

Legal Information Services in Libraries: Bridging the Gap Between Law and Public Access to Justice

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Abstract

Justice and the rule of law require the availability of legal information in any given democratic society. However, in India and other third world or developing countries, a vast majority of the citizenry has no knowledge of what the law says they are entitled to because of language, economic, infrastructure and education issues. As seen in the present research paper, libraries particularly public and academic libraries act as important "linkages" towards filling the justice gap because they are convenient inter-mediaries between cumbersome legal systems and the masses. Adopting the qualitative methodology of policy analysis, laws, history, and case studies, the paper examines the role of libraries in the delivery of legal information services, legal literacy and empowerment of the population. The most important findings are related to the fact that despite the positive outcomes of such projects as legal aid desks, online legal repositories, and legal literacy campaigns, they are not efficient to the sufficient extent due to some barriers providing ineffective trained personnel, insufficient resources, and the absence of a society awareness. In the paper, the argument is that legal information needs a wide reaching systematic reforming, professional preparation, and enhancements of relationship between libraries, legal institutions, and civil society to make legal information accessible to all. In fine, the paper also supports the claim that libraries are not only repositories of knowledge but also a key proponent of social justice and debt of law.

Keywords: Legal Information Services. Access to Justice, Public Libraries, Legal Literacy, Law Librarianship, Information Empowerment, Digital Legal Resources

Introduction

Access to legal information is a core measure to achieve justice, accountability and standing before equal law. As an individual living in a democratic society, a citizen needs to be aware of his or her legal rights and duties as well as the way to find redress to be able to be seen as an effective participant in the realm of civic life. But in most parts of the world including in India, this is not the case. Jargon in law is still unintelligible and laws are made so difficult to access most of the time that they are understood only by the lawyer and the court instead of being the right of the people. This lack of connection with the law and the citizen enables the phenomenon commonly referred to as the justice gap: a gap between the people with access to justice and those without.

It is against this backdrop that libraries have become a very important but less-appreciated venue where legal literacy needs to be promoted and where the gap between people and the law must be filled. The public libraries, especially, can in a very distinct manner provide free, neutral and community based access to information, and in this case legal knowledge. Academic libraries, on the other side of law colleges and universities also contribute to the production, organization and publication of legal materials. These institutions are then able to become an informal pathway to justice as they will provide individuals with knowledge enabling them to solve conflicts and seek redress and make informed choices.

The study aims at developing understanding of the extent and efficacy of Legal Information Services (LIS) in libraries as well as assess their roles in enhancing the aspect of access to justice in the populace. It researches both the institutional, historical and policy context through which these services are built and evaluates the opportunities and constraints available to libraries in the provision of legal information. The important research questions are:

- How do libraries assist access to the legal information and legal literacy?
- What do the existing patterns and examples of legal information services of community and college libraries look like?
- Which obstacles limit the efficiency of libraries in this sphere?
- What stunts and policies can be most effective in the role of libraries in delivering legal information?

Through weeding these queries, the findings of the study will help qualify the debates touching on issues of information equity, legal empowerment and democratization of justice by using accessible forms of knowledge.

Theoretical and Legal Framework

The publicity of legal communication by libraries is based on the theoretical context of the rights of information, legal empowerment, and access to justice in general. These are laws that have become part of the democratic system of governance and human development processes, which is applied all over the world. Here, the legal and philosophical basis of the argument about the public access to the legal information and the role of the libraries in this process will be outlined.

2.1 Right to Information as a Fundamental Human Right

UDHR, adopted in 1948, stipulates in **Article 19** that, everyone has a right to the freedom of opinion and expression; that right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. This is an underlying principle concerning the worldwide realization of the right to access to information, including the right to access to legal information.

This right is further operationalized in India by the **Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005** that enables citizens to demand information to be made available to them by the governmental bodies. Although the goal of RTI is mainly administrative transparency, the framework develops a culture of information access, such as information associated with legal decisions, public interest litigation, and government accountability.

