

Preparedness of Library & Information Services in New Normal

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines preparedness of our library system post Covid -19 pandemic. Covid-19 pandemic has brought in an uncertainty and threat to the existence of human life all around the globe in 2020. Even though this virus is not as dangerous as the viruses or bacteria that causes Pneumonia, Cholera, Tuberculosis, HIV, Typhoid or similar diseases to a healthy human being, its quick community spread has a blasting effect on the entire health system making it helpless to provide health services to large number of citizens at the same time resulting complete lockdown and making the world economy paralyzed for an indefinite period. We are living in a liminal moment where we are unaware as to what will happen next. This increased uncertainty is a challenge to all human activities including the activities of public libraries all around and in India the condition is comparatively worst as dependency on physical library services is more. It is the time for us to concentrate on what we need to adapt and bring transformation in response to the major challenges that have evolved from the COVID-19 pandemic as there is a little has been done in India in this direction till date. There is an immediate demand of service deviations to accelerate no-touch public access, extended loan limits and periods, shifting to online service delivery of reference materials and public programs, significantly increasing the collection of e-books, identifying and implementing direct channels of communication with readers and user communities, and setting-up home delivery of materials or improving click and collect facilities. There also need for a massive survey of the users to understand the depth of need that the users have for continuity of access to the public library services.

Keywords :- Library, Human being, e-books etc

I INDIA - PANDEMIC TIMELINE / CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

(a) The Beginning of the Trouble

- (i) By the end of December 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) receives reports of mass spread of a "pneumonia with an unidentified cause" from Wuhan city in Central China's Hubei province.
- (ii) By mid-January 2020, this unknown virus spreads globally, first to Thailand then to the United States, Nepal, France, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and then it also reached Australia.
- (iii) On 31st January, 2020, WHO again come out with new declaration the outbreak of this unknown virus as a "public health emergency of global concern".
- (iv) On February 12, 2020, WHO formally and technically named the new coronavirus as COVID-19

(b) On set of Pandemic

- (i) On March 11, 2020: WHO declares it as a global pandemic.
- (ii) On 16 March: Government of India announces complete lock-down of all schools and colleges countrywide.
- (iii) On 18 March: the CBSE released its revised guidelines and schedule of examinations, along with protocol to be maintained during the conduct of examinations.
- (iv) On 19 March: the much important CBSE and JEE examinations were postponed till 31st March.
- (v) On 20 March: Government of Maharashtra took its decision to cancel examinations for classes 1 to 8 and to promote all students to

the next higher classes. They also postponed examinations for class 9 and 11 to 15th April.

- (vi) On 20 March itself, the Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary Education also declared to postpone its examinations of Class 10th and 12th, asking all school principals to promote or detain students from class 5 to 8 reviewing their previous performance in lower classes.
- (vii) SLC (Class 10), HSLC (Class 12) exams in Kerala Board postponed due to COVID-19 lockdown.
- (viii) Assam State Government also cancelled all exams till 31st March.
- (ix) The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) also postponed its interview for the Civil Services scheduled from 23rd March to 3rd April 2020.
- (x) The SSC exams rescheduled for 15th April 2020 in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.
- (xi) March 22: The National Library of India situated at Kolkata was closed due to the spread of Covid-19 pandemic.
- (xii) On March 23, Prime Minister of India Mr. Narendra Modi came in public to make a resolution of a Janata Curfew which was carried throughout India with greatest sincerity by the citizen of India.

