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. Public libraries are people's own spaces and revamping them with more community engagement activities will boost them to be the nucleus of society and a most sought after community engagement hub. The main objectives of the study were to understand the current status of public library services offered to the community and to assess the utilization of community services by community members through the libraries. Moreover, it tries to identify the challenges faced by both users and librarians in the utilization of these programs. The study was conducted among the different reader group communities usually seen in public libraries under the Kerala State Library Council. A well-structured questionnaire was prepared to collect information from library users using Google fforms, and interviews with the librarians were also conducted to collect data. The study concluded that most users take advantage of the ccommunity 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 to strengthen democracy and enhance social sustainability in the community (Hapel, 2020). Assessment of public participation in community programs shows the level of community participation, the inclusive presence of various communities in different programs, the effectiveness of outreach programs, etc. Kerala is renowned for its highest number of public libraries, and among its districts, Kannur stands out with the

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highest number, boasting 1,300 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.

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 refer to 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, 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 a community engagement program, 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 enormous services and activities. Public libraries have always served 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 promote a culture of reading. They play an important role in the development of society. Public libraries 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.

Review Of Literature

There are several studies conducted on community services offered through public libraries. However, the current study focused on the assessment of community participation in these programs. A background study of the community services will help to give a clear picture of variant community services offered through public libraries. 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 by customizing the service activities of that library. The study lists various services conducted through different user forums, like Balavedhi (for children), Yuvajanavedhi (for
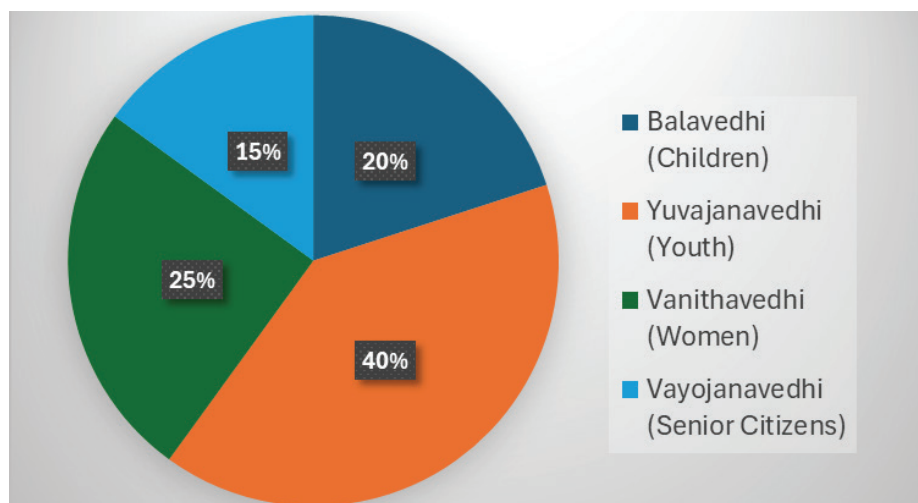
youth), Vayojanavedhi (for senior citizens), and Vanithavedhi (for women). Koteswara Rao (2019) conducted a study on the problems and prospects of public libraries in India. The study analysed the current status of public libraries in India. It could find out the challenges faced by public libraries in India. The study found public libraries as 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." In this study, the author found that there are more studies on urban public libraries, but the least studies concentrating on to rural libraries. In rural libraries, community engagement practices can connect communities in a better way than any other service. So, more emphasis should be given on to community-focused programs and activities to build connections with the rural people. Van Melik (2021) studies the role of public libraries in the social infrastructure. Bharath and Sudhir (2024) analysed that public libraries in Kerala are providing e-learning and e-governance services to the community that keeps them better connected to people.

