

Response to the Pandemic: the reality of the College Libraries in Paschim Medinipur

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has been revealed as a great challenge for Human society and civilization. It badly affects the education system of the entire world. Especially the educational institutes of the developing countries are now passing the worst possible time of history. And definitely, the libraries are the most hindered section of the system. However, every crisis opens up new avenues for advancement. The situation can be regarded as an important lesson for the libraries. The libraries of our country are trying to turn around with all their constraints. The paper tries to discuss the problems, as well as the prospects of the libraries in response to the unprecedented situation. It highlights the weakness of the libraries due to the deficiency of enough resources. The paper concludes with the hope that despite the limitations the libraries are still confident about their innovative ideas and will be capable to confront the critical time.

Keywords:

COVID-19 Pandemic, College Libraries, Library resources, Library services, E-resources, Online resources, Institutional repository, Digital Library.

Introduction

Nowadays, we are familiar with the terms like 'lockdown', 'shutdown', 'quarantine', 'containment zone', 'home isolation', 'work from home' etc. So far the word epidemic was

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known to us, in the last one and half years we have learned the word 'pandemic'. The worldwide disaster, due to the spread of the Novel corona virus (COVID-19), forced us to become acquainted with all these buzzwords. In our known history, the 2nd World War was the most dangerous crisis of human civilization. However today, we are witnessing that our civilization passing through the greatest crisis ever. Already the death toll surpassed the number of that of World War II. Authors, thinkers, social scientists are speculating that the current disaster will be followed by various after-effects of the pandemic. The World economy will take one to two decades to recover completely. The situation of the developing country is certainly worse than the developed countries.

In response to the pandemic Central Govt. as well as the State Govt. of our country was bound to take the harsh decision to lock the entire country on 25th March 2020 (Circulars For Covid-19, 2020). It was the only preventive measure to stop the spreading of corona virus in a densely populated country like us. Consequently, the educational institutes were also locked down for an indefinite period. After few months as the unlocking period started, Colleges and Universities started their activities slowly. However, all the activities were in online mode. And in this process, the ICT section and the Library became two main warriors for the institutes to confront the crisis.

The University Libraries are equipped enough to cope up with the situation. However, barring a few exceptions, the college libraries of our country were completely unprepared and helpless in such adverse conditions. So far, the notions like e-library, digital library, virtual library, etc. were the glorified units of the syllabus of BLISc and MLISc courses. The students have been learning all the skills inside the laboratories and gaining degrees over years. And after the completion of the curriculum, they have been getting jobs in pure traditional libraries of the colleges and preparing card catalogues. So far the system of producing personnel and appointing them was running smoothly. However, suddenly the scenario changed due to the pandemic and we entered into the era of new normal, where the only '*mantra*' is either online or perish. Hence, the question is how the traditional library can be transformed into virtual overnight?

Yet, with all their constraints the college libraries are trying their best to maintain the services. This paper tries to discuss the resources possessed and services provided by the college libraries of a backward district of West Bengal. It tries to find out the reality of the libraries during this critical period.

Review of Literatures

Asif and Singh describe the pandemic situation as an opportunity and scope for the libraries to become competent for the crisis. Their paper focuses on the proactive role of the librarians to maintain the services and to confront the adverse situation. It concludes with the hope the libraries will evolve to be suitable for the new normal (Asif & Singh, 2020).

The paper by Connel and others tries to measure the changes in the use of library resources during the timeframes of COVID-19 at three different institutions: Louisiana State University, North-eastern Illinois University, and Valparaiso University. The paper concludes that pandemic affects the bigger libraries with least impact and the smaller libraries with greater impact. It also infers that virtual communication has been increased in the meantime (Connell, Wallis, & Comeaux, 2021).

Dutta and Bhattacharya discuss the challenges faced by the College librarians during the Pandemic period. The main objective of their study is to highlight the role of the libraries and librarians in the E-learning ecosystem and the challenges faced by the college librarians at Paschim Medinipur district. They also try to highlight that how the library can overcome such problems (Dutta & Bhattacharya, 2021).

