

Libraries as Catalysts of Change: A Study on the Development of Rural Libraries and Student Empowerment in Idappadi, Salem District

Ganesan V

Centre of Online and Distance Education (CDOE), Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, India

Abstract

This study examines the role of rural libraries in empowering students in Idappadi, a block in Salem District, Tamil Nadu. Rural libraries serve as community knowledge hubs that provide access to books, digital resources, and educational programs. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 100 students, 10 teachers, and 5 librarians through questionnaires and interviews. The findings indicate that the majority of students rely heavily on libraries for textbooks and reference materials (about 85%), while less than half use digital/internet resources (40%). Over half of the students utilize libraries for career and exam-preparation materials. Qualitative feedback showed that libraries boost student confidence and reduce dependence on private coaching. However, infrastructural gaps (outdated collections, limited internet) constrain their impact. Consistent with UNESCO's vision, public libraries in Idappadi provide a "gateway to knowledge" and contribute to educational equity. Strengthening infrastructure, ICT access, and partnerships with schools and NGOs is recommended to maximize their role as catalysts for positive change.

Keywords

Rural Libraries, Student Empowerment, Educational Development, Community Learning

1. Introduction

Libraries are vital institutions for knowledge dissemination, cultural preservation, and lifelong learning. In particular, public libraries serve as local centers of information and community engagement. The UNESCO–IFLA Public Library Manifesto affirms that public libraries are "the local gateway to knowledge" and provide a "basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development". By offering free access to books, digital media, and learning programs, libraries uphold the rights to education and informed civic participation. Ranganathan's classic laws of library science (1931) further emphasize that libraries must be user-centered and accessible to all, reflecting their

social mission in India.

In rural areas, where educational and digital divides often persist, libraries can play a transformative role. Abu et al. note that rural public libraries are "more than shelves of books" – they offer a "changing range of cultural resources" and can drive community development. Alan Bundy observes that no other agency has the same "breadth of role, the user range and diversity, and the potential impact" as modern public libraries. Indeed, libraries can become "intellectual centres of life" for their communities by linking people with knowledge and learning opportunities.

Tamil Nadu has a relatively strong rural library network under its Public Libraries Department, and state initiatives have tried to bridge libraries with schools. For example, Tamil Nadu (along with Delhi) formally linked public libraries with local schools to increase student access to books and reading programs. However, specific studies on rural libraries in Idappadi are lacking. Idappadi is a predominantly rural block in Salem District where many students face educational constraints (e.g. limited school resources and socio-economic challenges). In this context, libraries may serve as catalysts that empower students academically and socially. This study investigates the development, accessibility, and impact of rural libraries in Idappadi, with a focus on how they contribute to student empowerment.

2. Objectives

- 1). To assess the development and accessibility of rural libraries in Idappadi,
- 2). To evaluate how these libraries empower students academically and personally,
- 3). To identify challenges faced by libraries and student users, and
- 4). To suggest measures to strengthen student-oriented library services.

3. Literature Review

Global research highlights the multifaceted role of libraries in education and community development. The UNESCO–IFLA manifesto emphasizes that public libraries contribute directly to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting literacy, inclusive access to information, and lifelong learning. In line with this, studies worldwide recognize libraries as engines of development: Harrison (1977) argued that “the public library can become an intellectual centre of life” for its area, providing vital links to knowledge and community heritage. Research in Australia and Malaysia found that rural libraries offer programs for adult literacy, vocational guidance, and digital skills training, thereby improving economic and social conditions. For example, the State Library

of Victoria (2005) identified four key ways libraries empower communities: by providing free public access to computers and ICT; helping patrons locate information (thus creating well-informed citizens); running lifelong learning and literacy programs; and building connections between individuals, groups, and government. Victorian libraries have thus become genuine “community hubs,” contributing to social capital, access to information, and expanded social networks.