(c) The Lock down Begins

- (i) On March 24, 2020 Prime Minister Modi has announced a 21-day complete lockdown starting from midnight of 24th March 2020 as a significant measure in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. For containment of Covid-19 epidemic, the Ministry of Home Affairs issues an Order with

- guidelines to all Ministries / Departments, States and Union Territories in the Country. It also enlisted the penal provisions under Section 51 to 60 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005 and under Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code for Punishment for obstruction, false claim, misappropriation of money, materials etc., false warning, failure of officers on duty, contravention of any order regarding requisitioning, offence by companies etc. to combat the spread of covid-19 and to break the cycle of its spread.
- (ii) March 25: Mass movement by migrants across India. Mostly the urban poor headed towards their homes in rural areas.
 - (iii) March 26: Finance Minister of India announced Rs 1.7 trillion economic stimulus plan as an immediate relief to millions of poor and migrants hit by the countrywide lockdown.
 - (iv) March 27: Prime Minister Modi urges India's 1.3 billion citizens to switch off the lights in their homes, stand at their balconies, and light candles, traditional diyas, torches or mobile flashlights, at 9 pm on Sunday the 5th of April 2020 for nine minutes to inspire individuals to dispel the darkness of the coronavirus disease.
 - (v) March 27: Reserve Bank of India announced that all banks, housing finance companies (HFCs) and NBFCs have been permitted to allow a moratorium of 3 months on loan repayments.
 - (vi) March 31: Delhi's Nizamuddin area emerged as 'hotspot' of Coronavirus with a large number of participants of Markaz, of the Tablighi Jamaat have been tested positive.
 - (vii) April 5: Responding to Prime Minister Modi's call to light lamps for nine minutes to 'harness the power of light' to fight against the coronavirus, people from around the country come out with candles lit and bursting crackers filling the entire country with positivity during Diwali festival.
 - (viii) April 10: Prime Minister holds a digital conference with Chief Ministers of all states to discuss the lockdown extension issue primarily to get the consent of state heads.
 - (ix) April 14: Amidst fear of mass spread, Centre extends lockdown till May 3, as 10,000 confirmed cases were recorded.
 - (x) April 16: Government of India allows e-commerce, Agriculture industry to resume its activities from April 20
 - (xi) April 20: Situation of pandemic became "especially serious" in Mumbai, Pune, Indore, Jaipur and Kolkata
 - (xii) April 24: Prime Minister Modi and Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman finalise a second stimulus package for the paralysed industry, the poor, and farmers.
 - (xiii) April 25: The government allows shops and commercial establishments, including those located in residential complexes within municipal areas, to function with 50 per cent strength as a relief to the citizen.
 - (xiv) April 30: The Central Government allows the movement of migrant labourers, students, pilgrims and tourists who do not have any symptoms, back to their home states.
- (d) Extended period of Lock down**
- (i) May 1: Lockdown further extended till May 17. Considerable relaxation given in the districts falling under Green and Orange Zones. Metros and most economically-important cities including Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai and Ahmedabad, marked red zones and will stay under strict lockdown.
 - (ii) May 4: Lockdown 3.0 - India entered third phase of lockdown. Total positive cases in the country touched 42,533 and 1,391 deaths recorded so far.
 - (iii) May 7: Prime Minister's Vande Bharat Mission begins to bring back all stranded Indian citizens home from various countries like the UK, the UAE, the US, Maldives, Bahrain, and Singapore.
 - (iv) May 16: India with 85,940 positive cases surpasses China in terms of the total number of Covid-19 cases reported.
 - (v) May 17: Countrywide lockdown further extended till May 31, proving it as the longest lockdowns any country has imposed ever in the history.
 - (vi) June 1: India becomes the seventh most-affected country in the global COVID-19 tally, with over 1.9 lakh positive cases and 5,400 deaths recorded so far.
- (e) Unlocking**
- (i) June 8: Unlock 1.0 guidelines come into force to relax the lockdown in a phased manner, as India records more than 2,50,000 positive cases and 7200 deaths. Government allows re-opening of malls, hotels, restaurants and religious places.
 - (ii) July 1: Unlock 2.0 guidelines, with relaxations in night curfew, provision for more domestic flights and trains, and clearance for more than five people in a shop.
 - (iii) July 17: International commercial flights resume as the Government establishes individual bilateral bubbles with France and the US. Total Covid-19 cases in the

country cross 10 lakh. Death toll stands at 25,600.