Rafiq et al. in their paper try to emphasise on the challenges and barriers faced by the academic libraries of the developing countries during the pandemic. The paper describes the crisis as a lesson for the libraries. It suggests that to overcome the crisis the libraries need to build infrastructures and systems so that they can meet the need of the digital era with ease (University libraries response to COVID-19 pandemic: A developing country perspective, 2021).

Dadhe and Dubey suggest that there is the necessity to reassess the existing services and redesign them to deal with the critical situation. The paper commented that the libraries have acted smart and evolved as a continuous learning factory. Moreover, it describes the library as an emerging new genre of knowledge hub which will be capable of the upcoming new normal (Dadhe & Dubey, 2020).

The reviewed papers analysed the situation from various perspectives. The topics they covered are: library of developing countries in the pandemic period, the scale of impact of the crisis over small and big libraries, challenges and barriers faced by the academic libraries, necessity of reassessment of strategies of the libraries, the opportunities that arise out of the pandemic situation, etc.

Research Questions

From the literature review, it has been found that there are research gaps in the concerned area. There are opportunities to conduct studies about the struggle for the existence of libraries in the current situation. The present paper will concentrate on the infrastructural shortcomings and the declared services of college libraries of the district of Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal.

The research questions of the study will be the following.

1. Do the libraries have enough e-resource to initiate online services?
2. Do the libraries have suitable infrastructure to be virtual overnight?
3. Do the libraries respond efficiently and effectively during the pandemic situation?

Methodology of the Study

West Bengal is one of the 28 states of India. The state is situated at the eastern region of the country having international border with Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. Once, Kolkata (then Calcutta) was the capital of British-India while the undivided province of Bengal was the main hub of education, arts and culture of the subjugated country. The capital shifted from Kolkata to Delhi in the year 1911, and consequently the significance of the city as well as the state decreased. Moreover, after independence in 1947 the state had to confront the crisis of partition. As a result, the people of the state experience major declension in all aspects over the years. Still the process of restoration cannot be completed. Paschim Medinipur, the study area for the present paper, is one of the 23 districts of the state of West Bengal.

Barring a few examples of excellence, the actual situations of colleges of our state are more or less the same. It is a recognized truth that the quality of our Education system has been diminishing considerably over years. However, the quantity e.g. number of Colleges and Universities, number students and research scholars have been increasing consistently. Presently there are 48 Govt. general degree colleges in our state (Government Colleges, 2021). The number of Govt. sponsored degree colleges is several times more than the Govt. colleges (Universities and colleges of West Bengal, 2021). Moreover, there are some private degree colleges too. In this paper the scope of the study is confined to the colleges of Paschim Medinipur.

The study covers libraries of all 29 degree colleges of the district of Paschim Medinipur. All types of institutions e.g. Govt. Colleges (7), Govt. Sponsored Colleges (21) and Private colleges (1) are taken into consideration (Paschim Medinipur district, 2020).

For data collection, we have followed the census method. The College websites were the main source of data for the study. Besides, telephonic conversations were made as per the structured questionnaire with some librarians.

All the collected data were quantitative. Simple statistical tools and suitable tabulation methods were applied to analyse the data.

There are limitations of the study. There was a time constraint. Moreover, the situation was not favourable for intensive survey work during the last few months.

Resources of the Libraries

The result of any battle depends upon the courage and skill of the soldiers and on the arsenal of the combatant sides. The war we witnessing currently is completely one-sided. The invader is extremely strong and the invaded side is fighting for self-defence. Yes, we are talking about the struggle of the libraries during the COVID-crisis. For the sake of civilisation, the library must win the battle with existing resources and constraints. Let's have a look at the resources of the college libraries in the study area.

It is to remember that most of the college libraries are still dependent on the traditional system. During the last few years, some of the libraries started to acquire e-documents and digital documents and initiated some online services. Yet, the printed books are their main resources. The next spot is occupied by the printed journals. During the last decade, almost 90 percent of the budget has been spent on the printed materials (Books and Journals).