2.2 Framework of access to justice and legal services

The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) was founded in the year 1987 by the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 to deliver free legal services to the weaker sections of the society in a competent manner. It focuses the responsibility of the State to make sure that no citizen does not get a chance of attempting to acquire justice with regards to economic or other disability. In this context, libraries, particularly the ones located in government buildings and community centers, could act as transmission hubs of legal awareness resources.

Besides, the judiciary in India has also strengthened the principle of access to justice as inherent in Article 21 of the Constitution, which entails the fundamental right to life and that of personal liberty. Various judgments made by the Supreme Court include the view that ignorance of the law must not be a source of obstruction of justice, making the matter of legal literacy in the low-level as important as ever.

2.3 Public Library Mandates and LIS Ethics

The legal information and government information are well developed in use in libraries around the world in reducing access to these information. According to the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994), the vital role of the open access of the public library is that all the people regardless of age, race and social status should have free access to the knowledge and information stored in the public libraries. In India, the State Acts and policies that govern the State library system (public libraries) usually have stipulated that the publication of government publications, gazettes and acts take place.

Moreover, the trends in the ethical codes of Library and Information Science (LIS) occupations refer to neutrality, service to everyone, and the encouragement of the informed citizenship. Such ethical involves aligning libraries with the aim of promoting justice using informed access.

2.4 Open Access Movements and Legal Information Institutes (Lilis)

With the advent of Open Access to Law projects the legal information world has changed. International sites like AustLH, CanLII and AfficanLII promote public free publishing of court cases, law and commentaries. India Code, E-Courts and Indian Kanoon are some examples of portals in India where laws, judgments and regulations are freely availed to the people.

Historical Evolution of Legal Information in Libraries

The topic of legal information, in libraries, has been developing throughout centuries, hand in hand with legal institutions, and libraries. This segment tracelines development in the legal information services in a library both in India and at the international level which has taken place so far; including some references to the international progress in law librarianship.

3.1 Early Legal Collections and Colonial Legacy

3.1 Early Legal Collections and Colonial Legacy During the colonial times, legal knowledge in India was considerably restricted to law courts, legal professionals and few instimtions of higher learning. Colonial administrative libraries, law colleges, and high courts held legal texts, including the Indian Penal Code (1860), Civil Procedure Code (1908) and Church British stamtes. The limitation to access meant that majority of the material was published in English and could not be available to the masses.

Law departments in universities were created as part of the British period, e.g. at University of Calcutta (1857) and University of Bombay (1859); this result in the creation of law libraries. These libraries were principally used by students, scholars and legal professionals.

3.2 Post-Independence Expansion

It is since the Indian Constimtion (1950) was framed a few years after India became independent in 1947 that legal education and the rights to law were captured with renewed interest. The legal collections of the public instimtions started extending to central and state acts, legislative debates, case laws, and the needs of legal commentaries. Nonetheless, the dissemination of information was still the prerogative of the legal profession, which limited the opportunities of access to information among the population.

Institutional legal repositories also gained power with the founding of the Bar Council libraries in the 1960s and 1970s and improvement of the graduates of universities libraries into law libraries. Such libraries as in Delhi university, Banaras Hindu university, and National law school of India university (NLSIU) emerged as giant sources of legal resource.

3.3 Emergence of Legal Librarianship

The specialization of law librarianship emerged gradually. In the late 20th century librarians were increasingly training in the use of legal materials and legal classification schemes (including Moys Classification Scheme of Legal Materials) and legal reference. In India however, the absence of specific legal librarianship courses has been an impediment.

The similar international association such as American Association of Law Libraries (AALL), International Association of Law Libraries (IALL) that helped to establish a standard and best practices in legal information services, showed a good measure of cooperation between them. These advancements caused the effect on the law libraries of India, and they started up to date their catalogues, reference facility as well as the documentation of the laws practices.