- (iv) August 1: Unlock Phase 3.0, government allows yoga centres and gymnasiums to function and revoked its night curfew order.
- (v) August 29: Unlock 4.0 guidelines - allows metro services to start from September 7, gatherings with 100 people allowed from September 21, senior students can attend schools on a voluntary basis.
- (vi) August 31: India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth contracts 23.9 per cent in the April-June quarter, as per data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO).
- (vii) Unlock-4 guidelines - Commercial metro services stopped on March 24 resume in a graded manner across the country.
- (viii) September 12: the country breaks its own record in fresh Covid-19 cases, records another highest single-day spike in infections, with 97,570 people found positive in 24 hours.
- (ix) September 14: Monsoon session of Parliament kicks off under the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, with MPs occupying seats in both Houses ensuring social distancing. More than two dozen MPs tested positive.
- (x) September 19: The Drug Controller General of India approves India's first Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic (CRISPR) Covid-19 test kit for commercial launch.
- (xi) September 21: Schools partially reopened in several states to enable students studying in Classes 9 to 12 to visit their institutions on a voluntary basis for seeking guidance from their teachers.
- (xii) September 30: Unlock 5.0 guidelines from Ministry of Home Affairs - allows cinemas and multiplexes to open with 50 per cent capacity from October 15; states and Union Territories can take a decision on whether to open educational institutions; removes limits on outdoor gatherings while allowing indoors gatherings with 50 per cent capacity. Swimming pools "being used for sportspersons" are also permitted to reopen.
- (xiii) Number of confirmed cases of coronavirus crossed the 63 lakh mark. India becomes the second worst coronavirus-hit nation.

II CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS

- (a) **Status of National Library, Kolkata** - The National library of India situated at Kolkata was closed since March 22 and started reopening in a phased manner on Monday the 20th of April 2020 with skeletal staff as many of them could not join due to lack of transportation. Some of the staff requested through emails to the authorities pleading Covid-19 transmission fear. Gradually the pandemic fear has reduced and it resumed normalcy in its functions.
- (b) **Libraries are not "low-risk"**- Our temples of knowledge are not really "low-risk". We have really become community centres and gathering places. Libraries that incorporate community gatherings or social activities into their services are considered as medium to high risk, similar to restaurants and retail stores. School libraries in more than 50 countries have been worst affected by the closure of all educational institutions, while in others, at least some schools have been closed, according to figures from UNESCO. In many of these countries, university libraries have also been shut down.
- (c) **Measures required in place in Public Libraries to resume its normal function**
 - (i) More investment to increase digital resources for interactive book clubs
 - (ii) Social media presence to enable more direct interaction with users
 - (iii) Live streaming of events
 - (iv) More webinars and VC based learning sessions
 - (v) Presence with Online story-times, video crafts, promotions etc.
 - (vi) Inclusion of online programming/events in routine activities
 - (vii) Addition of some components of an online service or video streaming to reach broader audience.
 - (viii) Investing more in training, especially for our older Patrons especially in terms of use of digital resources
 - (ix) Ensuring portable Wi-Fi hot spots for disadvantaged people
 - (x) Focus on no-touch service delivery options – i.e. self-check and mobile printing
- (d) **Physical Change needs**
 - (i) Redevelopments of the library to increase space and size keeping in mind that social distancing will continue to be an inevitable aspect of human life.
 - (ii) To reduce the chances for risk, reduction of seating in the medium term is suggested.
 - (iii) Ensuring more space in computer section for users
 - (iv) Setting up larger libraries in hubs
 - (v) Providing sneeze guards and protective screens at service centres