As we survey the college libraries we get some identical lists of resources from each library. Those are—

- Printed Books
- Printed Journals and Magazines
- News Papers
- Employment Bulletins
- Bound Volumes

The rate of collection development of the libraries is more or less the same. The number of books in the libraries is increasing day by day. However, the quality of most of the books is not up to the mark. A large portion of the book is a mere note's book of inferior quality. In the periodical section, the greater portion comprises magazines. Only a few libraries of the study area have a formidable collection of research journals.

The libraries possess other documents too. However, the volume of such materials is negligible as compared to the printed resources. Almost every library has a collection of CDs and DVDs. However, most of those are received free of cost with the printed books.

INFLIBNET has been doing a spectacular job to upgrade the libraries and to educating librarians in the last two decades. As a result of which the library personnel becomes aware of the importance of online resources. Moreover, INFLIBNET designed a beautiful database NLIST, which is very rich in contents but very cheap (only Rs. 5900.00 for the colleges covered under 12B section of UGC). In the last ten years, numerous college libraries subscribe the database. Practically, NLIST has become a very common and popular online resource of colleges. However, the reality of the libraries in the study area is not so satisfactory. Only 41 percent of the college libraries of Paschim Medinipur are presently subscribing NLIST.

Only 21 percent of colleges in the study area subscribe to online resources (e-books, e-journals, etc.). Colleges, who received the RUSA (Rashtriya Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan) grant, spent some money to upgrade the libraries. Mainly due to this grant, the colleges were able to subscribe to some e-resources.

Besides, the libraries have few digitised resources of their own. Question papers of the examinations are found as the common document which most of the library digitised. Some of the libraries collect the class notes from the faculty members and digitise them. And that is all of their in-house digital documents.

Table 1: Resources other than the printed materials

Resources	Percentage of libraries
NLIST	41.38
Subscribed e-Books and e-Journals	20.69
Digitised Question Papers	20.69
Digitised Class Notes	10.34
CDs/ DVDs	65.52

Anyway, the printed documents have been the main resources of the libraries over years. However, those documents were useless during the days of lock-down. College libraries, which have been running their traditional system, suddenly become helpless. Librarians discovered themselves destitute, no matter how rich their libraries are with the printed resources. Along with the institute, the libraries were also completely closed. After few months, as the unlocking process initiated, the institutes started their activities. Libraries too started working two or three days per week. However, the students were not permitted to come to the institutes. Therefore the circulation service for the student remains stopped. Only a few teachers were issuing books from the library. And the reading room was closed for the entire period. Meanwhile, the second wave of the pandemic appeared. And as a result of which again the colleges and universities were shut down.

In such circumstances, there was almost no offline service for the students in most of the libraries during the period. Online service was the only alternative. But as we have seen from the above discussion, most of the libraries have nothing to offer online for their user. NLIST is an attractive resource for teachers, research scholars, and PG students. But, is it helpful for the UG students? The answer is no. UG students need textbooks and reference books for their studies. But the libraries don't have e-edition of such documents. Class notes are cannot be treated as a substitute for books.

Services provided by the Libraries

If we visit the website of any college we will find a long list of library services. And the same lists of different colleges are almost identical. The lists are generally crowded by the traditional services. Only a few libraries of some renowned colleges have some special services like Digital Library service, IR service, etc.

As the offline services become useless during the pandemic we will discuss services other than the offline services. The services provided by the big libraries worldwide during the challenging period are: service through phone, service through email, service through social media (including blog), and online services. Online services are the main alternatives. Now the question arises: Is it possible to provide all these services by the college libraries in our study area? All of us can predict the answer. Let's check the reality. The services provided by the college libraries other than those of the offline mode are given below.

