Services offered by Indian libraries during COVID-19

Sarika Sawant

Assistant Professor, SHPT School of Library Science, SNDT Women's University, 1, NT Rd, Churchgate, Mumbai 400020
Email: sarikashpt@gmail.com

This is a study of the services provided by Indian libraries during the COVID-19 lockdown and the problems faced by the libraries in providing their services. Using a Google Forms questionnaire survey, responses were sought from librarians through library groups covering schools, colleges and universities, mailing list forums and WhatsApp/Telegram groups. The findings show that libraries strived to stay connected with the users and provided remote services. Many libraries developed library/digital guides and e-content and responded to online reference queries. Librarians frequently participated in webinars.

Introduction

In the first phase of the COVID-19 induced lockdown period (25 March to 14 April 2020) and subsequently, in phases 2, 3, 4 (up to 31 May 2020), all educational institutions, government offices, businesses, malls, etc. were shut down and only emergency services operated. Libraries were no exception. The Government of India recommended that staff of all academic institutions should work from home as far as possible so that work should not suffer. The majority of the libraries were not adequately equipped to respond to the work from home situation, as it requires a strong information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure. Moreover, even today, the major proportion of library resources are in physical form.

Library associations like the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)[1], American Library Association (ALA)[2], Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)[3] and Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)[4] issued guidelines for librarians to cope up with lockdown and suggested ways to provide services to the users. Their guidelines included the worldwide initiatives taken by libraries, names of publishers that provided databases free of cost during the pandemic period, initiatives taken by library associations, guidelines for reopening of libraries etc. Further, the library profession witnessed a flood of webinars which empowered librarians with skills, enriched their knowledge and provided an opportunity not only to think how digital services can be provided but to act in the hours of need to fulfil the requirements of the users. The present study is an attempt to document the Indian library scenario during the pandemic. It aims to find out how, what, and to whom services were provided during the lockdown, the knowledge gained from webinars, and the planning for the reopening of libraries.

Review of literature

Karsan (2020)[5] reported that more than 91 per cent of the world's students are out of school due to school closures in at least 188 countries, while Dhawan (2020)[6] said that the adoption of smart classroom systems by private and government schools is transforming the traditional education system, and will help improve the quality of education in India. Falt and Das (2020)[7] reported that COVID-19 had given an impetus to the transition to distance learning. While institutes are racing to shift courses online, students are engaging *en masse* with e-books. Ali & Gatiti (2020)[8] reported that the role of university librarians in Pakistan in this emergency included raising awareness of public health education, providing support to medical staff and researchers, and providing ongoing traditional services to regular library patrons. Public Library Association, a division of ALA, conducted a survey on 'Public Libraries Respond to COVID-19' (2020)[9], which reported that during the crisis, there was increased use of virtual library cards, digital content, and virtual programming. In case of reopening of libraries, it was found that libraries have limited access to their buildings while they work to establish health and safety protocols for staff, social distancing requirements for patrons, and processes for sanitising materials.

REopening Archives, Libraries and Museums (REALM) (2020)[10], a research partnership between OCLC, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and Battelle, created and distributed science-based information and illustrative practices designed to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to staff and visitors who are engaging in the delivery or use of services in museums, libraries, and archives. A project named Public Libraries in Europe and COVID-19 (2020)[11] was commissioned by National Authorities on Public Libraries in Europe (NAPLE). It reported that there was a strong focus on online services and digital content, with a wide range of online services and content available across all countries. In some cases, online services were extended, or vendors eased restrictions on access to digital material. Many libraries reported the development and publication of new online content, such as online story-times, in response to the COVID-19 lockdown. Educause (Grajek, 2020)[12] and Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) (Smith, 2020)[13] conducted research studies to collect information from libraries on how the pandemic is impacting the field.

Oyelude (2020)[14] gave an overview of the measures and precautions that libraries are taking in response to COVID-19 and their role in educating users to prevent infection. Clough (2020)[15] discussed the principles of fair use in this crisis situation and reported that according to the group of copyright experts from universities, US copyright law is "well equipped to provide the flexibility necessary for the vast majority of remote learning needed at this time." Walsh & Rana (2020)[16], in their paper, described the continuity of library services and collections access at the University of Toronto during the period of March, April, and May 2020 and briefly considered how these services may evolve moving forward. Mehta & Wang (2020)[17] described the library's status during the pandemic and explained the uncharted challenges that the pandemic has posed to its digital services. Furthermore, they gave details of how the library converted some existing services into digital format and explored new initiatives/practices to support the university's full online teaching and learning.

