The Impacts of COVID-19 on the Use of Academic Libraries and the Emerging Trends of Digital Libraries in South Asia

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Abstract

Human history is full of many bitter examples of natural calamities which affected mankind with heavy losses. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most disastrous calamities which momentously impacted every sphere of life, especially, higher education and the use of academic libraries. This pandemic instigated the worldwide subsequent lockdown policies imposed by various governments. These policies badly devastated the physical use of the academic libraries. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the faculty and students who are reliant on the physical use of libraries have badly suffered. This temporary postponement of the in-person operation of libraries has opened up new challenges for the staff of libraries. Though the libraries were closed for the faculty and students, but the library staff decided to adopt digital methods to fulfil the needs of faculty and students. During this pandemic, the trend of digital libraries and resources has emerged. The academic institutions adopted the policy to work from home and online classes for the students. This restriction opens up new dimensions to explore the knowledge from digital sources and libraries. Those libraries which were fully aware of the need for digital resources had already managed a huge collection of digital sources. In the use of digital libraries, there was a trend to remain up-to-date with modern developments, especially in March 2020, when there was a worldwide lockdown. This article is an attempt to highlight the use of academic libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic and about the new trends of digital libraries.

Key Words: **Impacts of COVID-19, Digitalization of Libraries, Libraries in South Asia. Benefits of Digitalization.**

Introduction

Throughout the course of COVID-19, this pandemic has caused the drastic reshaping of the use of libraries and societies (Huremovic, 2019). This was the first disease that took hold of the world in this digital age (Ali, Naeem, & Bhatti, 2021). In previous pandemics, there was no need for any lockdown and challenges of social distance (Baxter et al., 2021). During this period the economy not only a single state but also the whole world suffered badly (Kanmony, 2020). Mostly, it was telling for the under developing countries and emerging nationalities (Rogers, 2020). According to the instructions of the World Health Organization (WHO), this included in instructions the closing of educational institutions such as schools, universities, colleges and their libraries (Organization, 2020). The public libraries were affected in a similar manner preventing the user from accessing printed material for their research for an indefinite time (Hutson, 2020). In Pakistan, office work ceased and the lockdown was ordered and law enforcement agencies took serious measures in the goodwill of the public health (Ahmed, Ahmed, Ahmed, & Ahmed, 2021).
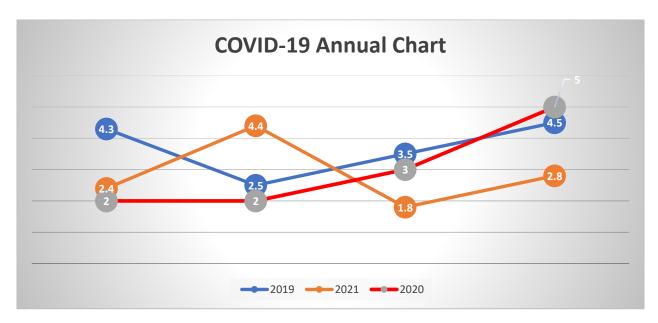

Figure 01. Annual Rise and Fall Chart of COVID-19 Cases

Digital libraries have been becoming an alternative to modern public libraries, many of which have undertaken the digitization of printer materials, the creation of e-books and multimedia contents (Papy, 2016). As this digital content steadily grows in parallel with technological advances, so does the growth of its users, as it is a practice in South Asia. Now it is the basic necessity of any library to digitalize its physical resources (Songphan Choemprayoung, 2017). In

this feeling of uncertainty and the era of social distancing, it is a basic necessary to manage all resources to be available online (Pakistan, 2020).

Now, it is the basic challenge for the small libraries that have limited resources to digitalize their collections. The South Asian organizations which are working for the promotion of knowledge should look into the matter and provide financial help (UNCEF, 2020). No doubt, as compared to the world population, South Asia has great impact in the world academia and during this pandemic the population of this region suffered heavy fatalities.