In the Indian context, public libraries have long been guided by Ranganathan’s philosophy of accessibility (e.g. “Books are for use; Every reader his/her book; Save the time of the reader”). Libraries in India historically supported self-education and competitive exam preparation, especially for underprivileged students. However, scholars note persistent challenges: many public libraries struggle with underfunding, outdated collections, and a lack of digital infrastructure (Satija 2018). Digital divides are pronounced in rural India – for instance, ASER 2022 found that barely 15% of rural schools have a computer. Thus, while libraries have potential, realizing it requires addressing such systemic barriers.

Regional studies in Tamil Nadu highlight the state’s efforts and gaps. Tamil Nadu’s Public Libraries Department supports village and panchayat libraries; some reports suggest this has improved general literacy. State initiatives have even linked libraries to schools to encourage reading. However, evidence of outcomes is sparse. A recent survey in nearby Theni District found that about two-thirds of respondents were library members, and many used libraries primarily for reading newspapers and general books. Newspapers and magazines were ranked highest in use, while the internet was least used. This suggests that Tamil rural libraries function as centers for print media consumption but lack strong digital engagement. There remains a gap in understanding exactly how libraries in Idappadi impact student motivation and learning outcomes. The present study fills this gap by empirically examining library use and its effects

on students in Idappadi.

4. Methodology

A descriptive research design was employed to evaluate library services and their impact on students. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered via surveys and interviews during 2023. A structured questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 100 students from high schools and colleges across Idappadi. The questionnaire covered frequency of library use, resources accessed (books, internet, programs), and perceived impact on learning. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 teachers and 5 local librarians to gain qualitative insights into library operations, resource adequacy, and student outcomes. Secondary data included official reports (e.g. Tamil Nadu Public Libraries statistics) and relevant literature. The survey responses were tabulated and analyzed using simple descriptive statistics (percentages and frequency) to identify usage patterns. Interview notes were coded thematically to understand perceptions of library benefits and challenges.

5. Research Questions

- 1). What is the current state of rural library development in Idappadi (e.g. number of libraries, collections, infrastructure) and how accessible are these libraries to local students?
- 2). In what ways do rural libraries in Idappadi contribute to student empowerment, academic success, and personal development?
- 3). What are the main challenges faced by rural libraries and by students in using library services (e.g. funding, technology, awareness)?
- 4). What strategies can enhance the effectiveness of library services in supporting students' education and community development in Idappadi?

6. Findings and Analysis

Table 1: Student Usage of Rural Library Services in Idappadi (N=100)

Library Service Used	% of Students Using	Impact on Learning
Textbooks & Reference Books	85%	High (supports exam prep)
Digital Resources / Internet	40%	Medium (limited usage)
Career Guidance Materials	55%	High (competitive exam prep)
Cultural / Skill Programs	30%	Medium (holistic development)

A vast majority of students (85%) use libraries to obtain textbooks and reference books. This mirrors other Tamil Nadu studies where general books are the most sought-after resource. It reflects that many students depend on the library to supplement or replace lacking school resources. Students reported that easy access to textbooks significantly helps their exam preparation and understanding of subjects.

Only 40% of students reported using library-provided digital resources or the internet. This relatively low figure indicates infrastructural gaps. In fact, the Theni District study found that internet sources ranked last in library use, suggesting a common trend of low computer use in rural libraries. Poor connectivity and few available computers were frequently cited by librarians during interviews.

About 55% of students utilize libraries for career guidance and competitive exam preparation materials. Many students explained that free access to exam guides and entry-level reference books motivates them to aim higher. Librarians noted that special shelves with exam preparation kits (for civil services, banking exams, etc.) are among the most borrowed items. This confirms the empowering role of libraries in facilitating upward mobility.

Approximately 30% of students participated in cultural or skill-development programs (e.g. reading clubs, computer classes) offered by libraries. These programs were generally rated medium in impact because they were sporadic and not well-publicized. Teachers suggested that if such programs were regular and tailored to students' needs, their utilization and benefit would increase.