Ifijeh & Yusuf (2020)[18], in their study about dynamism in library service delivery, recommended urgency in the acquisition of new skill sets by academic librarians in Nigeria. They placed emphasis on relevant stakeholders to provide adequate funding for libraries to deploy relevant ICT infrastructures needed to adequately support teaching and learning in a virtual environment. On the blog post of LexisNexis University (2020)[19], it was mentioned that librarians are not only helping their users but other academic and school libraries as well. Further, it was mentioned that some universities are ensuring that this unique period in history is captured for future generations to study by appealing to users to submit stories, photos, and videos of the pandemic to build up an archive.

American Libraries magazine (ALA Survey Shows Effects of Pandemic on Library Services, 3 June 2020)[20] reported that a survey by ALA showed that libraries were involved in community crisis response, cautiously planning for reopening facilities, working to meet the educational needs of students and researchers, reporting increased use of digital services, and anticipating future demands. Asundi & Uplaonkar (2020)[21] reviewed articles regarding the reopening of libraries and provided links to these papers so that librarians can refer to them while preparing guidelines.

The literature review established that there has not been a detailed study so far of how Indian libraries coped with the challenges of providing services during the pandemic induced lockdowns. A need was felt for a systematic examination of the activities undertaken by Indian libraries in the lockdown situation, identifying the problems encountered and the initiatives taken to mitigate them. The results emerging from such a study would function as guidelines for other libraries, for initiating services in new forms and avoiding the potential problems.

Objectives of the study

- To examine the provision of library services during the lockdown period;
- To assess the challenges faced by the librarians in delivering the services; and
- To find out how the libraries are preparing for post-COVID times.

Methodology

A questionnaire was prepared using Google Forms and sent to all regional library groups covering schools, colleges, universities, mailing list forums and WhatsApp/Telegram groups of webinar participants. The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions, including five general, 12 multiple choice and two open-ended questions. It was pilot tested, and the required modifications were made. The institutions of national

importance, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and as well as non-academic research institutions having libraries, were also considered for the study. The data was collected during the period May-July 2020. A total of 367 responses were received, out of which 40 were invalid. The remaining 327 responses were analysed.

Findings

Personal & institutional information

Personal and institution-specific information about respondents such as location, number of years of experience, type of library and its financial status etc., was collected. Out of 327 respondents, the largest number (63.91%) were from colleges, while 18.04% were from universities, 11.01% from schools, 6.42% from institutions of national importance, and 0.61% from public libraries and, 11.01% from schools, and 18.04% from universities.

Subscription to e-resources

Respondents were asked about subscription to e-resources/digital resources /databases and the mode of availability, such as IP based or Login id password-based access. In the case of colleges, 26.30% (out of

63.91%), most of the e-resources subscribed were login and password-based. In the case of universities, 6.12% (out of 18.04%) stated the e-resources were Internet Protocol (IP) based and login based. Almost one-quarter of schools said that they did not subscribe to e-resources/digital resources/databases. The data is presented in Table 1.

Preparation of library guides for their readers

The respondents were asked about their library activities during lockdown, such as preparing library guides containing notifications/Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)/alerts in the lockdown period. It was observed that around half of the respondents (50.46%) had prepared such guides for their readers, whereas 49.54% had not.

Further, when those who had prepared library guides (50.46%) (165 out of 327) were asked which items were covered, it was noted that information about digital collections subscribed by the college/university was mostly covered (73.93%), followed by reference queries (60%), due dates of books (53.33%) and library operation hours (52.72%). The least frequent notifications were about overdue charges (40%) and library account renewal/expiry (36.36%). Under 'Others', 11.51% of the respondents mentioned other

Table 1—Subscription to e-resources/digital resources /databases

Subscription to e-resources/digital resources/databases	No	%
Colleges	**209**	**63.91**
IP based	32	9.79
Login based	86	26.30
Some are IP based, and some are login based	47	14.37
No e-resources/digital resources/databases	44	13.46
Institutions of National Importance	**21**	**6.42**
IP based	5	1.53
Login based	3	0.92
Some are IP based, and some are login based	11	3.36
No e-resources/digital resources/databases	2	0.61
Public Libraries	**2**	**0.61**
Login based	1	0.31
Some are IP based, and some are login based	1	0.31
Schools	**36**	**11.01**
Login based	9	2.75
Some are IP based, and some are login id based	3	0.92
No e-resources/digital resources/databases	24	7.34
Universities	**59**	**18.04**
IP based	16	4.89
Login based	16	4.89
Some are IP based, and some are login id based	20	6.12
No e-resources/digital resources/databases	7	2.14
Grand total	327	100.00

items included in the library guide, such as News clipping service, Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), how to search Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC)/Digital search strategies and awareness about fake news v/s real news.

