud. The library staff were provided a handout that explained how to communicate with people with disabilities. The authors concluded that the experience of "Access" service was educational and enriching.

Roy and Bandopadhyay (2009), aims to design barrier free environment in university libraries. The authors have suggested to consider procuring proper equipment, technologies and providing proper infrastructure and need based services for the visually disabled students.

Lawal-Solarin (2012), examined information availability, accessibility and services provided for the physically challenged students in Academic Libraries in Ogun State, Nigeria. The results revealed that the respondents are dissatisfied with the library resources and services. They stated that the accessibility to academic resources is very poor. The barriers faced by these respondents include physical, environmental, attitudinal and technological barrier. The response shows that the library is designed to cater to the needs of normal students only.

Attri and Rai (2014), discussed about inclusive education, need of technology for students with disability, various types of technology available for these students and the assistance provided by technology in becoming independent, productive, and participate in academics and careers.

Mitra et.al. (2014), reported the findings of a pilot study carried out to study the existing scenarios of the library services for the differently-abled students being provided by some Calcutta, Jadhavpur University and some central universities in India. The aim of the study was to find out the needs of disabled students, funds allocated to provide special services, status of infrastructure and analyze LIS curriculum relating to library services to differently-abled users. The findings showed that these universities were serving only blind students. The library infrastructure was not user-friendly.

Chandrakanth HG & Reddy (2014), attempted to study on the facilities being provided to the disabled users in some of the University Libraries of Karnataka. Three major categories – Access to resources, physical access to library building, and services and communications. The data received from nine libraries revealed that four libraries provided magnification facility and DAISY collection, web Braille system, alternate format system and screen magnification system, is available in three libraries. All nine libraries had ramps. Only one library had elevator. Three libraries had provided 'Disability Sensitization Trainings' for all their library staff.

Chaputala & Mapulanga (2017), investigated the provision of library services to people with disabilities. The study covered academic, special/research and school libraries across the country. Malawi has four public universities; nine private universities; four agricultural research stations; ten government, private and grant-aided teacher training colleges; and three high schools. The data was collected by both qualitative and quantitative methods. It was discovered that are largely not accessible to people with disabilities. They do not have the necessary architectural structures and equipment to give access to people with disabilities viz. lack of automatic doors, no Braille buttons in the lifts, and inadequate equipment to access library resources. The PwDs reported that reading tables and computer tables were not wheelchair-friendly.

Anderson (2018), explored the experiences of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in academic libraries. One of the ASD student seemed to be irritated with the noisy environment of the library. Their experience with the study carrels was quite satisfactory. They found library as a stress buster and a popular hangout place. The ASD students accessed both online and offline library resources. Interestingly, library was also used for dating purpose by these students. The suggestions given by the author include, training programs to be arranged to create awareness among other students on the campus, and library staff.

Nazim (2021), studied the availability of library facilities and services to users with disabilities at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. Three categories of users were identified: (i) visually impaired (person who has lost complete sight in both near and far vision), (ii) partially visually impaired (person with partial sight in one or both eyes or visual acuity worse than 6/12–6/18), and (iii) physically disabled (persons with locomotor and auditory disability). It was found from the results that the library has sufficient facilities such as good signage for disabled users, smooth and non-slippery ramps, enough spacing between doorways for wheelchairs, and reachable Braille buttons/signs

inside the elevators. The library has material in different formats viz. Braille, large print, audio, electronic books, recorders, CDs, talking and audiobooks, Braille printers, scanners, and ear-buds. The library is also a member of the Daisy Forum of India (DFI) and subscribed to bookshare.org. The Helen Keller Unit provides specialized services and assistive technologies to visually impaired researchers and students.

Sharma and Kumar (2021), explored the accessibility and usability of library services for people with disabilities in the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR). The study focuses on three types of disabilities: blind/vision impairment, deaf/hearing impairment, and locomotor impairment. It uses survey methods, questionnaires, and interviews to collect data, analyzed using statistical software. It was found that NCR libraries lack adequate assistive technologies and adaptive facilities for disabled users, such as specialized software, hardware, and accessible infrastructure. The barriers faced by the disabled users include lack of orientation sessions, insufficient assistive technologies, inaccessible library environments, and inadequate signage or adjustments for specific disabilities. There is lack of orientation and training programmes for the users with disabilities in the NCR libraries.

Olajumoke Williams & Unegbu (2021) examined the use of library services users' satisfaction of the physically challenged students in Federal Universities in South-West, Nigeria. The data was collected through survey method. Advisory and consultancy services are the most frequently services, whereas photocopying and lending of library materials were also used by physically challenged students. The challenges faced by these students are inadequate current awareness services and a lack of relevant materials, physical barriers and inadequate current books and journals. The authors suggested that libraries should organize programs to raise awareness about the services offered by the university and regular surveys should be conducted to assess the areas needing improvement and user satisfaction.

Singh[28] (2022) examined the library services provided to persons with disabilities (PwDs) by selected fourteen law libraries in India. The author suggests to refer to IFLA guidelines that mentions a variety of services for PwDs. The results show that (57.14%) have fully friendly building for persons with disability. Most of the law libraries have set up separate section for disabled persons. The libraries are serving well to students having visual impairment and physical disability as compared to hearing impaired, dyslexic and students with cognitive disabilities.

