Public Libraries As Community Engagement Hub: An Analytical Study

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Abstract: *The present study assessed the participation of the communities in the community engagement program and services offered by public libraries in Kannur, Kerala. Public libraries functions as people's own spaces by engaging the people with vibrant and innovative outreach programs and services. The main objective of the study was to assess the current status and utilization of public library's community engagement services by the different user groups.. Moreover, it tries to identify the challenges faced by both users and librarians in the utilization and actualization of these programs. The study was conducted among the different reader group communities namely Balavedhi, Yuvajanavedhi, Vanithavedhi and Vayojanavedhi in public libraries functioning under the Kerala State Library Council A well-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from library users and interviews with the librarians were conducted to collect data. Chi-Square test was conducted to compare the challenges faced by users in different community groups. The study found that most of the users take advantage of the community services provided by public libraries, and they also require additional services from the library, such as free Wi-Fi, ICT facilities, and more e-governance services.*

Keywords: Community engagement, Community services, Public library, Social sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Revamping public libraries from their traditional role as mere information repositories into a dynamic community engagement hub is the paramount necessity of society. This transformation will enhance public libraries strengthen democracy and social sustainability in the community (Hapel, 2020). Assessment of public participation in community engagement programs shows their level of participation, their inclusive presence in different programs, the effectiveness of outreach programs, etc. Kerala is renowned for its highest number of public libraries in the country, and among its districts, Kannur stands out with the highest number, boasting 1,400 public libraries. This figure exceeds the total number of public libraries in many Indian states. In Kerala, public libraries are people's own spaces, highlighting Kerala's exceptional commitment to information literacy and community services. Community engagement programs builds a more resilient community. Strategic assessment of community engagement programs and their utilization will definitely help public libraries to garner greater civic support and become a most reliable community engagement hub.

Public Libraries as People's Own Spaces

Public libraries are the nucleus of social gatherings. They play a pivotal role in the socio-political and cultural development of the society (Kunhambu and Mudhol, 2012). Libraries act as a community center for education, research, and entertainment, the exchange of information, exploring new ideas, and connecting with others. Community services include a range of activities, programs, and resources designed to improve the well-being and quality of life for individuals and groups within a community. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary "Community service is unpaid work performed by a person or group of people for the benefit and betterment of their community". Beyond lending books, public libraries also provide literacy programs, technology access, community spaces, special collections, cultural programs, and educational initiatives (Abu et. al, 2011).

Public libraries foster social sustainability by providing inclusive services to society irrespective of caste, creed, and gender. By fostering community engagement programs, they instill social cohesion and civic integrity. It has the vibrant capacity to bring social change to society. (B. Mehra, 2023). They are the change driving force and the flagship bearers of social change. Studies show that community engagement

activities can eradicate racism in society (Larsen, 2024). Here comes the role of the public library as a democratic social institution to impart information to all by coordinating, connecting, and engaging all the sectors of communities with different services and activities. Compared to other kinds of libraries, public libraries are serving as a community hub, providing access to information to people of all ages and backgrounds and serving as a vital resource to support education and the culture of reading. They play an important role in the development of society. They can enhance social interactions by encouraging more community participation. (Calista & Suharjants, 2024). This study assesses the user engagement in community services provided by public libraries in Kannur District in Kerala.