Methodology

The present study is an attempt to assess the utilization of community services provided through the public libraries of Kannur district in Kerala State, India. The fact may be noted that there are 9415 public libraries in Kerala. While taking the statistics of public libraries in India a total of 27600 libraries is there. It shows 30% of public libraries in India are in Kerala. Another notable thing is that there are 1008 public libraries now in Kannur district spanning over 5 Taluks namely Kannur, Thalassery, Iritti, Thalipparamba, and Payyannur. Each ward in the district has public libraries. The number of public libraries in the Kannur district is more than that of some of the the Indian states. Kerala State Library Council assigns grades to public libraries like A+, A, B, C, D, E, and F based on the collection. facilities and activities of the library. Purposive sampling method is applied in this study to select libraries among the 47A+ libraries in Kannur. A sample of 5A+ libraries concentrating on community engagement programs were selected for the study. Community services are usually delivered through different forums functioning in the library. Each forum focuses on different community groups for example Balavedhi for children, Yuvajanavedhi for youth, Vanithavedhi for women, and Vayojanavedhi for senior citizens. The study was conducted among 200 active users belonging to different community groups from the five selected libraries by applying multistage sampling method at the time of their visit to the library. So, the researcher randomely selected forty active members from each Taluk. For equal representation, 40% youth members, 25% women members, 20% children, and 15% senior citizens are selected through random sampling method. A well-structured questionnaire was prepared to collect information from library users by using Google Forms. Interviews with available users and librarians were also conducted for collecting data.

Sample Distribution

Objectives

- ❖ To understand the status of services provided by the public libraries.
- ❖ To assess the utilization of services provided by the public libraries.
- ❖ To assess the various community engagement services offered through the different user group forums
- ❖ To evaluate the challenges encountered by the user while using community engagement services
- ❖ To assess the challenges faced by the public librarians in Kannur district in providing these community engaging services.

Results

1. Current Library Services And Usage

As part of the study, the researcher collected and analyzed data to find out the present services provided by the public libraries to the users and to understand the user participation in these activities. An array of vibrant services is listed below which are commonly offered through all the public libraries working under Kerala State Library Council. The researcher included 20% of children in the sample taken for the 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

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

2. **Usage Of Community Services Under Balavedhi**

Balavedhi is a children's forum. The activities and services under this forum are mainly meant for children's users of the library. It instills reading habits and social behavioral development in the blooming buds. Various educational programs, games, quizzes, story times, etc. are some of the Balavedhi services. Children are more engaged in school vacation times. For the analysis of usage of the Balavedhi services the researcher collected data from 8 children's users from each of 5 A+ public libraries.
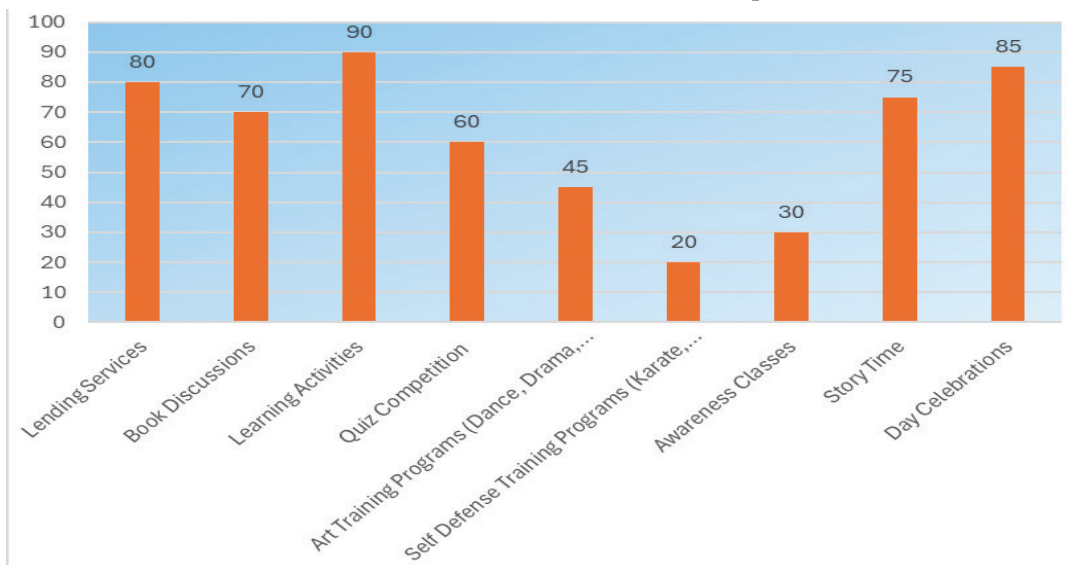