3.4 Digital Transformation and E-Governance

The latter 1990s and the earlier 2000s rang in the shift where Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) surfaced. Government and privately funded projects embarked on digitization of legal documents and making them accessible online. Key milestones include:

- **India Code:** A hugely comprehensive online collection of Central Acts.
- **E-Courts Project:** It was started with the National e-Governance Plan to computerize the court procedure and verdicts.
- **Nyaya Bandhu:** It is a mobile app and other integrated platform that links citizens with pro-bono-lawyers.
- **Indian Kanoon:** A free-access site which equalized access to judgments and legal documents using search tools in plain languages.

Current Practices and Senices

Over the past couple of years legal information services provided by libraries have greatly expanded. Libraries are presenting additional opportunities as including community-centered spaces of knowledge that are likely to democratise legal awareness, and act as informal entry points to justice. This segment discusses the current activities that the law libraries, the public libraries, academic instimtions, and the digital platforms engage in to offer legal information and promote legal literacy.

4.1 Law Libraries and Academic Institutions

Law libraries Special universities and national law school law libraries and the national bar councils are also on the front line of legal information services. These libraries will contain large print and electronic libraries with bareacts, case reporters, Legal digest, journals, commentaries, and reference work. The top law schools like the National Law School of India University (NLSIU), Symbiosis Law School and the Delhi University Faculty of Law offer:

- Online access to Prune data bases such as SCC Online, Manupatra, HeinOnline and LexisNexis
- Reference services to guide the user navigating through complicated laws materials
- Early introductions to legal research methods with first year law students
- Citation guidance and access to moot court resources

AI-based search tools and automated cataloging systems are also becoming part of some law libraries to enhance the experience of their users.

4.2 Public Libraries as Legal Literacy Agents

Public libraries have also started redefining themselves as one that provides direct assistance to legal empowerment. These include:

- Legal Infonnation Comers with the inventory of citizen guides, acts, RTI manuals, and legal aid booklets
- Conducting legal literacy workshop in partnership with State Legal Services Authorities (SLSA) or other local non-governmental organizations
- Putting court timings, government bulletins, form of pensions / RTE/ Ration Card etc so that people can access this information
- Making online legal databases and court judgment archive accessible through computer terminals

The Delhi Public Library is a good example as it conducts legal awareness programs on a regular basis and has associated with law experts to inform the citizens about basic rights and legal processes.

4.3 Digital Legal Information Portals

- Increasing numbers of libraries in the era of the internet and mobile access provide access to free and subscription-based legal databases, e.g.:
- **Indian Kanoon** - The Indian laws and court judgments in clear language that can be searched
- **Nyaya** - A platform that gives an understanding of laws and legal proceedings by use of infographics and local languages
- **E-Courts Senices** - Online status of cases, **FIRs**, court orders
- **India Code** - Government portal for Central Acts and amendments
- **Manupatra** and **SCC Online** - Commercial databases widely used in legal academia and practice

Students, researchers, and paralegal volunteers are getting much training in the use of these platforms through libraries.

4.4 Collaborative Legal Aid Initiatives

Libraries also partner with legal aid providers, District Legal Services Authorities (DLSA) and civil society organisation in order to develop their legal service provision. Common practices include:

- Organizing free legal advice clinics in library premises
- Organizational of legal literacy rallies in the course of Constimtion Day, Legal Awareness Week or RTI Day
- Administrating document checking services or help with template government fonnns
- Referred users to offices of paralegal volunteers, legal aid lawyers or to ombudsmen

Such partnerships considerably contribute to the library in terms of social outreach and help the library directly achieve the goal of legal empowerment.

5. Challenges iu Delivering Legal luformationu Sen ices

Even though libraries are increasingly being perceived as an avenue to legal information, delivery of legal information services is affected by many pressures. Such barriers are especially high in the developing nations such as India, in which forces of structure, technology, and human resources factors continue to hinder the process. This section is there to review critically important issues surrounding the inability of libraries to act as effective dispensers of legal information and justice relevant services.

