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2021

## Continuing of Library Services During the Covid-19 Outbreak in Indian Academic and Research Libraries: A Survey

Saroja Kumar Panda

*Central University of Rajasthan, saroj4kumar@gmail.com*

Atul Bhatt

*Gujarat University Ahmedabad, dratulbhatt@gmail.com*

Vijaykumar M

*Central University of Rajasthan, vijayakumar@curaj.ac.in*

Ravindra Pratap Singh

*Central University of Rajasthan, stats.rpsingh@gmail.com*

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Panda, Saroja Kumar; Bhatt, Atul; M, Vijaykumar; and Singh, Ravindra Pratap, "Continuing of Library Services During the Covid-19 Outbreak in Indian Academic and Research Libraries: A Survey" (2021).

*Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 6066.

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# **Continuing of Library Services During the Covid-19 Outbreak in Indian Academic and Research Libraries: A Survey**

## **Abstract**

Libraries are considered the heart of academic and research institutions. Without a library, academics will have no progress. Though the digital library is a frequent buzzword for libraries and information centres in the present era, traditional services, especially in public and academic libraries, still exist. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all types of libraries have been equally affected. The paper discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the continuity of library services and access in the Indian academic and research libraries. It describes how the libraries safeguard the resources and staff and examine the difficulties and challenges faced by the libraries during the COVID-19 outbreak. It details the adoption of services for the benefit of the communities that support the educational mission. The study is carried out by administering an online questionnaire to about 58 libraries and analyzed. In conclusion, the paper proposes firm ideas and recommendations to deal with the pandemic situation like COVID-19 and continue the library support to users.

## **Keywords**

COVID-19, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Academic Libraries, WFH, Remote Access, India

## **Introduction**

The world considers that the library is a social institution within an academic setup that provides numerous personal and specialized services to its user community. Top educational institutions worldwide now open their libraries not less than twelve hours a day and 24\*7 basis during the exams (Ellis, 2002). Nowadays, libraries invest more time and money in digitizing their collections and provide online services to readers. However, digital libraries cannot replace traditional libraries (Abbas & Faiz, 2013). People continue to publish in printed and electronic forms, and therefore conventional library services exist alongside digital libraries (Ogunsola & Library, 2011). Printed books are preferred for their easy usage and reading (Rose-Wiles, 2013, Piramanayagam & Seal, 2020). Borrowing printed or physical books strongly support the classroom teaching-learning method, and it is a standard service in academic institutions. By the sudden wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire library operations predominantly affected. The libraries discovered a digital way of disseminating information and services to the user's community through Email, cloud storage, video and audio conferencing, chat, webinars or remote desktops etc. However, reaching remote users is not easy for libraries during a pandemic, whereas it requires technology, infrastructure, and changing staff mindset. The paper describes how libraries deal with the challenging situation during the pandemic and continued services to their user community.

## **Review of Literatures**

The author conducted a thorough review of the previous literature published on the library responses to the COVID-19 pandemics across the globe. With the explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic, Governments worldwide imposed a closure on the doors of academics and because students health is of utmost priority. Academics have been affected by either a budget cut or a lack of human resources. As a result, the standard library services are inaccessible to users. Though the libraries were adopted various measures, still struggling to recover the earlier workflows. Academics officially closed the library buildings and maintained roster duty with fifty per cent of staff, and the remaining staff sent work from home (Walsh & Rana, 2020). Somewhere the library buildings were accessible with only one door open (Mehta & Wang, 2020). At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the service provided by the academic libraries includes mainly issue/return, no-dues, settlements of fines, etc. After the lockdown imposed, libraries moved to off-campus services with Zoom-with-a-Librarian, remote access service etc. (Ma, 2020). No-dues extended online through Email and messages, borrowing privileges made flexible for users, and fines waved due to the shutting down the doors of academics for students because of COVID-19 pandemic. Library consultations significantly shifted, and many libraries halted face-to-face interactions due to COVID-19 (Anderson et al., 2021). Libraries are required to assess, modify, and expand existing online offerings rather than requiring them to start from scratch (Walsh & Rana, 2020).

If we look at the global viewpoint, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the university libraries in Pakistan engaged with users by WhatsApp, phone, and Email, raised awareness through public health education, provide support to medical staff and researchers, and offered ongoing traditional services (Rafiq et al., 2021). They also delivered scanned papers of needed books and articles to regular library patrons all around the pandemic (Ali & Gatiti, 2020). Polish University libraries used social media as a tool to engage with patrons during the COVID-19 pandemic. As per the survey result, Facebook was the most frequently used, followed by Instagram, Twitter, and youtube to a smaller extent (Gmiterek, 2021). In the UK, academic libraries supported the student's mental health and well-being because digital learning stressed students as students struggled to adjust to a greater reliance on e-resources (Cox & Brewster, 2020). Academic libraries in Zimbabwe managed to offer digital and virtual library services; however, they faced challenges, including a lack of internet connectivity to interact with patrons (Tsekea & Chigwada, 2020). One of the innovative practices carried out by Indonesian libraries implementing health protocols in all aspects, such as furniture and library programs changing to online during the pandemic (Winata et al., 2020). Likewise, academics worldwide extended emergency eLearning to avoid the possible second wave of COVID-19 (Murphy, 2020). The literature reviews indicate how libraries worldwide faced the challenges and continue services to communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and support the educational mission. This paper will discuss the impact of

COVID-19 in Indian academic libraries and libraries' preparedness for post-COVID situations from the librarian's perspective.