Comprehensive digital resource guides about free Internet resources

Another important initiative reported by the librarians was the provision of comprehensive guides about free Internet resources in the form of PDF files/web pages/portals. This was stated by 62.28% (205 out of 327) of the respondents. Almost two-thirds of the colleges and universities had proactively given this service, whereas it was absent in the case of more than half of school libraries. While half of the institutions of national importance provided comprehensive guides, this service was totally absent in public libraries.

In continuation with the previous question, those who provided digital resource guides were asked about the items included in the guides. It was found that the largest proportion of the respondents included open access resources (80.48%), followed by online educational databases, which are made free due to COVID (64.39%), followed by newspaper links (49.26%), and information about online courses (44.87%). Under 'Others', many mentioned supplementary items included in their library guides such as study material made accessible to visually impaired students on the website, trial access to new resources, subject lessons regarding university exams, and online video and audio collections.

Library guides

Library guides were mostly (65.13%) circulated among the users through the WhatsApp group of the college/school/university department or by email communication (45.56%), and the least frequent method was the use of social media (33.33%). Under 'Others', 3% of the respondents mentioned that they uploaded information on a library website that they created using Google, Blogspot, or Weebly as the library did not have an official website. Others mentioned that they sent notifications through a book club group or Telegram, and some also mentioned that they directly shared a Google drive link with users.

Services offered and online training provided to the users by librarians

To investigate this issue, respondents were asked to give information on a series of statements applicable in the lockdown period, and the data is presented in Table 2. It was observed that librarians frequently helped faculty members of colleges and universities by providing relevant material regarding their PhD research. It was observed that online training was given in less than half of all types of institutions. When respondents were asked whether they received any reference queries during the lockdown period, a positive response was observed across all types of institutions.

Table 2—Services offered and online training provided to the users

	Help to faculty members who are doing PhD		Online training to users		Reference queries from users	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Colleges	209	63.91	209	63.91	209	63.91
No	66	20.18	106	32.42	66	20.18
Yes	143	43.73	103	31.5	143	43.73
Institutions of National Importance	21	6.42	21	6.42	21	6.42
No	7	2.14	12	3.67	5	1.53
Yes	14	4.28	9	2.75	16	4.89
Public Libraries	2	0.61	2	0.61	2	0.61
No	2	0.61	2	0.61	1	0.31
Yes	0	0	0	0	1	0.31
Schools	36	11.01	36	11.01	36	11.01
No	29	8.87	21	6.42	16	4.89
Yes	7	2.14	15	4.59	20	6.12
Universities	59	18.04	59	18.04	59	18.04
No	11	3.36	20	6.12	8	2.45
Yes	48	14.68	39	11.93	51	15.6
Grand Total	327	100	327	100	327	100

Librarians' participation in online meetings and webinars

Librarians were engaged in online meetings with their library staff, and they also arranged webinars on various topics. It was observed that e-content development was undertaken in less than half of all types of institutions (Table 3).

Webinars attended by respondents in lockdown period and their learning outcomes

The respondents were asked about the types of webinars they attended, and it was found that nearly all respondents (90.35%) attended library & information science (LIS) related webinars. It is seen that they attended webinars in other fields (71.91%) as well. This makes it evident that librarians were engaged in the learning process during the lockdown period.

The webinars/FDP attended by respondents were organised by library associations (71.91%) followed by colleges (70.06%) & universities (54.01%). Fewer respondents attended webinars organised by publishers (34.25%), study circles (20.98%), or schools (9.56%), perhaps because these organisers conducted fewer webinars than the rest. Under 'Others', respondents mentioned that they also attended webinars organised by alumni associations, TedEx Gateway and webinars of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC).