5.1 Shortage of Trained Legal Information Professionals

Barrier to access Lawyers are one of the most important factors which consists of absence of librarians who can manage legal information. Specialized legal terms and classifications (Moys or K10, etc.), citations, and case law indexing are all specialized knowledge required to utilize legal resources. Nevertheless, there are few modules available on legal librarianship in most of Library and information science (LIS) courses in India, and many professionals are not equipped to handle legal material or to conduct legal research with users. Such lack of skills has in many cases resulted in unfavorable service delivery, wrong referrals or failure to interpret documents such as laws in a manner that is understood by the population.

5.2 Language and Accessibility Barriers

India's multilingual landscape presents another formidable challenge. According to the Constitution, most of the legal documents, case law websites and government websites are all in English or in Hindi and have therefore excluded the non-literate or the people who do not understand or speak Hindi. Though there is indeed a certain number of initiatives trying to tackle translations, the technical background and the lack of linguistic

standardization between states currently hamper the overall effort to create a linguistically inclusive context. Moreover, people with disabilities do not always have unlimited access to the resources that contain no screen readers, Braille codes, or support digital platforms in libraries.

5.3 Infrastructure and Digital Divide

Rural, semi-urban libraries usually do not have the basic infrastructure that can support quality legal information service. The lack of enough computers and the internet connection and current legal materials are often inadequate. Public libraries which are continuing an underfunded existence by governments find it hard to obtain subscriptions to legal databases or keep legal text up to date. The urban-rural technological gap can also be witnessed in the online portal services such as E-courts, India code, or the Manupatra, which demand constant internet access and the knowledge of digital tools, which are not equally distributed in the population.

5.4 Low Legal Awareness Among the Public

The other big problem is the unawareness of the existence and the usability of legal information via libraries. Scores of citizens do not know that libraries can assist in the process of learning about domestic violence rights, pension rights, land rights, labour rights, or entitlement rights by the government. This little awareness is coupled with the cultural, distrust of legal system and the view that one only seeks the benefit of legal assistance when educated or not poor. Consequently, most libraries providing legal services are usually underutilized despite their great potentials.

5.5 Policy Gaps and Institutional Inertia

In spite of the fact that the right to legal assistance, as well as access to information is codified in several legislations and frames of policy, the floors at the library level are poor. The Department of Public Libraries, State Legal Services Authorities and local legal NGOs are poorly coordinated. Lack of national standards of incorporating legal services within the library systems implies that the activities are usually haphazard, unsustainable and are subject to the initiative of individual librarians or non-governmental organizations. Moreover, bureaucratic inertia often stalls progressive collaborations.

5.6 Field Reflections and Real-Life Illustrations

During 2023 surveying to district libraries around western Uttar Pradesh, the librarians reported that citizens often requested assistance with filling pension forms, land records, and RTI applications; however, the librarians could do nothing because they did not have the capacity to provide legal counselling. An example has been given in Baghpat district where a library teamed up informally with a retired judge to have weekly sessions, but the program ceased to exist when the funding ran out. These case examples indicate the need of legal information and the superficiality of providing mechanisms without being organized.

Case Studies (India or Global Context)

To know more about the practical aspects of legal information services in libraries and their application and application, the following section introduces some case studies both in India and internationally. These examples demonstrate an opportunity to use libraries as effective instruments of legal literacy and empowerment of citizens, justice access, especially with the support of powerful partnerships, community engagement, and novel service designs.