### **COVID-19 and Academics in India**

In India, the first COVID-19 case was reported on January 27, 2020, in Kerala, when a 20 years old girl infected while returning from Wuhan city, China, to her home state Kerala, was studying at Wuhan University. Since then, the cases have continually been reported in various parts of the country. The Govt. of India declared its first nationwide lockdown on March 25, 2020, for 21 days. That was the time when the case was approximately 500. Later, the infection cases increased quickly and doubled in 6 days, negatively impacting the economy, human life, and the environment (Ghosh et al., 2020). Looking at the situation, the Government imposed strict social distancing and lockdown rules on April 15 for up to May 3, 2020, with conditional relaxations(Lockdown 2.0). Further, the lockdown was extended by two weeks until May 17(Lockdown 3.0), and the 4<sup>th</sup> lockdown was effected from May 18, 2020, to May 31, 2020.

Meanwhile, the Govt. of India classified the 733 districts into three zones- red, green and orange to combat the spread of the COVID-19. By the end of Lockdown 3.0, the Government recognized 130 districts as 'Red Zone', 284 districts as 'Orange Zone' and 319 districts in the 'Green Zone'. The entire HEI's declared closed with fifty percent staff. The research activities at academics and research laboratories became slow, and academic libraries' doors closed. Staff perceived the Indian Government and the local authorities' advisories issued from time to time while working from home(WFH). However, WFH was not comfortable for the staff as time, place, and service are concerned because physical service is vital in academics. In libraries, general services like library reading areas, check-in and check-out of library materials and student-librarian interactions didn't meet user's access. Library staff encountered several challenges to fulfill the users' needs. The librarian's role significantly changed from a hybrid library to a completely virtual one. After the partial lifting of lockdown, the academic services, including the library, resumed phase-wise.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objective of the present study are as follow:

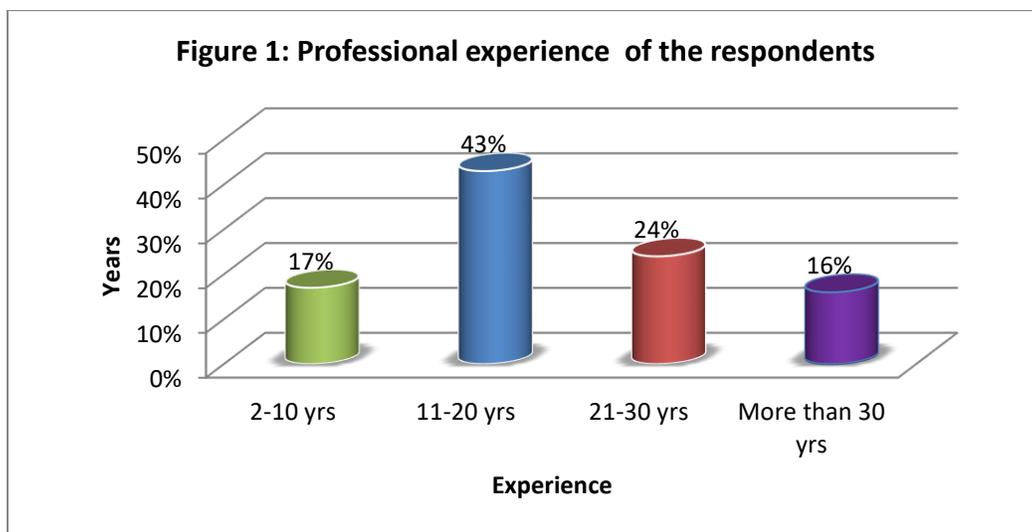
1. To study how the COVID-19 pandemic changed the library operations
2. To assess the continuity of academic library services and the measures adopted to safeguard the resources and staff in the Indian academic libraries during the COVID-19 outbreak.
3. To identify the difficulties faced by the Indian libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic
4. To discuss the initiatives adopted by the Indian libraries during the COVID-19 outbreak to foster the library service, and
5. To discover the library challenges and preparedness after the post lockdown