Impacts of COVID-19 and Emergence of Digital Libraries

COVID-19 has affected day to day life and the global economy. Countries has to lock their population and banned the social gathering of the people to stop the spread of the virus (Ajey Lele, 2020). This pandemic has also suffered the educational institutions and their libraries. Most importantly the process of educational learning of the students, especially, their on-campus classes has suffered dreadfully (Kretz, Payne, & Reijerkerk, 2021).

Apart from the economic setbacks the world has suffered from business disruption, trade and movements (Hal Brands, 2020). Now the 'identification of the virus at an early stage is vital to control the spread of the virus, because it rapidly spreads from person to person' (Tooze, 2020). This interruption has created a major gap in the educational leaning of students. Moreover, it has badly affected the process of internal assessment and physical assessment of the students.

Although, educational institutions tried to modify these services, procedures and operations, but these institutions failed to achieve their maximum targets. During this pandemic, libraries continuously supported the academic research and activities. The educational institutions tried to adopt the research activities through remote and virtual teaching. This process was immediately backed by the libraries to support the faculty and students (Hutchinson, 2019). It was very challenging for libraries to meet the both ends by keep managing the e-sources and safeguarding the health of staff. It was a challenging task for the libraries to organize off campus access to the e-sources and physical sources (Weiss, 2016). To manage the needs of the students, the library staff constantly organized online meetings with the students. This communication resulted in a fruitful way and bring a new revolution of digitalization of the library sources.
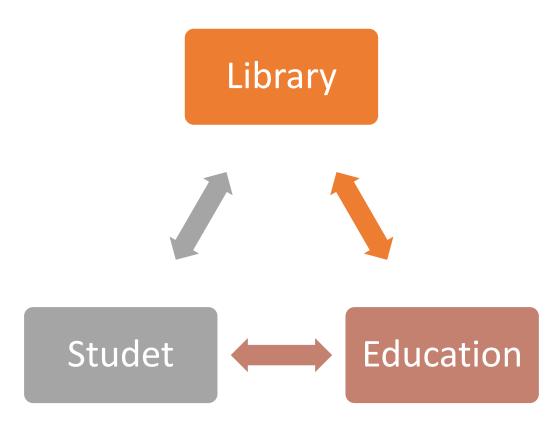
Figure 02. The Cycle of Library, Student and Education

Basically, the major impression of this pandemic has affected the circulation of the libraries. Most of the public and institutional libraries have abandoned the physical attendance of persons or users (Richards, 2020). Because it is very difficult to manage the social distancing in the small and congested libraries (Hennesy & Adams, 2021).

In exceptional cases, the academic faculty is allowed in the educational institutional libraries, but with limited numbers and proper SOPs of COVID-19 (Australia, 2020). In this whole scenario, the private and the public libraries have suffered heavy financial losses. Because it has affected their regular membership, which was their main source of income, now it has reduced to the limited numbers (Weltbank, 2020). These financial inequities in financial benefits have created an uncertainty among the investors to invest in libraries. The educational and economic recovery efforts should consider the libraries as an essential part of the educational setup. The investment in libraries plays a significant role in the achievements of students (Oddone, 2015). Further, the role of the library in the economic recovery, after the pandemic, cannot be denied. A library can be used as a financial recovery for educational and economic equity. Additionally, the computer's

labs of libraries can easily be used for the entrepreneurial purposes to enhance the earning capacity of students and libraries.
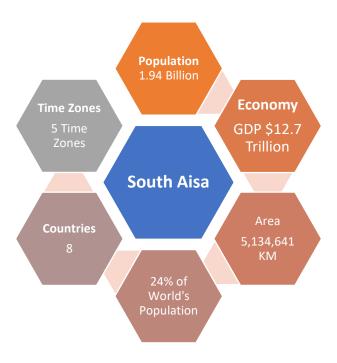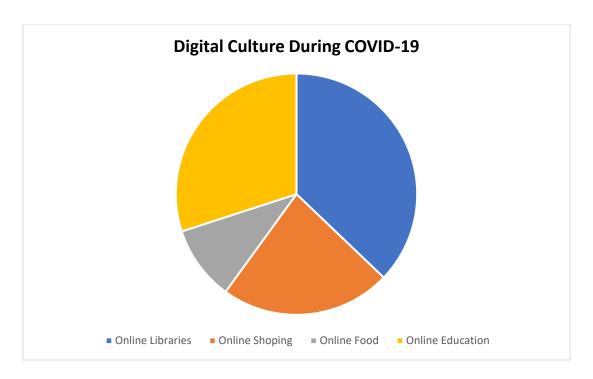