In an open-ended question, which received 100% response, respondents were asked to write about the learning they gained by attending webinars. A few stated that webinars helped to update knowledge or helped them to learn about new tools/techniques. Some learned about new software for content development, and created a personal YouTube channel as well as one for the college and uploaded the content, and conducted webinars live from YouTube/Facebook. Many stated that they realised the importance of e-resources, particularly open educational resources as well as open-source software. They praised the online meeting tools available for conducting seminars/conferences and wished to continue to use them in future. A few also mentioned that webinars on reopening the library after the lockdown was useful and empowered them to get ready for opening the doors for users with utmost safety.

Challenges faced by librarians of sudden lockdown due to COVID-19

Respondents faced various challenges as it was a sudden lockdown, and they were not prepared for it. The most obvious challenge was the lack of infrastructure/facilities while working from home (53.84%). A few mentioned that coordinating with office staff/library staff was difficult for them (32.92%), and also timings of office meetings were not suitable and were lengthy, while a few could not join the meetings because of low network capacity (30.46%).

Reopening of the library and plans after lockdown

Respondents were asked which points they would consider if the library needs to reopen with minimum

Table 3—Development of e-content and participation in online meetings and webinars

	Development of e-content		Online meetings with library staff		Webinars organised on LIS/Non-LIS topics	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Colleges	209	63.91	209	63.91	209	63.91
No	118	36.09	105	32.11	126	38.53
Yes	91	27.83	104	31.8	83	25.38
Institutions of National Importance	21	6.42	21	6.42	21	6.42
No	13	3.98	7	2.14	14	4.28
Yes	8	2.45	14	4.28	7	2.14
Public Libraries	2	0.61	2	0.61	2	0.61
No	1	0.31	2	0.61	1	0.31
Yes	1	0.31	0	0	1	0.31
Schools	36	11.01	36	11.01	36	11.01
No	21	6.42	21	6.42	28	8.56
Yes	15	4.59	15	4.59	8	2.45
Universities	59	18.04	59	18.04	59	18.04
No	32	9.79	19	5.81	31	9.48
Yes	27	8.26	40	12.23	28	8.56
Grand Total	327	100	327	100	327	100

capacity for the readers as per the government instructions. It was observed that respondents gave importance to 'Cleaning and Sanitation' (81.34%) followed by 'Maintaining social distancing at the issue/return counters' (71.55%). It was observed that a relatively low number of respondents were in favour of closing down the reading/study hall/cubicles (Table 4).

In 'Others' (2.44%), it was observed that the respondents would like to partially close down open access to stack areas/ photocopy services. Some felt that vigorous promotion of e-resources needs to be done. Also, remote access should be provided for IP based resources. Two respondents mentioned that they would like to develop an app for book request/reservation etc.

Post-COVID library situation

In the open-ended last question, respondents were requested to share their thoughts about the post-COVID library situation, including how they visualise the library, precautionary measures, and problems associated with it.

Solo librarians expressed the problem of their inability to cope up with the situation as there is no other staff; also, a few mentioned that they do not even have help with cleaning and sanitation. Most of them gave importance to acquiring e-resources in future and providing e-services. A few mentioned that the institution needs to frame a policy for reopening. One respondent mentioned that 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. hours should be made flexible for providing the services.

Many mentioned that they would scan books or parts of the books and will provide them via email which needs to be done keeping copyright laws in mind.

Some mentioned developing an institutional repository and populating it with institutional e-publications/resources. A few expressed the view that post-COVID, the library will face budget cuts, so preparation for the opening of the library will be difficult. Also, following social distancing in limited reading room space will be difficult to manage. One respondent suggested that library members should be allowed in by odd/even membership IDs, so crowding and interaction with staff will be minimised. Users should take an appointment before they walk into the library, and only urgent cases should be attended to. One respondent suggested that the University Grant Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) should develop the norms to purchase pdf books in every college. The air conditioning of the library should be suspended, and more emphasis should be given to ventilation with the help of windows/fans. Many have mentioned that masks, hand gloves and thermal scans are a must.