Fig. 1 Balavedhi Services Usage

Figure 1 shows that the services provided under Balavedhi in 5 selected public libraries. Children are mostly resorting to public libraries for learning activities (90%) like school project work and assignment work. Least presence we can see in self-defence training programs (20%).

3. Usage Of Community Services Under Yuvajanavedhi

As part of the study, the researcher collected and analysed data to find out the community services provided to users under the Yuvajanavedhi and to understand the users' use of these services. Youths belonging to the age group 20–50 age group with a 40% sample of the total population are taken for the study. The researcher could find that among the public library members; there is a higher number of youth users. So, sample size is more than that of another category of users. All responses were collected and processed. The results are given below.

Table 2. Yuvajanavedhi Services Usage

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

It is evident from the above table that most 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%).

4. Usage Of Community Services Under Vayojanavedhi

In this study, the researcher collected and analyzed data to find out the community services provided to users under the Vayojanavedhi and to understand the users' use of these services. Citizens above the age of 50 were considered under the Vayojanavedhi programs. Among the

sample taken for the study, 15% of people are senior citizens. A total of 30 senior citizens were included in the sample of 200 users taken for the study. Since the number of members above the age of 50 is smaller compared to other user groups in the library. All responses were collected and processed. The results are given below.

Table 3. Vayojanavedhi Services Usage

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 tables reveal that most users under the Vayojanavedhi participated in the medical camps organized by the 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%).

5. Usage Of Community Services Under Vanithavedhi

The researcher collected and analyzed data to find out the usage of community services provided to Vanithavedhi members and to understand the users' use of theseservices. Thus, the researcher selected 25% of the active women members among the community groups selected from 5 A+ libraries. Women members within the age group of 18-50 are taken for the study. All responses were collected and processed. The results are given below.

Table 4. Vanithavedhi Services Usage

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 (Psc Coaching, 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 reveals the fact that women are more interested in participating in self-employment training programs. At the same time, they also show interest in being part of tour programs conducted by the library. It is noted that very few people are attending self defense training programs.

6. Challenges Encountered By The User

Data has been collected to find out what are the challenges users are facing in participating in the community engagement activities of the library. The analysis is 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
Due to the non-availability of necessary books and inforamtion sources	25	12.5
Lack of intimation of library programs	10	5
Lack of knowledge in the usage of library services	15	7.5
Due to insufficient time	85	42.5
Due to health problems	13	6.5

The inferences from the above table analysis are that most of the users are unable to attend the community-focused programs due to their insufficient time. Very few people remarked that due to the behavior of the library staff, they were hesistant to attend library programs.

7. Challenges Encountered By Librarians

In this study, data has been collected from librarians to understand what the challenges are they are facing while offering community services. Organizing community programs requires some essential qualities like leadership, competencies in organizing library-related programs, etc.