Table 2: Services provided by the Libraries

Resources and services of the libraries	Percentage of Colleges
Web-OPAC	27.59
Delivering in-house digital documents	37.93
Digital Library	13.79
Institutional Repository	10.34
NLIST	41.38
Subscribed Online Resources (other than NLIST)	20.69
Links of Open Access resources	41.38

The number of automated libraries might be higher, but only 27.59 percent of libraries have Web-OPAC. It is needless to say that this particular service helps the user to browse and search titles. It cannot provide a book physically to the reader. Therefore, the Web-OPAC is not so relevant service during the lock-down period.

Rather the second service of the list above is more important. Through this service, the library offers some original documents to the readers. Almost 38 percent of libraries provide some in-house digitised documents over the website. Mainly the question papers, class notes, notices, syllabus, certificates (e.g. No-dues Certificate, Library Clearance Certificate, etc.) are delivered through the service. Doubtlessly, this service is beneficial for the students.

Only a few libraries (14%) possess structured Digital Library. However, the documents of the library (DL) are not so important either. Usually, they archive simple things like question papers, class notes, etc. Only two or three libraries archive their college journals and magazines digitally. Anyway, the service is praiseworthy.

Institutional Repository is the rarest (10%) service provided by the libraries in our study area. Research publications of the faculty members of the institute are carefully gathered, enriched, and designed here with proper metadata.

The online database service was on for 41% of libraries. Teachers were able to access the databases through their user id and password. In a word, the NLIST was a great reliance for the faculties and researchers. For other subscribed e-resources (e.g. e-Boos and e-Journals), they were dependent on the librarian, because those resources were available only over the static IP of the library.

The last service of the table above was the most effective service during the pandemic. Open Access e-resources of great quality were available round the clock for the readers.

Response to the Pandemic

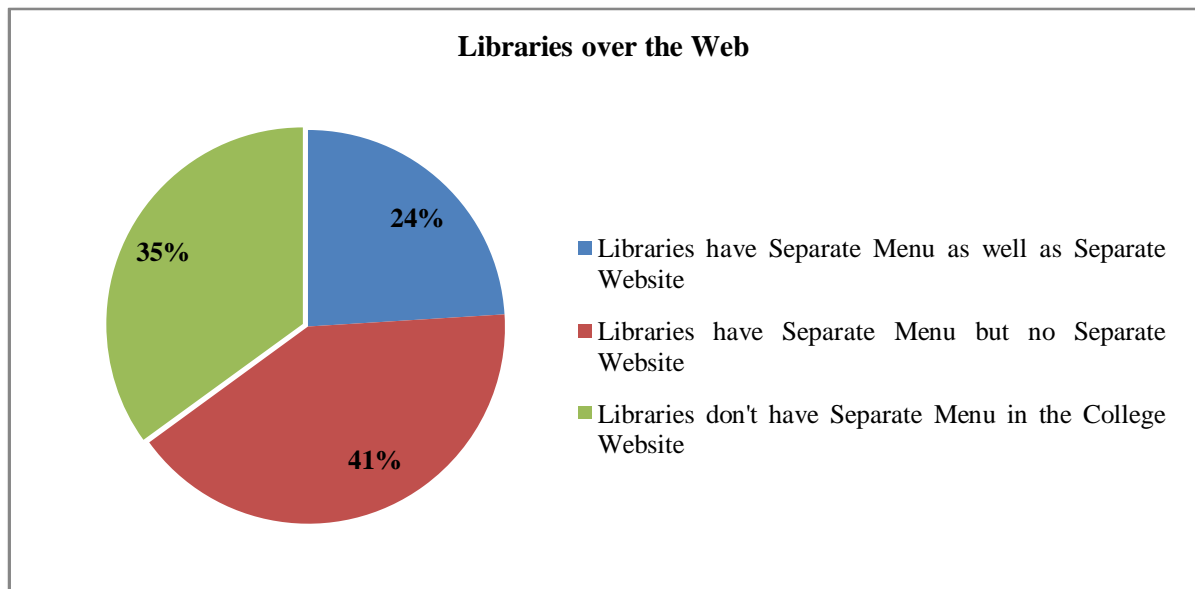
Before making any comments on the responses of the libraries during the pandemic period we must check the infrastructural status of the libraries. From the study, it has been found that only 65% of libraries are given proper importance at the website of the College. A separate menu is deployed for them, and enough information about the library is placed inside the menu. Out of that 65% of libraries 24% have websites of their own.