## Methodology

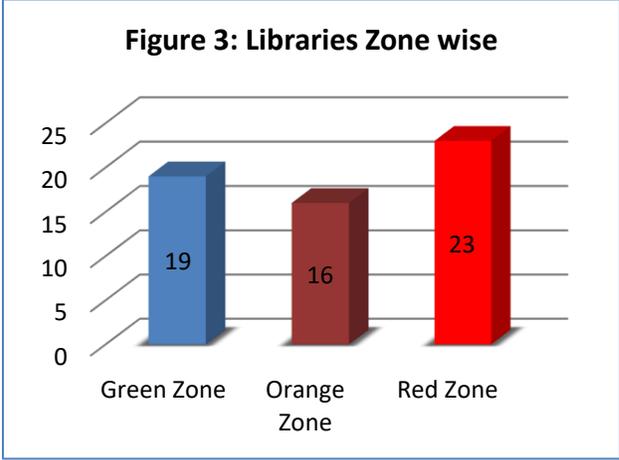
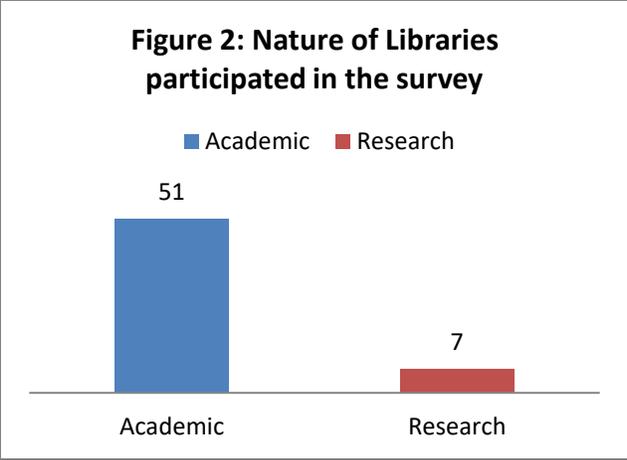
A survey questionnaire was administered through an online Google form to collect the data from Indian academic and research libraries in the mid of 2020. The questionnaire comprises a list of 25 open-ended questions relating to the services, measures, and initiatives adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the institution's educational mission. The feedback was collected from senior library professionals working in top institutional libraries and recorded in the Google sheet. Further, it was restored to Microsoft Excel and SPSS software for analysis and summarize the descriptive data.

## Result and Discussion

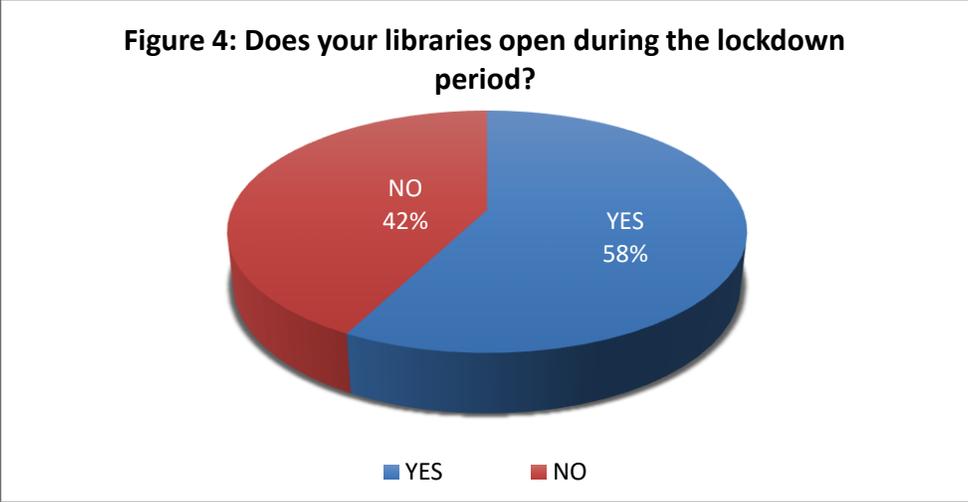
The survey questionnaire was circulated among the various library forums and groups to gather responses from Indian academic and research libraries during coronavirus spreading in mid-2020. In response, 58 libraries furnished their feedbacks. **Figure 1** presents the professional experience of the respondents who participated in the study working in different capacities in HEIs of India.