The above findings are summarized in Table 1. Qualitative interviews supported these trends. Students expressed that having a local library makes them more motivated and confident: one student remarked, "I used to think I needed private tutors, but the library's books and guidance tell me I can learn on my own." Teachers observed that libraries are reducing the reliance on commercial coaching centers for low-income students. However, both teachers and librarians pointed out challenges: outdated book collections need renewal, and limited internet hours restrict online learning.

7. Results

The results underscore that rural libraries in Idappadi function as educational equalizers. By providing free access to core learning materials (textbooks, reference works) and exam preparation resources, libraries help students from diverse backgrounds improve academically. This aligns with global evidence that libraries equip communities with "equal opportunity of access to resources" for continuous learning. For example, the UNESCO-IFLA manifesto notes that such access is fundamental to creating knowledge societies.

However, the findings also highlight persistent gaps. Infrastructure constraints mean digital offerings are under-leveraged, limiting exposure to online learning tools. The lack of trained library staff and outreach programs further reduces libraries' impact. In qualitative feedback, some students mentioned that internet speed was too slow to be useful, echoing concerns that without better ICT support, libraries cannot fully serve modern educa-

tional needs.

Overall, the data show that libraries already contribute to student empowerment by boosting motivation and learning outcomes. Many respondents confirmed that libraries make education more inclusive: as one librarian put it, "We see students from remote villages coming here after school because we have books and even some test series they can't get elsewhere." This qualitative evidence suggests that libraries help narrow educational disparities, consistent with literature that libraries can play a "transformative role in the lives of students from marginalised communities".

8. Conclusion

Rural libraries in Idappadi clearly act as catalysts for change by empowering students academically and socially. They bridge information gaps and foster lifelong learning, consistent with UNESCO's vision of libraries as agents of sustainable development. By offering free access to books and knowledge, libraries promote equitable education and community upliftment. As quoted by Abu et al., rural libraries are "an important entity in local communities" that drive literacy and development.

Nevertheless, limitations must be addressed. Infrastructural support (e.g. funding for new books, high-speed internet, computer facilities) and human capacity building (training for librarians in ICT and student engagement) are critical. Strengthening collaborations—with schools, NGOs, and government education programs—can amplify the libraries' reach. Initiatives like Tamil Nadu's linking of schools and libraries have shown promise; expanding these linkages would create more consistent learning environments.

In conclusion, the Idappadi case affirms that rural libraries have vast untapped potential. If modernized and better integrated into the educational ecosystem, they can continue to enable stu-

dents' personal growth and academic success. As one regional education policy report notes, "Libraries have the potential to address shortcomings in public schools" by nurturing reading habits and information skills. It is therefore imperative for policymakers and communities to invest in these institutions. With robust support, Idappadi's libraries can truly fulfill their role as vibrant learning hubs and engines of social change.

References

- [1] Abu, R., Grace, M., & Carroll, M. (2011). The Role of the Rural Public Library in Community Development and Empowerment. *International Journal of the Book*, 8(2).
- [2] Chinnasamy, P. (2023). Awareness and Utilization of Library Resources and Services among the Users of Public Libraries in Theni District of Tamil Nadu (Unpublished PhD thesis). Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.
- [3] IFLA & UNESCO. (2022). Public Library Manifesto 2022. UNESCO Digital Library.
- [4] Mr. V. Ganesan, Ms. A. Sharmi, "Academic Library Automation: The Case Study of Library of Excel College of Pharmacy, Komarapalayam, Salem Dt.", *IJRAR - International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*, E-ISSN 2348-1269, P- ISSN 2349-5138, Volume.12, Issue 4, Page No pp.192-204, December 2025, Available at : <http://www.ijrar.org/IJRAR1EHP019.pdf>
- [5] Yanappa, S. P., & Reddy, A. (2023, March 30). Why libraries are a must in India's public schools. Scroll.in. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/> (See also National Assessment Survey data discussed therein).