Objectives

1. To understand the current status and utilization of services provided by the public libraries.

2. To assess the various community engagement services offered through the different user group forums.

3. To evaluate the challenges encountered by the users while using community engagement services.

4. To assess the challenges faced by the public librarians in Kannur district in providing these community engage ment services.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are several studies conducted on community services offered through public libraries. But the user participation and challenges of users and librarians in accessing and delivering community engagement services and activities were not became the thrust areas. Varghese and Thirunavukkarasu (2021) conducted a case study of a village public library in Kannur District and recommended other libraries to follow it as a model for conducting social sustainability practices in their libraries. The study focused on various services conducted through different user forums, like Balavedhi (for children), Yuvajanavedhi (for youth), Vayojanavedhi (for senior citizens), and Vanithavedhi (for women). Koteswara Rao (2019) conducted a study on the problems and prospects of public libraries in India. The study analyzed the challenges faced by public libraries in India and identified that public libraries are vibrant places of community development.
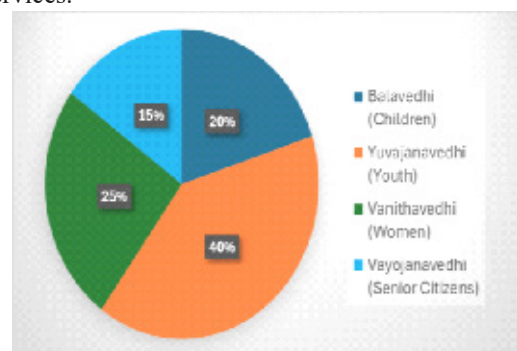
Reid and Howard (2016) conducted a study on "Connecting with Community: The Importance of Community Engagement in Rural Public Library Systems." The study found that there are least studies concentrating on rural libraries. It recommended to have community engagement practices to connect communities in a better way than any other services. It stressed on community-focused programs and activities to build connections with the rural people. Van Melik (2021) studied the role of public libraries in the social infrastructure. He identified that public libraries are key social infrastructure. Bharath and Sudhir (2024) analyzed the role of public libraries in providing e-learning and e-governance services to the community that keeps them better connected to people. Lee (2023) conducted a study on the role of public libraries in

promoting community resilience especially during the times of crisis. The study revealed that through community engagement activities public libraries can support the community needs during disaster crisis times and can build a more resilient and sustainable community. Kranich (2012) conducted a study on libraries role in civic engagement. The study revealed the fact that librarians should realign their activities and services strategically by identifying and assessing specific needs of the civic they are catering. This will increase the impact of libraries among the civics. All the above study highlights the importance of community engagement services. This study is aimed to fill the research gap of the utilization of community engagement programs by public libraries.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is aimed to assess the utilization of community engagement services provided by public libraries of Kannur district in Kerala State, India. There are 9415 public libraries in Kerala today. Among these 9415 public libraries, 1400 public libraries are in Kannur district alone, spanning over 5 Taluks namely Kannur, Thalassery, Iritti, Thalipparamba, and Payyannur. It shows that each ward in the district has at least one public library. Moreover, it is more than that of the total number of public libraries in certain Indian states.

There are 47A+ libraries in Kannur district. A sample of 5A+ libraries concentrating on community engagement programs were selected for the study. Community services provided through different forums such as, Balavedhi, Yuvajanavedhi, Vanithavedhi, and Vayojanavedhi in public libraries. The study covered 200 active users belonging to different community groups in the five selected public libraries. The samples were randomly selected from each Taluk. For equal representation, 40% youth members, 25% women members, 20% children, and 15% senior citizens were selected. Data were collected using questionnaire. Additionally interviews were conducted with librarians to collect data about their challenges in conducting community engagement programs and services.

Sample Distribution

RESULTS

1. Current Library Services and Usage

As part of the study, the researcher identified an array of vibrant services which are commonly offered in all the public libraries under study.
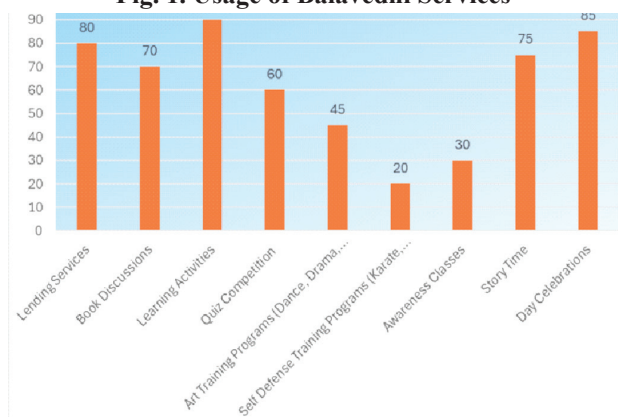
Table 1. Current Library Services and Usage

Current Library Services	Response	Percentage (%)
Lending Services	180	90
Information Services	192	96
Digital Services	42	21
Printing & Photocopy Services	140	70
Literacy Services	52	26
Education-based Services (Tuition class, competitive exam practice, Quiz competition)	110	55
Business & Entrepreneur Services	44	22
Health Services (Awareness class, camp)	113	56.5
Agricultural Services	90	45
Cultural Services	173	86.5
E-governance	35	17.5

The study revealed that majority of library users (96%) are exploiting information services offered through the library. The least exploited service is E-governance service (17.5%).mThis may be due to lack of computers and high-speed internet facilities in the library. Moreover, the efficiency of librarians in providing these services may also be reflected in the lower usage statistics.