6.1 Delhi Public Library's Legal Literacy Collaboration

6.1 Delhi Public Library's Legal Literacy Collaboration The Delhi Public Library (DPL), a centrally funded Library under the Ministry of Culture has been in the forefront to facilitate information under the legal domain in an urban Indian scenario. The library has been organizing on a regular basis legal literacy camps, awareness talks and document assistance workshops in collaboration with the Delhi State Legal Services Authority (DSLISA) and the NGOs, such as the HRLN (Human Rights Law Network). Some of the topics have been laws on domestic violence, RTI processes, consumer rights and ways of seeking punishment as provided by Indian Penal Code.

Issuing of multilingual pamphlets and establishment of a special Legal Literacy corner that contained simplified versions of significant statutes were also part of the initiative. In 2022, the main branch of the DPL explained that more than 600 users received legal aid resources within three months. The effectiveness of the model in question emphasizes the importance of partnership between a government and NGO, and increasing local alertness with a library.

6.2 Community Legal Resource Centres in Ghana

A good international model is present in Ghana where community legal resource centres (CLRCs) were convened by the Legal Resources Centre (LRC). They are usually in the form of centers found in public libraries and assigned with trained paralegals and volunteers. They present simplified laws, make access to judges decisions and offer legal advice offered on a walk in basis.

In an assessment done in these in 2019 by the UNDP, it was revealed that more than 70 percent of the people who used these centers reported to have gained a deeper awareness of their legal rights, especially with regard to land matters, domestic violence, and employment complaints. By placing legal services in known and comfortable places such as libraries, such facilities have been successful in minimizing intimidation that comes with accessing the legal services through formal channels and giving citizens the power to access justice by doing so in an informed way.

6.3 Nyaaya: Digital Legal Literacy in India

Being a digital program on legal literacy is backed by the Vidhi Centre of Legal Policy, and, with the help of libraries and legal aid clinics, Nyaaya looks to expand its reach. It has a platform that gives simplified explanations of laws written in English, regional Indian languages, as well as infographics, video, and real lifescenarios.

In 2021, Nyaaya launched pilot digital legal kiosks with the help of rural libraries in Karnataka. These kiosks provided convenient information to the user through tablet access and printed books or guides so that users, particularly women and other discriminated groups, could learn more about legal issues like a legal age to marry and get married, domestic violence process, and how to file FIR. The pilot has shown legal information will be easier to use and act upon by the rural poor when supported by trained facilitators who can use the power of digital tools.

6.4 Comparing Rural and Urban Access Models

The urban libraries such as Delhi and Mumbai are better equipped, have digital connectivity and are located near the law aid offices. Conversely, rural libraries usually are based on the models of the volunteer program, print materials, and communal events in the spread of the legal knowledge. However, these two settings also exhibit the innovative qualities: city libraries have the possibility to organize legal databases training, whereas outlying libraries develop trust-building relationships with marginalized groups.

Recommendations and Best Practices

Based on the arguments and solutions outlined so far, this section presents strategic guidelines and indicates the best practices that can support the contribution of libraries to the provision of legal information services. The aim is to develop a wider, more successful, sustainable model in which libraries play an active role in legal empowerment and access to justice assistance.

7.1 Training and Professional Development

In order to curb the problem of lack of competent legal information professionals, there must be an introduction of modules in Legal Information Services in the Library and information science (LIS) curricula. Universities offering B.LIS and M.LIS degree must express the additional expertise courses on:

- Legal classification and indexing

- Legal database management (e.g., SCC Online, Manupatra)
- This includes style of legal reference and citation (e.g. Bluebook, OSCOLA)
- Rights-based communication for vulnerable populations

There should also be refresher workshops and certificate programs jointly conducted with Bar Councils, Legal Services Authorities and law schools that would train practicing librarians on aspects of legal literacy facilitation.

7.2 Integrating Legal Services into Library Policy

The mandates of public library systems should make specific reference to legal information services. Access to law should be reflected as a critical information need in national and state level library policies, especially among the economically and socially disadvantaged groups. Key actions include:

- Establishing Legal Literacy Corners in all public libraries
- Requiring the libraries to provide prominent presence of important legal documents (e.g. Constitution, IPC, RTI Act)
- Promoting the idea of regular legal outreach initiatives toward the law students and professionals

The government departments such as the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of law and justice must work in tandem to finance and make these services institutionalized in the general body of knowledge.