Table 3: Presence on the Website

Separate Menu for library on College Website	Separate Menu but no Separate website of the Library	41%	65%
	Separate Menu as well as Separate website of the Library	24%	
Libraries don't have separate Menu at the College Website			35%

So, it is clear that there were no online services from 35% of libraries of the study area. Yes, they might have some services over the phone, email, etc. However, those are not notified or reflected anywhere, because they don't have any space on the website. Without a website how can a library communicate with its mass readers? Therefore, we can infer that those (35% of) libraries did not give any response to the critical situation.

Diagram 1: Presence on the Website



But, what the residue, i.e. other 65% of libraries did? Did all of them respond? The answer is no. There were no significant updates over the website (or page of the website) of at least

28% of libraries in response to the pandemic. Their pages have been static. The study reveals that only 37% of libraries responded during the pandemic. They post some important notices for their users. They offer some special services during critical times. And they tried to convey the message to their readers that they will stay by their side in the crisis. They tried their best according to their abilities with all the constraints. Besides the routine services, they introduce the links of some useful forums and databases which provide innumerable Open Access documents of great quality. Some common websites which the libraries share are listed in the following table.

Table 4: Free/ Open Access resources

Online Databases of e-Books and e-Journals	
1. E-GyanKosh	10. IntechOpen
2. VidyaMitra (Integrated E-content Portal)	11. Project Gutenberg
3. E-PG Pathshala	12. OAPEN
4. (NDL) National Digital Library of India	13. PDF Drive
5. (NSDL) National Science Digital Library of India	14. Science Books Online
6. West Bengal Public Library Networks	15. NYU Libraries
7. DOAB (Directory of Open Access Books)	16. MERLOT
8. DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals)	17. Open Textbook Library
9. WikiBooks	18. NPTEL

Findings

After analysing the collected data we get the answers to all three research questions. And, as anticipated, all three answers are negative.

- The libraries don't have enough e-resource to initiate online services.
- The libraries don't have suitable infrastructure to be virtual overnight.
- And, only 37% of the college libraries in the study area can respond during the pandemic situation.

There are various shortcomings of the libraries. Inadequate infrastructure, lack of skilled manpower, lack of proper resources, lack of expertise, lack of funds, strategic weaknesses, negative attitude, etc. are some of the responsible issues.

Conclusion

It has been found from our study that the College libraries of a backward district of a developing country cannot respond properly during the pandemic. Yet, the initiatives of the librarians despite all constraints are praiseworthy. This proves that if they have enough resources and suitable infrastructures they can do an excellent job. The crisis teaches a great lesson to the librarians. They have to reassess their tactics and strategies.

The heads of the educational institutes have to rethink their plan and policies about the library. And they must admit that the library personnel deserve some kind of respect and recognition from the authority.

The State Govt. as well as the Union Govt. has their responsibilities to do the necessary reforms at the educational systems, so that they become well equipped to confront such critical situations.

And lastly, it should be mentioned that the Open Access Movement must be encouraged by the educationists of all countries. The Open Access resources were effective and efficient at the time of crisis.

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Author's Short Biography

Biswajit Adhikary, born in 1976, received his M.Sc. (Economics) and MLISc. from Vidyasagar University. He won the Gold Medals of the University for being topper in the final examination of both BLISc and MLISc. He did his Ph.D. in 2016 under the supervision of Dr. Durga Sankar Rath in Vidyasagar University. The title of the thesis was "Little Magazines as the source of Social Science Information: an Analytical Study." He started his career as a Trainee at the Library of the Birla Industrial and Technological Museum (BITM), Kolkata in 2007. Since 2010, he has been working as the Librarian of Raja Narendra Lal Khan Women's College (Autonomous), Midnapore. Besides academic study, he is very much involved in the exercise of modern Bangla literature. He wrote six books of poetry and short story to date.