- (vi) Installing hand sanitisation points and adopting such other measures to stop the transmission of through spread of virus.
 - (vii) Avoiding face to face interactions especially in smaller sites
 - (viii) Capacity of meeting rooms to be increased to maintain social distancing.
 - (ix) Occupancy counters and prevention of crowd at entrances to libraries
 - (x) Redesigning of information and circulation desk – a rotating round table is approachable from all angles supporting the social distancing protocols.
 - (xi) Redesigning of toilets and change-rooms– installation of contactless soap/taps entry/exit
 - (xii) Controlling of crowded activities and to have bookable sessions
- (e) Management & Access to Resources**
- (i) Promotion of continued Click and Collect and more home & workplace deliveries
 - (ii) Adoption of devices to improve people's accessibility to e Resources
 - (iii) Addition of 24 / 7 vending machines
 - (iv) Increased investment in procurement of digital and e Resources
 - (v) Deviation in shelving to accommodate self-serve reservations
 - (vi) Change in opening hours
 - (vii) Revision / removal of reservation fees and penalties
 - (viii) Newspapers and magazines like physical collections must be reviewed because of the high risk of community spread of virus
 - (ix) Retractable control systems to manage crowd and to direct foot traffic and enforce social distancing
- (f) Information Service**
- (i) Assistance through technology and support programs for unemployed (anticipating increase in unemployment)
 - (ii) Customer service reformation – more training to staff to work with screens and digital signage
 - (iii) Visual cues from staff for improving internal communication
 - (iv) Additional digital content associated with information services and supporting programs
 - (v) Wi-Fi hot spots in open places and community centres to improve accessibility to library services and e-Resources
 - (vi) Supplementary outreach programs to promote participation
 - (vii) Technical training to users to assist them accessing and adapt to online resources and services
- (g) Marketing and Promotion**
- (i) Full-fledged promotion of online services
 - (ii) Adoption of innovative marketing strategies, making best use of the social media and exploring use of such other additional platforms
- (iii) Building confidence in people to self-motivate them coming back to the library
 - (iv) Developing a strategic, vibrant, reliable and professional communication plan with proper templates and checklists
- (h) Financing, Staffing and Library Planning**
- (i) Budget considerations - More budget for digital content, planning and development
 - (ii) Review and evaluating program delivery
 - (iii) Reserving more budget provisions on sanitisers and cleaning supplies
 - (iv) Readiness with Covid-19 response plan by reassessment of library strategy
 - (v) Redesigning roles to reduce transactional tasks
 - (vi) Investment in skill development and hiring more technically skilled human resources.
 - (vii) Developing the trend to work from home when human resources of the library are not rostered to desk
 - (viii) Adoption of new flexible working hours policy
 - (ix) Modification in staffing and rostering plans
 - (x) Need to keep lobbying for further resources financially
 - (xi) Promoting virtual workshops and online staff meetings
 - (xii) Moving to a online financial transactions and cashless, no-touch service dealings
 - (xiii) Skilling the staff to create and deliver virtual contents and digital services efficiently
 - (xiv) Hiring and engaging skilled consultants to perform an entire service review and come up with suggestions for improvement of service delivery
- (i) Remote pickup Services -** We have seen that the Government has relaxed eateries to continue serving the customers throughout the pandemic by offering pickup parcel services through online or telephone orders. As most of the libraries have suspended all borrowing of physical resources and alternatively often strengthening their digital collections to fill the gap. However, some libraries have opted pickup, and many are considering it as a first phase of reopening. Now, each library should make decisions that what work best for their individual circumstances and based on the users' demand. The libraries should make it possible to reach its resources to more local residents and support to expansion of local readers group.
- (j) Phased reopening of library buildings -** Reopening of Libraries should happen with more emphasis on hygiene and social distancing concerns. It would only be successful if we adopt a phased and well planned approach. We should adopt a people-counting technique to ensure that they do not exceed a safe capacity, proper distancing of people waiting in queues should be