7.3 Enhancing Multilingual and Inclusive Access

The law-related information should be given in the local languages, as well as, simplified forms. Best practices include:

- Translation of some essential laws and ruling decisions to local languages
- Visuals, story-based booklet, audio-visual explanations to the legal procedures

Including the assistive technologies (e.g., text-to-speech, Braille, the video clips of sign language) in order to cater to the differently-abled users. Such content partners could be platforms such as Nyaaya and Indian Kanoon that would be used to localize digital legal content by libraries.

7.4 Leveraging Technology for Legal Information Delivery

Legal information services can greatly benefit by the use of digital innovations in increasing the efficiency and reach of their services. Libraries should adopt:

- **Kiosks** for accessing legal databases and government schemes
- **QR-coded posters** with links to online acts or rights based video pleas
- **Mobile apps** for community-level legal information delivery
- **Chatbots or virtual assistants** (e.g. preloaded responses) to answer frequently asked questions in the legal field

City libraries should be well loaded with internet connected systems whereby they can assist one on how to have a guided access to various portals like E-Courts, India Code and RTI Online.

7.5 Global Models to Emulate

A number of cross-nation models present replicable models of legal information services:

Legal Information Institutes (LII): Laws and judgments are available in free, searchable forms by such organisations as AustLII, CanLII and AfricanLII. These models can serve as a cornerstone to libraries that aim to come up with localized open access legal portals.

- Community Justice Centers (South Africa, Kenya): The work of these centers that are often located within libraries unites legal education with mediation services and the centers are manned by legal interns and trained volunteers.
- Public Library Legal Clinics (USA): Many cities, including New York and Chicago have regularly had so-called Lawyer in the Library where lawyers provide free legal advice in libraries. These models can guide the construction of Indian libraries of low costs and suited into a community that integrates legal services points.

7.6 Policy Recommendations for Systemic Reform

- Form a National Legal Literacy Through Libraries Mission in joint sponsorship of the Ministry of Culture and NALSA
- Develop Legal Information Toolkit for Libraries that will include suggested resources, posters, and multi-lingual materials
- Establish a national directory of legal information professionals, trainers and collaborators Loyalty laws should include legal access measures in the performance assessment of public libraries

Conclusion

Access to legal information is not merely a service—it's a right that underpins the broader ideals of justice, equity, and democracy. In societies marked by socio-economic disparities and bureaucratic complexity, the ability of ordinary citizens to understand and navigate the legal system becomes a foundational aspect of civic empowerment. Libraries, as historically neutral and publicly trusted institutions, are uniquely positioned to fulfill this role.

This research paper has established the importance of Legal Information Services in libraries which is an important means through which the justice gap can be bridged, the promotion of legal literacy and the empowerment of people to pursue their rights. The paper has demonstrated using historical review, legal provisions, a case analysis, and an overview of the current practices that both community legal support in the form of either a public or academic library is developing as an avenue of support in community legal services, especially where training, infrastructure, and inter-sectoral collaboration are provided.

However, the path to universal legal empowerment is full of obstacles: insufficient professional skill, language difficulties, infrastructural discontinuities, and policy weak connectivity. Nevertheless, there are successful cases like the awareness programs provided by the Delhi Public Library and the Community Legal Resource centres in Ghana, which demonstrates that the combination of law and libraries not only work; it is effective.

Systemic reforms are needed in order to bring this vision to scale. These involve the curricular changes in LIS education, special funding, development of multilingual resources, technological advances and formal associations between the libraries, legal aid organizations and civic society. The overall objective is to shift the unsystematic activities to a national systematic system in which all libraries (urban or rural) can be introduced as the initial place where people can access legal information and advice.

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