2. Usage of Community Services Under Balavedhi forum

Various educational programs, games, quizzes, story times, etc. are provided through Balavedhi forum. Children are utilizing the programs during school vacation times. The usage of the programs meant for children are assessed and the results are given in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. Usage of Balavedhi Services

The figure shows that children are mostly resorting to public libraries for learning activities (90%) like school project work and assignment work. Least presence was found in self-defense training programs (20%) offered to them.

3. Usage of Community Services under Yuvajanavedhi

The study identified and assessed the use of different programs offered under Yuvajanavedhi forum. The statistics shows that there is a higher number of youth as regular users of the library. The usage of the various programs and services offered under Yuvajanavedhi forum is given below.

Table 2. Usage of Yuvajanavedhi Services

Services Under Yuvajanavedhi	Response	Percentage (%)
Lending Services	64	80
Educational Programs (Competitive exam preparations, Spoken English)	76	95
Quiz Competition	42	52.5
Self-Employment Training Programs	52	65
Art Training programs (Dance, Drama, Music)	38	47.5
Self-Defense Training Programs (Karate, Kalari)	6	7.5
Awareness Classes (Anti-drug class, adolescence class)	52	65
Prominent Day Celebrations	64	80
Career Guidance Class	68	85
Digital Literacy	30	37.5

The table shows that majority of the youth rely on public libraries for the preparation of competitive exams (95%). All the selected libraries are offering PSC coaching classes free of cost to the youth members. Youth involvement is very less in self defense training classes (7.5%) offered to them.

4. Usage of Community Services Under Vayojanavedhi

The study identified various community services provided under the Vayojanavedhi forum in public libraries. The usage of the services are assessed and the results are given below:

Table 3. Usage of Vayojanavedhi Services

Services Under Vayojanavedhi	Response	Percentage (%)
Lending Services	16	53.3
Book discussion at homes	17	56.7
Awareness classes	24	80
Health class	28	93.3
Medical camps	29	96.7
Excursion	23	76.7
Prominent Day celebrations	14	46.7
Yoga class	15	50

The table revealed that the majority of users under the Vayojanavedhi forum users participated in the medical camps organized by the public libraries (96.7%). They are also very interested in attending health awareness programs and classes. Least participation can be seen in prominent day celebration programs (46.7%) by adults.

5. Usage of Community Services Under Vanithavedhi

There are different programs offered under Vanithavedhi forum in public libraries. The study identified the programs listed in Table 3 and assessed ts usage among women users in public libraries under study. The results are given below:

Table 4. Usage of Vanithavedhi Services

Services Under Vanithavedhi	Response	Percentage (%)
Lending Services	39	78
Book Discussions at Home	36	72
Quiz Competition	27	54
Self-Employment Training Programs	43	86
Skill Enhancement Training Programs	36	72
Self-Defense Training Programs (Karate, Kalari)	8	16
Educational Programs (Competitive exam preparations, Spoken English)	37	74
Awareness Classes	38	76
Excursion	40	80
Day celebrations	35	70
Yoga class	36	72
Digital Literacy	17	34

The study revealed that women are more interested to participate in self-employment training programs. They also show interest in being part of tour programs conducted by the public library. It is noted that very few women are attending self defense training programs provided to them.

6. Challenges Encountered by the Users

The study identified certain challenges faced by users in attending and exploiting different community engagement programs offered under various community forums in public libraries. The challenges are given below.

Table 5. Challenges Encountered by Users

Challenges	Response	Percentage
Library Environment	5	2.5
Difficulty in reaching the library	15	7.5
Behavior of library staff	3	1.5
Non-availability of necessary books & information sources	25	12.5
Lack of intimation of library programs	10	5
Lack of knowledge in the usage of library services	15	7.5
Lack of time	85	42.5
Health problems	13	6.5

The table shows that majority of the users are unable to attend the community-focused programs due to lack of time. Very few people noted that there is a problem of non-supporting behavior of the library staff towards attending the library programs.

A comparative analysis of the challenges encountered by different communities were conducted to find out its significance to different community groups.