- taken care while using ground markings to assist those waiting in queues. We should also emphasize on using social media platforms to reserve a schedule to borrow materials. Visits can be limited to one or hours, and users may not be allowed to sit or read in the library as a short-term policy. Materials could be allowed to borrow a specific floor / area/ general collection only. The children's area should be banned for use until a certainty in the conditions is achieved. Inside the library, different routes have to be established for borrowing and returning of items.
- (k) **Protecting Staff and Users** - Certainly it is of prime importance to any institution to protect the health and well-being of staff and users preventing contact with those who are already sick. Visitors to establishments should be allowed only after proper screening through health questionnaires and temperature checks. Libraries will need to be sensitive to the tolerance levels on varied social norms of different communities across the globe. However, temperature checks and sanitization of hands of visitors must be made compulsory. Inside the library, care must be taken to limit direct contact between staff and users. Extra precautions like providing disinfectant for staff, accepting online payments and cards instead of currency transactions and regular cleaning of facilities etc. should be adopted in addition to providing masks and gloves to the operational staff.
- (l) **Use of UV sanitizers for sterilization** - Unlike restaurants, museums and such other distribution centres having limited quantum of high-touch articles to disinfect, libraries have thousands of resource materials, which cannot merely be wiped down with disinfectant to avoid spread of viruses. In this scenario, libraries have the best option to use UV sanitizers to sterilize and disinfect materials after return. Each library should develop their own protocols in accordance with their user groups. Multiple book drops. Building Plexiglas protected workspaces for staff is yet another solution to protect the staff from infections through contacts.
- (m) **More significance to self-service and touch less services** - Pre-Covid, almost 75% of the library users preferred self-service to handle their transactions. Almost the same number of users have changed their behaviour and prefer to opt robust self-service or touchless alternatives since the pandemic began. There should not have any doubts that this particular virus will persist to have a perpetual impact on people's perceptions about preferences for safety and limited contact, although its threat will gradually come-down and come to an end latter. However, touchless library activities and self-services will be more important in the future than ever in the past. Libraries should eliminate the need for excessive human interactions and encourage users to

borrow and return items through self-service kiosks and thereby reduce the risk to staff and users alike. Hand sanitizer installations at self-checkout can reduce contamination of touchable surfaces, however, our libraries can easily be configured for a completely touchless experience. Reducing the risk factors and fear or anxiety, users could also be facilitated to borrow and return resources directly from their own mobile devices.

- (n) **The future of libraries is 'Digital'** - During the Covid-19 pandemic, undoubtedly the librarians and library staff have exhibited extraordinary courage, creativity, and resilience. Resourceful libraries continuously offered e-resources, digital contents, book clubs, video-conference, recorded and broadcasted story-times, online consulting and webinars without the use of physical structures and infrastructure and constantly supported their reader communities.

Now, as the public libraries around the globe commenced to reopen, the new virtual means of connecting and communicating will indeed become an essential element of the library landscape. While the prospective users are swiftly adapting to cyber living and working atmospheres, they still have an inclination for human interventions and familiar in-person involvements. Libraries must request their users to maximise the use of resources and services that are Digital.

The public libraries should concentrate on what they have adopted in providing digital services to the users during the pandemic. They also should make efforts to address the challenges and implications for the professionals working in-house and remotely for the library.

III CONCLUSION

Although there are a lot many restrictions put in place, they are being lifted slowly across the globe to resume a new normal. Libraries are struggling to embrace the best approaches to safely resume its normal routine activities and providing their best services to their readers.

There is a need now to emphasize enhancing relationship with users and stakeholders, on keeping the people associated with library services, as well as on developing employees' agility and skill with project work and effective delivery of new services.

As the library buildings began to open after the lockdown, these buildings should be altered to set up onsite facilities that are compulsory and complementary in compliance of Covid-19 Health Orders, while continuing with the remote and no-touch services and the communities should also be educated to adopt it as quickly as possible.

Library staff should work hard to set up a phone-in facility for prospective clients who were customarily taking part in regular functions and programs of the libraries as there may have a chance of them developing a sentiment of being socially isolated or having difficulty in accessing shopping, medical appointments etc.

Behavioural pattern of both users as well as the staff should be modified adhering social distancing norms. There is also a need to pivot and start developing high quality online content. Reopening or resuming work will not exactly mean going back entirely to the way things were in pre-Covid-19 but it should put in place a 'new normal' approach to library services."

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