Figure 03. An introduction of South Asia

However, in previous public emergencies, public libraries have focused mainly on the preservation of their collections and maintaining normal services (Zach, 2011). Apart from this the libraries have to prepare for any crisis and have experienced serious consequences, such as natural disasters, destroying collections and theft (P. Ngulube, 2006). The South Asian region is mostly consisting of under developing countries and they have a limitation of sources (Wirtz, Müller, & Weyerer, 2021).

Further, many public libraries have been unprepared for the new information age, where the younger generation of scholars and library users rely on modern techniques (Wyatt, Leorke, & McQuire, 2021). Many prominent South Asian libraries are being unacquainted with the importance of their available resources. Many are failed to create an awareness of available services through their web pages and online catalogues (E. Sahoo, 2014). Furthermore, as compared to the rural libraries the urban libraries are more advanced in South Asia. The most of the South Asian region is under development and this is the prime factor that the rural libraries are lacking in the modern techniques and equipment. The famous financial agencies should finance the rural libraries to uplift their system.

Digital Culture During COVID-19

■ Online Libraries ■ Online Shoping ■ Online Food ■ Online Education
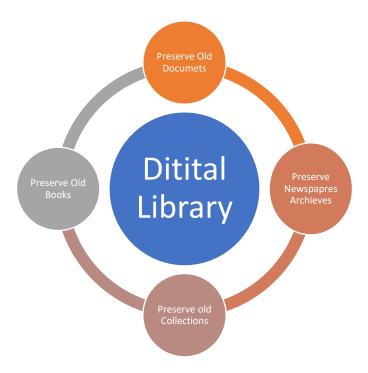
Now, it is very important for the endurance of public and private libraries to reconsider their methods, techniques and strategies (Warwick, 2021). In South Asia, many prominent libraries have many prominent collections in the shape of e-sources (Hennesy & Adams, 2021). But, numerous libraries are lacking behind in the scanning of monographs and prominent publications, like collections of old and rare books, hand-written manuscripts and non-book materials (Iqal & Idrees, 2021).

During this pandemic, many prominent libraries have started the program of digitalization of the sources (Agosti, 2010). The primary goal of this digitalization program is the preservation of the most unique and rare items of these libraries.(Leith, 2021) Quite a lot of libraries in India and Pakistan have very rare collections on their freedom movements, also have a collection of prominent papers on British Colonial rule in India and South Asian countries (SAARC, 2020). The digitalization of these collections will provide the access to international users and along with it the long-term safety of the documents will be assured (Nyitray & Reijerkerk, 2021).

The Trend of Digital Libraries

The digitalization of library is a procedure in which 'collections are converted from hard copies to electronic copies' (Hussain, 2012). The basic aims of this 'digitalization are: to enhance access and improve the preservation of library materials' (K.MaKook, 2004). Now in South Asia,

this is an emerging trend among the libraries to digitalize their resources in an ongoing course of the pandemic.

There are three major aims of digitalization endeavors. First, 'there is a need to preserve endangered library resources'. Second, the enhancement in the effectiveness of 'information and search mechanism'. Third, digitalization improved access to library resources from the national to the international level (Stefano, 2001).

Most libraries are digitalizing 'materials that might be lost in the future such as old manuscripts, research projects, photos, analogue maps, official papers, government records and rare recordings etc.' (Arms, 2001). Digitalization is useful in preserving precious materials and records, helpful to 'making high-quality digital images available electronically will reduce wear and tear of fragile items' (Iris Xie, 2016).