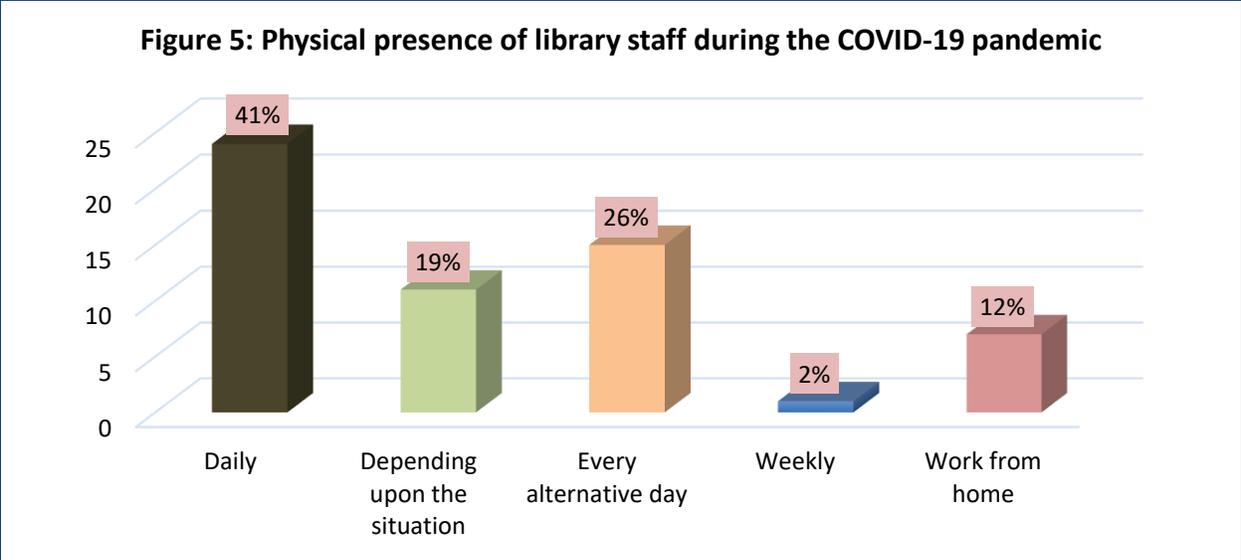
**Figure 2** shows the nature of respondent libraries that participated in the study. The data found that 51(88%) of the respondents were from academic libraries (university and technical institutions). Only 7(12%) respondents were from research libraries (the library belongs to R & R&D Laboratories). It means a maximum number of libraries participated from academic libraries in the study. Because the Indian Government classified the districts into Zones based on the increasing number of COVID-19 cases and hotspots areas, **Figure 3** illustrates the zone-wise libraries that participated in the survey. According to the data analysis, 23(40%) libraries were found in the Red Zone, 19(33%) in the Green Zone, and 16(27%) were from Orange Zone. It means nearly an equal number of the participant took part from all the three zones.



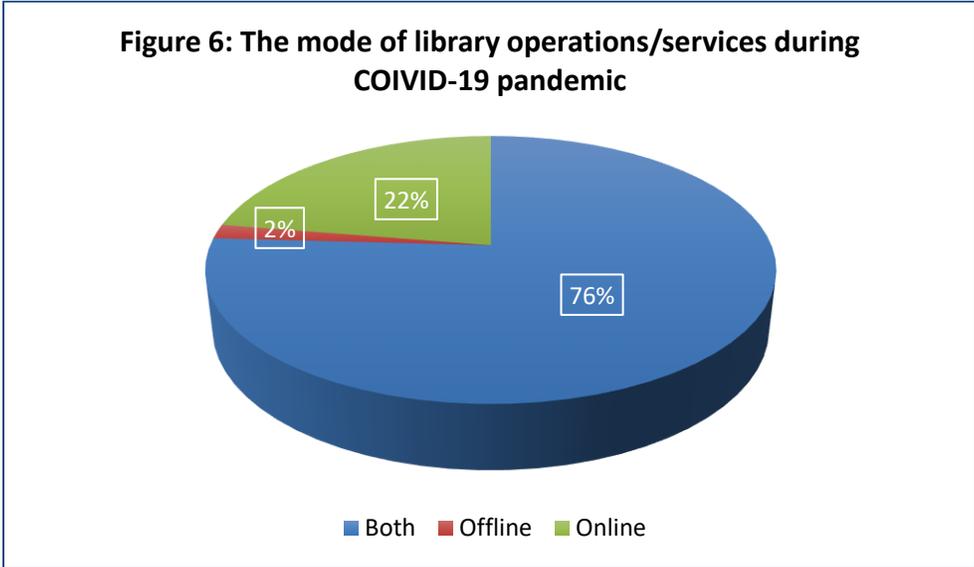
In a developing country like India, most higher education institutions nowadays open their libraries in not less than 12 hours, sometimes are 24\*7 a week. But in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, the libraries' opening hours somehow reduced up to the office working hours only. **Figure 4** refers to whether the libraries in India opened during the lockdown period. Data found that 58% of libraries opened during but cut short the opening hours, whereas 42% of libraries replied they completely closed their doors to the community during the lockdown period. However, in both situations, library services were affected.



While asking the libraries how often their staff showed their physical presence in the office during the COVID-19 pandemic to meet library user needs. Libraries with 41% responded that their staff attended the library daily with fifty percent staff, 26% of libraries replied in every alternative day, 19% of libraries answered depending upon the situation, and 12% replied their staff worked home. Only 2% of libraries replied that their staff showed physical presence in the library weekly, as shown in **Figure 5**.