Discussion

Digital resources are now an integral part of the library's collection. In the present study, it was noted that access to these digital resources was mostly either login id based or IP based. But looking at today's scenario, all digital resources should be made available remotely so that all users can access them

Table 4—Reopening of the library and plans after lockdown

Sl. no.	Reopening of the library	No.	%
1	Keeping safe distances between workstations/computers	215	65.74
2	Keeping safe distances between chairs in the reading room	229	70.03
3	Completely close down reading/study hall/cubicles	92	28.13
4	Only issue/return counter will remain open	106	32.41
5	By maintaining social distancing in the issue, return counters	234	71.55
7	Cleaning and sanitation	266	81.34
8	Negotiating with database vendors for log in id-based availability of resources	135	41.28
9	Ensuring access to soap and water and also a supply of hand sanitiser	198	60.55
10	Implementing quarantine policies on returned books/Compact discs (CDs) (Studies say that risk posed by cardboard can be considered negligible after 24 hours, and plastic after 72 hours)	157	48.01
11	Cleaning of book drop facility /return desks	205	62.69
12	Limiting numbers of readers using the library at any one time by making proper schedules	178	54.43
13	Communicating clearly about all new rules to library users, both online and onsite	194	59.32
14	Making a portal of e-content developed by teachers of institutions or helping them to provide resources to make such e-content	169	51.68
15	Restrictions for social gathering like no lunch together	190	58.10
16	Others	8	2.44
	Total	327	100

from home. Also, it is important to enrich the library website by uploading videos about searching skills/information literacy/digital literacy. Imparting the right web information skills for searching and evaluating users will ensure that they find the right information. It was noted in the present study that many librarians were involved in content development during the lockdown period. At the institution level, support in the form of good ICT infrastructure, staffing and facilities are also important for the smooth functioning of the library.

The immense importance of open access resources and open educational materials has been realised in the pandemic period, as librarians provided free and open access resources to the users in the form of digital guides/via the website. This may boost the development of institutional repositories and their content in India.

As the part of unlock procedure, physical libraries have started operating on certain days in a week. With limited budget and restrictions on hiring temporary staff, many libraries are facing new set of challenges. In the case of colleges, textbooks are an important resource for students, but local publishers have stopped printing them, and digital editions are costly.

As reported by Burke (2020)[22], COVID has hastened the transformation of libraries by compelling libraries to acquire and use digital resources. There is a concern that publishers may take advantage of the situation by raising the prices. On the contrary, due to budget cuts, there are great chances that librarians may be asked to cancel journal subscriptions.

The lockdown period has encouraged librarians to attend and conduct webinars and watch live streaming via YouTube and Facebook Live. These new skills will help librarians, in the long run, to conduct various programmes at the institution level and outside of the institution as well.

In case of reopening of the libraries, almost all topmost university libraries of the world have provided guidelines and procedures required for reopening on their home pages. Also, the guidelines developed by IFLA, ALA, ACRL are of great relevance in this context. In the case of India, many well-known libraries such as IIMK Kozhikode, IIT Delhi have provided guidelines on their websites regarding SOP for reopening, links to publishers' databases which are free due to COVID and to the open educational resources. A few librarians have developed and shared SOPs on various WhatsApp groups/ mailing lists, for instance, the Central University of Haryana, SNDT Women's University etc. These become the guiding tools for affiliated colleges as well as for others.

There were numerous webinars conducted in India by various associations like IASLIC (Indian Association of Special Libraries and Information Centres), ILA (Indian Library Association), Maharashtra University and College Librarians Association (MUCLA), MLA (Madhya Pradesh Library Association), BLA(Bengal Library Association), KKLA (Kalyan Karnataka Librarians' Association), MANLIBNET (Management Libraries Network) and many others jointly with colleges, universities, regional associations as well as publishers/vendors too. In the case of publications, IASLIC[23] published a bibliography covering 11,134 scientific journal articles on COVID from PubMed. In Maharashtra, MUCTA (Mumbai University and College Teachers Association), jointly with many college and university libraries, conducted noteworthy webinars. These webinars played an instrumental role in preparing librarians for reopening. In fact, the webinars were knowledge enriching, creating a strong sense of togetherness, supporting each other in the crisis, triggered good discussions and actually exploited the opportunity for librarians to upgrade themselves. Further research in context with publishers' policies and licencing, acquisition/use of e-resources, consortia will help to shed light on the post-pandemic situation.

Conclusions

Though Indian librarians faced infrastructural problems, by and large, the situation was handled pretty well during the pandemic. According to UGC's new public notice (UGC, 2021[24]) of blended learning, it was recommended to all higher education institutions in India to teach up to 40% syllabus of each course through online mode and remaining syllabus could be completed in offline mode. If online teaching is made compulsory, then demand for e-resources will increase. In this changing scenario, the librarian's role as a facilitator will become even more magnified.

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