Yadav and Singh (2022), carried out a survey of graduate, postgraduate and doctoral differently-abled students studying in 10 Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) in India. The findings revealed that the 77.9% users daily visited the library for different purposes such as accessing library resources, CD/DVDs, and web resources. Regarding accessibility, the users responded that library entrance, sanitation facility, parking area was accessible for wheelchair users. The staff was very aware of their needs (35.9%), talking books and braille books (39.2%), slightly aware of sign language (28.1%), and very aware in the training in the use of telecommunication devices for deaf persons (33.2%). The users stated that they had received training in the use of library services sometimes through orientation (47.5%), seminar (38.2%), and rarely through workshop (38.2%). The respondents expressed overall satisfaction with assistive technology facilities available in the library. The barriers faced by students in the use and access of internet at the library included unawareness of the ICT facilities available at the institute or library (53%),

insufficient ICT infrastructure and facilities (48.39%), lack of staff support (31.8%), and poor internet connectivity (28.11%).

A survey was carried out by Roberson, Barefield, & Griffith (2022), in the University of Georgia to assess the use and preferences of library spaces, awareness and use of library resources and library services by the disabled students.

A study was undertaken by Goroba et.al (2023), to understand the perceptions of users living with disabilities towards academic library services offered at one of the State Universities in Zimbabwe. The data was collected from 35 participants who comprised of lecturers, non-teaching staff and students. The majority of the respondents 15 (78.9%) indicated that the library does not offer special services to users living with disabilities. The findings revealed that that there were no assistive technologies available in the library (100%), do not offer tours to users living with disabilities (88.2%). Inadequate assistive technologies, lack of space and furniture, lack of braille resources were the barriers encountered by the users in the library. The library staff reported that communication barriers (36.8%), lack of assistive technologies (42%), lack of facilities (31.5%), lack of policies (5.2%) budgetary constraints (5.2%), lack of skills (42.1%), lack of resources like braille (5.2%), poor infrastructure (15.7%) were the barriers in offering library services.

The academic libraries of Turkiye was the subject of Çakmak & Uğurlu (2025), to determine the existing facilities offered by academic libraries to disabled users for 12 libraries in Türkiye. The data was collected by using IFLA checklist and the *Accessibility Guide* published by the Ministry of Family and Social Policies in Türkiye. Qualitative data was collected by conducting interviews of librarians who were responsible for providing services to disabled users. The results indicated that academic libraries need improvements in physical infrastructure, staff training, awareness-raising activities, collaboration, and website optimization for disabled users.

4. MAJOR FINDINGS

- ❖ It is observed from the literature review that the library collection, infrastructure, technology and services are adequate in academic libraries as compared to public libraries.
- ❖ It is found that the common man demands and expects health information from public libraries. The requests for health information includes basic information viz. about the disease, treatments, physician's name and address, factual information such as definition and statistics of disease.
- ❖ The disabled population accessing libraries belong to disabilities i.e. blind, deaf, physically handicapped, ADHD, learning disability and autism spectrum disorder.
- ❖ The persons with disability require library resources, special hardware and software, assistive technology, sensory equipment and barrier-free accessibility to library.
- ❖ The Government of developed countries regularly conduct surveys to find out the perception and barriers faced by the differently-abled users.
- ❖ The challenges faced by the libraries include lack of knowledge of needs of disabled users, lack of time, money, resources, and accessibility.
- ❖ There is need for collaboration between public libraries and health science and hospital libraries.

CONCLUSION

The Government of India is promoting public libraries through the National Mission on Libraries. The four Components of this mission include A. Creation of the National Virtual Library of India, B. Setting up of NML Model Libraries, C. Quantitative and Qualitative Survey, and D. Capacity Building. It aims to build a comprehensive database and provide public access through open-source platforms in multilingual form, set up a model state central, district libraries to fulfill the recreational and cultural needs of the community, to provide free access to all publications, and to facilitate reference services to help the public. A nationwide quantitative and qualitative survey of public libraries is being carried out to study the availability of data for specially-abled groups in public libraries. Under capacity building, the mission is to provide training in an online mode and improving managerial, analytical, decision-making, planning, and organizational skills and communication skills of the library staff and library science students to access online resources and provide ICT-enabled services. With these measures, it can be hoped that in the future, the public libraries in Indian will be providing access to knowledge, information, and resources for the entire community.

The major sources of finance in the case of academic libraries are funds received from the parent body/state government, and University Grants Commission. The library authorities should make it a point to allocate a special budget to build a special library collection, make architectural changes, improve internet and technology and train themselves to understand the needs of special users. Qualitative and quantitative surveys should be carried out by the master's students of library science and publish their findings in the journals. This will help to understand the requirements and impediments faced by these special users.

It should be made mandatory for both types of libraries to formulate written disability policies, compulsory disability awareness training and proactive promotion of available facilities. Lastly, the public libraries and academic libraries should work in partnership with medical libraries and take their guidance to build resources, infrastructure and technology.

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