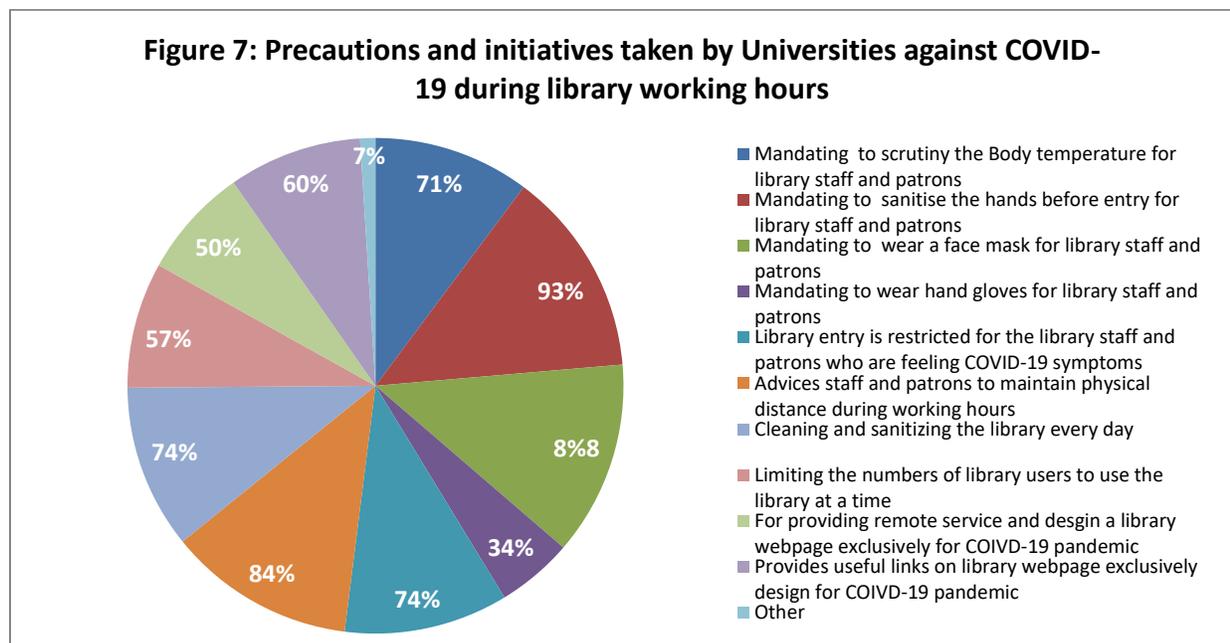


**Figure 6** explores the mode of library operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The statistics say, 76% of libraries replied that they performed offline and online, 22% of libraries operated only online mode, and 2% of libraries served only offline during the lockdowns.



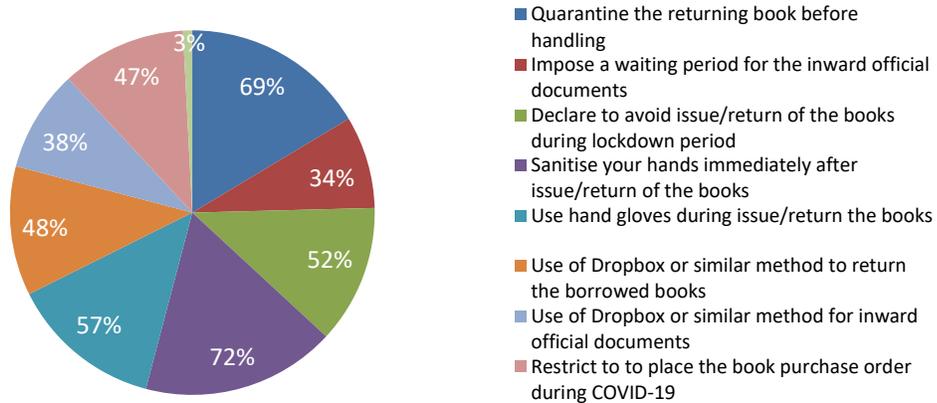
Like other frontline workers, library staff are also at equal risk of getting exposed to contagious diseases like COVID-19 while extending services (Samanta, 2020). International Library Associations IFLA has also drafted guidelines for the libraries worldwide to maintain pre- and post-COVID-19 preventative measures for staff and users while extending services to the user community. **Figure 7** investigates the precautions and the initiatives taken by the Indian libraries to protect the staff and patrons from COVID-19 attacks during library working hours. According to the study, 93% of libraries mandated to sanitize the hands before entry to the library for all staff and patrons during the pandemic, 88% of libraries mandated to wear a face mask for library staff and patrons, 84% of libraries advised the users to maintain physical distance during

working hours. At the same time, 74% of each restrict library entry for those who feel mild COVID-19 symptoms and clean and sanitize the library every day, respectively. However, 71% of libraries mandated to scrutinize the body temperature before entry to the library premises for all, 60% of libraries provided useful links on the library webpage exclusively designed for the COVID-19 pandemic, and 57% of libraries restricted the numbers of library users using the library at a time. Similarly, 50% of libraries initiated remote access service and designed a library webpage exclusively for the COVID-19 pandemic and 34% of libraries mandated to wear hand gloves for library staff and patrons. Only 7% of libraries provided other services like delivered need-based assistance to the campus resident staff, generated Google Classroom, WhatsApp Group, and Email services for students and faculty, restricted patrons' visits into the library and sanitized the library periodically, respectively.