Moreover, the interest of the librarian to organize all these programs is of utmost importance.
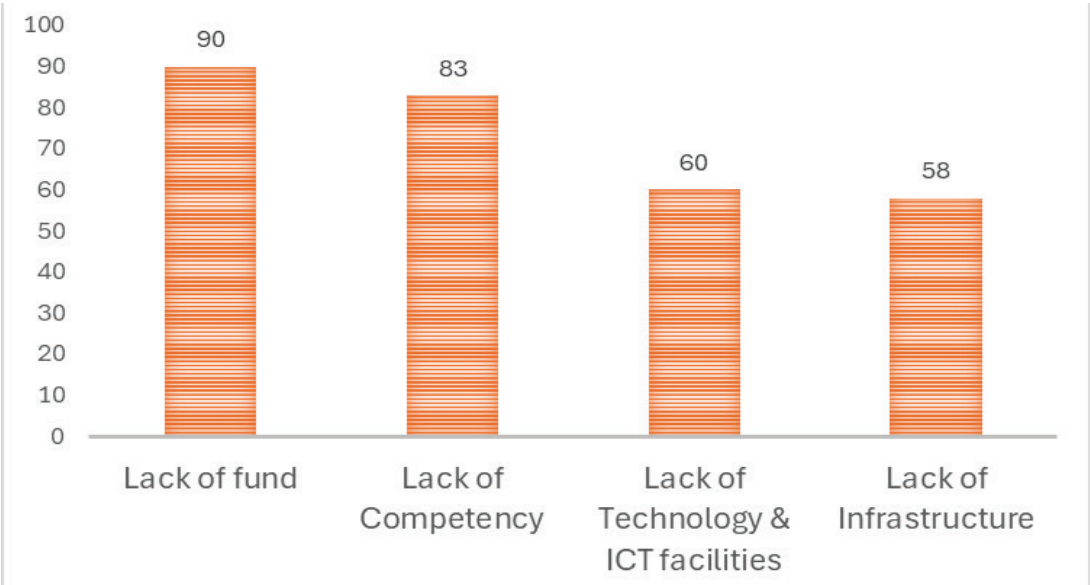

Fig. 2 Challenges Encountered by Librarians

The above figure shows that financial constraints are the major problem that hinders libraries from doing community-engaging services. They are running with the grant received through Kerala State Library Council. That is not sufficient for them to organize programs. The lack of competency of the librarians to do technology-related services withholds them from doing more activities related to digital literacy.

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). The major finding of the study is that public libraries provide a variety of services to their communities. These include general services and specific services intended for specific community groups. While assessing the status of services and their usage, the researcher could find out the fact that the users are mostly approaching public libraries for the information they need. The primary priority for visiting the library is for information. E-governance is the least sought service due to the lack of competency of the librarian to do these services. Adding to that digital infrastructure and Wi-Fi facilities is very poor.

The analysis of the participation of children in the programs offered through the Balavedhi forum revealed the fact that students are visiting the public library for their learning resources. Resources in the public library are helping them to do their academic activities and projects. The least participation of children is found in self defense training programs. Analysis of

Yuvajanavedhi program participation by the youth revealed that all most all youths (95%) utilize the public library educational programs such as PSc. coaching and other competitive exam preparation classes. The least sought service is self defense programs.

While analyzing the Vayojanavedhi programs most of the senior citizens are utilizing medical camps convened by the libraries with the help of health centers near the library. All most all (98%) senior citizens attending the medical camps. The least presence is seen in prominent day celebrations. Vanithavedhi programs participation by the women users showed that most of the women members are attending the self-employment training program. Their least presence is seen in self defense classes. The study also analyzed the challenges faced by the users in utilizing the community services (Larsen, 2024). It is found that insufficient time to participate in these programs hinder them from being part of these services. The study also analyzed the challenges faced by librarians while conducting and organizing various programs. Lack of funds is the major problem for convening programs. Moreover, lack of competency and lack of infrastructure also make them reluctant to do such activities. The grant given by the Kerala State Library Council is not sufficient to meet all the expenses of the library.

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 has been conducted to assess the participation citizens in the community services offered through public libraries. The investigator found that the public library is a community hub; they provide a wide variety of services to their users for their development and lifelong learning. It includes general services, digital services, and different community services for their community. Users require additional services from the library such as free Wi-Fi, ICT facilities, and more e-governance services. Most of the users utilize almost all services, and they expect more services from public libraries related to their education, employment, health, digital literacy, and lifelong learning. More studies can be conducted in this area for improving the quality of services and also for directing public libraries to actively engage in the community's growth and welfare with innovative services proactively stressing on the socio-political-economic growth of the society.

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