However, 'the digital copy should not be seen as a replacement' of the original document, therefore, 'the original piece should be cared for even after digitalization' (Nyitray & Reijerkerk, 2021). It will provide the preservation to remains a secondary benefit of digital projects (Todaro, 2014). During this pandemic, it is a prominent practice among the South Asian libraries that these libraries are continuously busy in 'digitalizing the archives of newspapers, artefacts, maps, coins, art, music, literature, historical records', images of national and international interest (Library,

2020). The digitalization of historical events will provide the 'public and researchers to view, read and hear the photographs, speeches and documents' (Dion Hoe-Lian Gog, 2007) (Wilcox & Monobe, 2021).

The research mechanisms for the 'information in the traditional library system' are very slow and insufficient. Most of the libraries in South Asian countries have wiped out and are uncoordinated due to their old systems (Warwick, 2021). Now it is the need of time to adopt modern measures to compete the world (Rafner et al., 2021). Libraries are constantly considering this measure to make accessing materials un-necessitate physical contact by the users (Adam Jatowt, 2019). Online web pages 'can be made to existing digital libraries, this will enable users to use materials that are not available in the local library'(De León, Corbeil, & Corbeil, 2021). In this era of globalization, technology is transferring rapidly to the underdeveloped countries. In the upcoming few years, this transfer of technology will highly revolutionize South Asian libraries. The new trends of digitalization are providing the financial relief to the underdeveloped counties and the cost of digital sources is much lower than the physical sources. Moreover, the process of digitalization brings a library into the international community where it can be contacted with many other renounced libraries. The trend of digitalization is speedily emerging in the prominent libraries of South Asia. The administration of these libraries is fully convinced that a digital document can easily be available and accessible through multi interfaces. A library can also set restrictions on the access of the documents as per the policy, open-access or paid-access. Mainly, the rare documents are set on paid-access to meet the financial needs of the libraries. Now it is worldwide acknowledged phenomenon that a digital medium plays much greater role in the promotion of knowledge.

Digital libraries allow users to search for all 'collections rapidly and comprehensively from anywhere at any time' (Hasin-Hasi Chen, 2012). It 'makes the invisible to be visible'. Numeral users can access the library sources at a time and there are no restrictions (Brine & Knight, 2021). A user can use a library without travelling to a library that possesses the hard copies of concerned materials (Songphan C, 2017) (Leith, 2021). A digital library can be made for a region or open for the world (Nyitray & Reijerkerk, 2021). The biggest benefit of the digital library is the tremendous increase in the use of digital collections.

Conclusion

Now in the modern age, the libraries are sources of wisdom in form of recorded information, especially for the researchers and users. It is validated that the digital technology has made it more stress-free and at ease to use library sources reliably from home or office. Now, this is the most challenging task of the financial agencies, whose basic duty is to preserve the valuable sources and collection, must provide financial assistance to the old libraries in South Asia, especially, which are facing the financial crises during the pandemic. There must be financial assistance for them to digitalize their sources and collections. The South Asian countries, the members of the Commonwealth, have the colonial records and their libraries should be digitalized on war footing basis.

Numerous prominent libraries haven't proper facilities of a digital library's architecture, systems, tools and technologies, metadata, interoperability, digital content and collections, standers and knowledge organization system, legal information, users and usability. These are the modern trends and without these trends, the survival of a library is almost impossible. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the process of investment in the digital resource management. The library leaders are very conscious to provide the remote assistant to their users and very keen to justify their position as 'well-positioned'. Moreover, there is a need to connect the local libraries with the international centers for South Asian studies. This will revolutionize the research on South Asian history, politics, economy, society, religion and culture. Furthermore, it will be a constructive step for the indigenous researcher of South Asia to utilize the documents of the international institutions which have the documents and collections on South Asia.

The academic libraries, especially, associated with the educational institutions are facing the heavy cut in their financial budgets. This situation is creating an uncertainty among the lower-staff of these libraries. Definitely, the financial benefits of the staff have severely suffered and the long-term projects of the prominent libraries have been halted. The digitalization of the sources is the only option left for the libraries to avoid the financial setbacks. Moreover, the new trends of the digital libraries will be proved as the game changer in South Asia for the libraries and users.

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