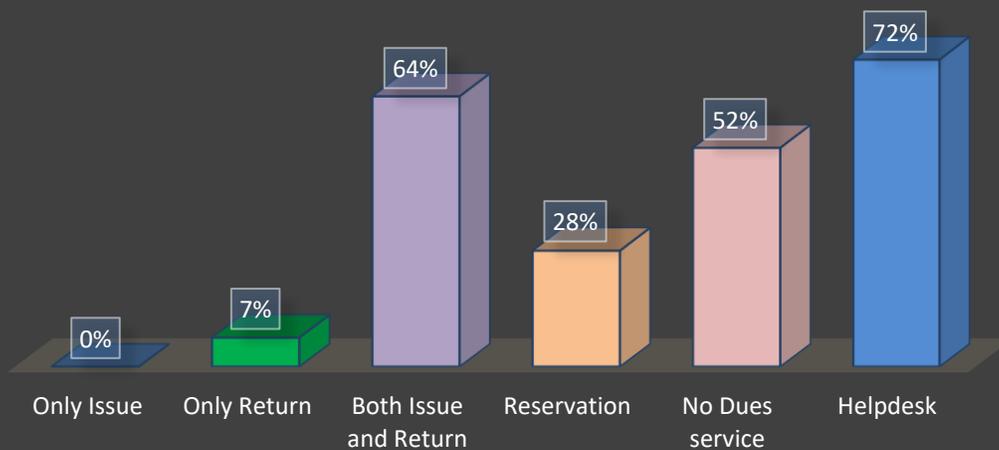
**Figure 8** defines the measures taken by the Indian libraries to move printed materials within the library. Data found that 72% of libraries used to sanitize hands immediately after issue/return of the books, 69% of libraries quarantined the returning book before handling, 57% of libraries used hand gloves during issue/return the books, and 52% of libraries used to avoid issue/return of books during lockdown period. At the same time, 48% of libraries used dropbox or a similar method to return the borrowed books, 47% of libraries restricted from placing the book purchase order during the COVID-19 pandemic. While 38% of libraries used dropbox or a similar method for inward official documents, and 34% of libraries imposed a waiting period for the inward official documents. Only 3% of libraries followed the routine way of check-in and check-out and returned books in exceptional cases and quarantined them also for 72 hrs in a segregated room.

**Figure 8: Measures taken by the libraries for the movement of printed materials in the library**

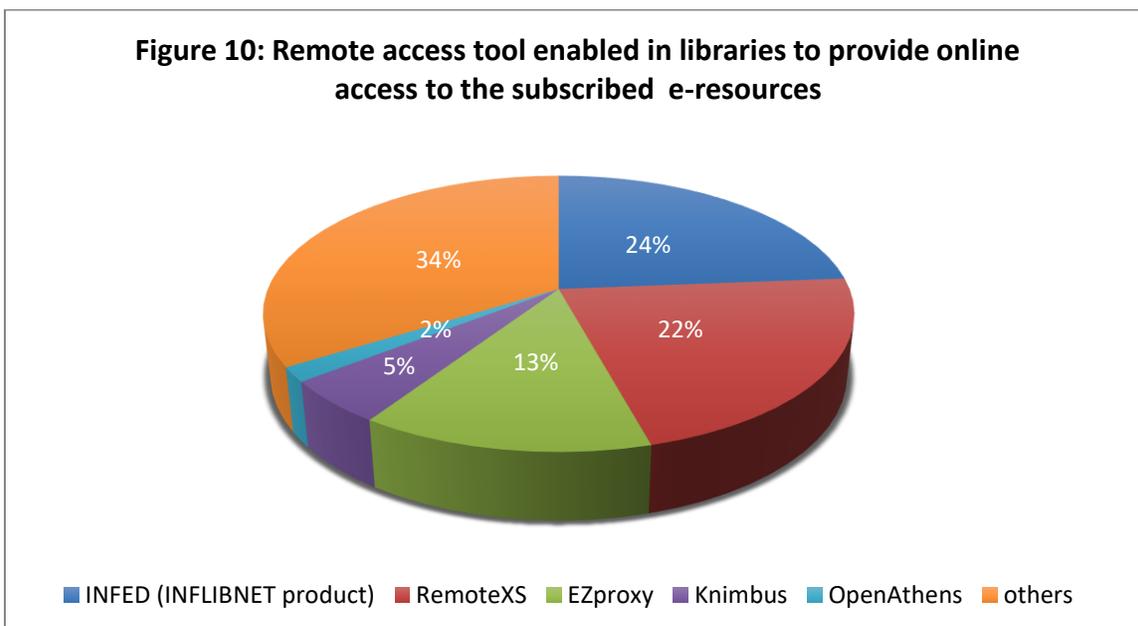


**Figure 9** intrigues the type of services offered by the Indian academic libraries during the lockdown period at the circulation desk. Circulation division is the central part of libraries that provides check-out/check-in and reservation facilities, short-term loan of special items held behind the desk, etc. In some libraries, circulation is more likely to combine with the helpdesk to provide information about library services and other assistance for users. (Freund, 2012). The study shows that 33% of libraries provided information assistance to users at the helpdesk, 29% of libraries continued both issues and return service during the pandemic, 23% of libraries provided no-due services, and 12% of libraries provided reservation service. Whereas fewer libraries (3%) only issued books at the circulation desk during the lockdown periods.