Table 6. Comparison of Challenges Encountered by the Users

Challenges	Yuva jana vedhi	Vanitha vedhi	Vayojana vedhi	Bala vedhi
Library Environment	2	1	1	1
Difficulty in reaching the library	1	9	3	2
Behavior of library staff	0	2	1	0
Non-availability of necessary books and information sources	15	6	3	1
Lack of intimation of library programs	6	2	1	1
Lack of knowledge in the usage of library services	1	7	3	4
Lack of time	40	8	27	10
Health problems	0	9	4	0

The analysis was conducted using a chi-square test, and the results are provided below:

Chi-Square Value	df	P Value
61.42794008	21	0.000

The P-value is less than the standard significance level (e.g., 0.05 or 0.01), indicating that the result is statistically significant. It shows that there is a significant association between the challenges faced by different communities under study.

7. Challenges Encountered by Librarians

As part of the study the challenges faced by librarians while offering community engagement services were also analyzed and found that organizing community engagement programs requires some essential qualities like leadership, competencies in organizing library-related programs, etc. Moreover, the interest of the librarian to organize such programs is of utmost important.

The figure shows that financial constraints are the major problem that hinders librarians from doing community engagement services. They are running with the grant received through Kerala State Library Council alone. The amount so received is insufficient for them to organize different programs. Lack of competency of

the librarians to do technology based services withholds them from doing more activities related to digital literacy programs
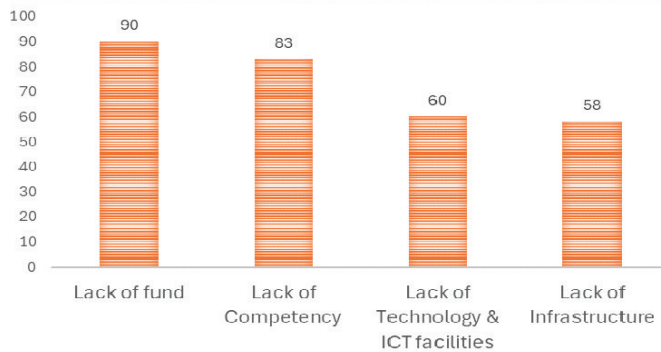

Fig. 2 Challenges Encountered by Librarians

DISCUSSIONS

The major findings of the study highlight the fact that public libraries are staying connected with the people through community engagement services and activities. They could maintain social sustainability through these civic engaging programs (Abshana, 2024). While assessing the current status of community engagement services and their usage, the study proved that majority of the users are largely approaching public libraries for their information requirements. E-governance is found to be the least sought service due to lack of competency of librarian in ICT oriented programs and services. The digital infrastructure and Wi-Fi facilities are also very poor.

The study identified that students are visiting the public library for their academic learning resources. There is a least participation of children in self defense training programs. But, almost all youths (95%) utilize the programs oriented for competitive exam preparations. Unemployment among educated youth may be the reason for high participation of youth in career oriented programs offered by public libraries.

Similarly, most of the senior citizens are utilizing medical camps convened by public libraries in collaboration with health centers. Almost all (98%) senior citizens are attending the medical camps. This may be due to their old age medical problems they face in their daily life. The women members are seriously attending the self employment training program, which shows their interest to become self standing in their life. Among the challenges faced by the users in utilizing the community services, lack of time to participate the programs is hindering them from attending the programs and services. This may be because of the working time and programs of the library.

There are challenges faced by librarians while conducting and organizing various programs. Lack of funds is the major problem for convening community engagement programs. Lack of competency and lack of infrastructure are also making problems in organizing such activities. The grant given by the Kerala State Library Council has to be enhanced to meet all the expenses for conducting community engagement programs and services. Skilled and trained library professionals are to be appointed in public libraries to connect the communities and libraries.

CONCLUSIONS

Public libraries are moving forward by the social cohesion and integrity of the people by fostering community engagement services and programs. Public libraries are democratic places and sustainability tools in the society. The study found that the public library is a community hub; they provide a wide variety of services to their community users for their development and lifelong learning. It includes general services, digital services, and different community services. Users demands additional services from the library such as free Wi-Fi, ICT facilities, and more e-governance services. Members of different community utilize almost all services offered by public libraries and expect more services from public libraries for improving their education, employment, health, digital literacy and lifelong learning. More studies can be conducted towards the role of public libraries in the socio-political-economical growth of the society today.

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