**Figure 9: Services provided by libraries during the lockdown period at the Circulation desk**

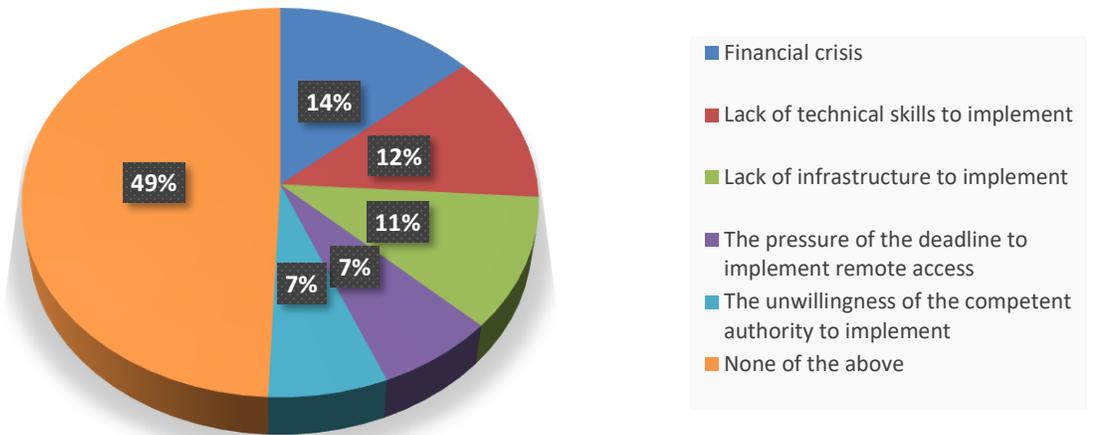


**Figure 10** provides a clear picture of library-enabled remote access tools as an alternative solution for accessing the library subscribed e-resources tools during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been observed that almost all libraries that participated in the study adopted the remote access option as an alternate solution for providing online access. As per the data, 25% of libraries implemented the Indian Access Management Federation (INFED), followed by RemoteXs(22%), EZproxy(13%), Knimbus(5%), and only 2% of libraries using OpenAthens credentials remote access service. INFED – a single sign-on-based mechanism for remote access to provide off-campus access to e-resources developed by INFLIBNET and offered free of cost to all UGC-approved universities and Institutions. 34% of libraries used other means for off-campus access but were not mentioned precisely.



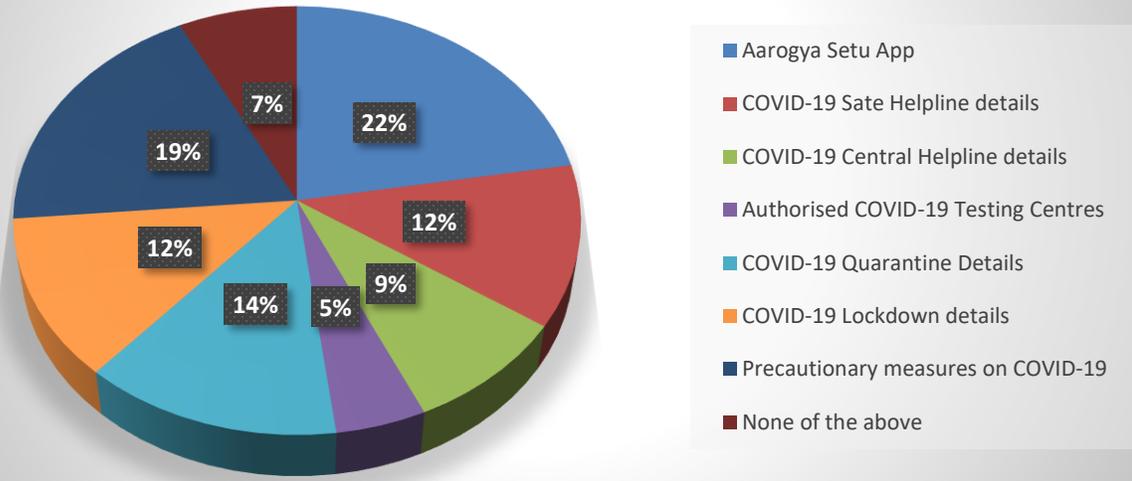
Implementing any new service needs strategic planning, skills, financial resources, and authority approval. **Figure 11** figures out the difficulties faced by the libraries while offering remote access service during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that 14% of libraries encountered a financial crisis while implementing the remote access service, 12% of libraries faced a lack of technical skill, 11% of libraries replied that they were a shortage of infrastructure to implement the service. In comparison, 7% of libraries each responded to the pressure of a deadline and the unwillingness of the competent authority to implement remote access services respectively during the pandemic. However, 49% of libraries were having no difficulties while offering remote access during the outbreak.

**Figure 11: Difficulties faced by the Libraries while offering the remote access during the COVID-19 pandemic**



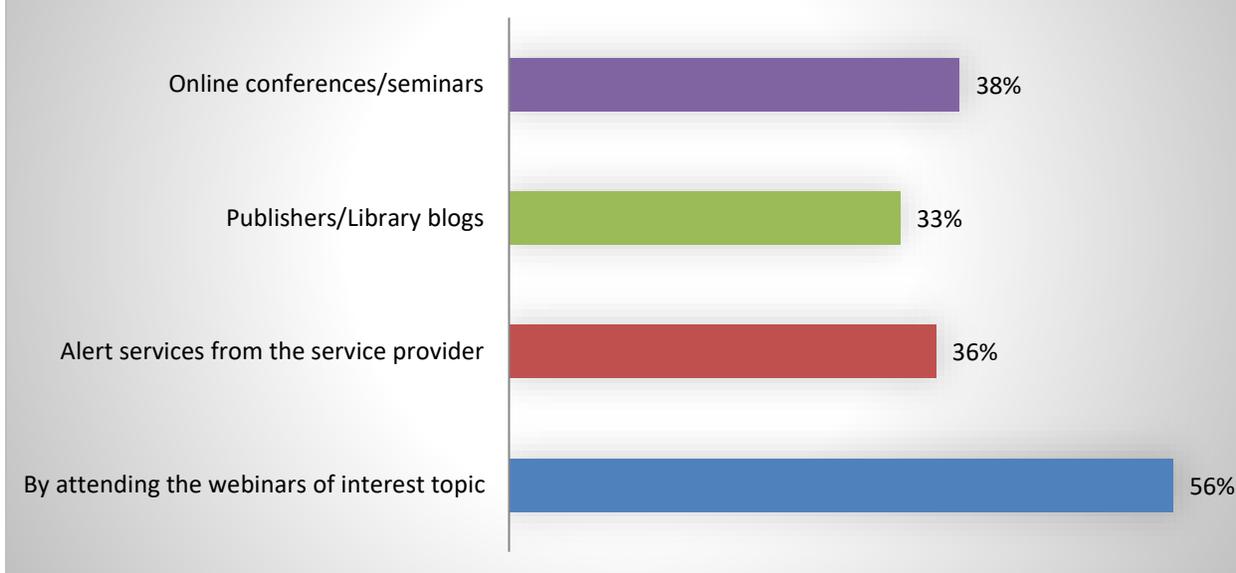
Throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, the Governments organized various awareness campaigns to create awareness on COVID-19 symptoms, preventive measures, and the advisories released from time to time. Academics have always been a part of the movement, often participated in various outreach programmes of Government for surrounding communities(Schneider, 2008). Academic libraries are the primary source of trustworthy information for quick and easy access to those looking for credible information about what to do in an emergency(Zach, 2011). In the wake of the COVID-19 explosion, it is essential to know whether the Indian academic and research libraries offered any awareness services to meet the needs of surrounding communities. The study finds 22% of libraries engaged in providing awareness on the 'Arogya Setu' mobile App, launched by Govt. of India, bringing the people together to fight against COVID-19. The primary objective of the App is to trace COVID positive cases in and around the people or locality. 19% of libraries engaged in allotting precautionary measures on COVID-19, 14% of libraries provided quarantine details, whereas 12% of each library provided information about lockdowns and state helplines parties respectively, 9% of libraries provided central helplines details and 5% of libraries responsible for informing the communities with authorized testing centres. The study also explores that a few libraries(7%) did not extend any awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in **Figure 12**.

**Figure 12: Aawareness services provided by the libraries to meet the needs and demands of community residing in and around your campus**



The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way libraries providing services to their communities. Library professionals during the pandemic faced many challenges to reach remote users with assistance. They acquired new skills and kept informed about the advances around the world. **Figure 13** provides evidence on how libraries updated their knowledge to serve the library patrons in such an unprecedented time. 35% of libraries answered that they were attending different webinars to know how other libraries are taking initiatives during the COVID-19 emergency to support the user's communities and fulfilling their research needs. The staff in 23% of libraries participated in conference/seminars to update their knowledge. 22% of libraries used alert services to reach the research community, whereas 22% of libraries responded that they used publisher websites and library blogs to gather information.

**Figure 13: During the pandemic time, how you update(d) the knowledge to serve the library patron**

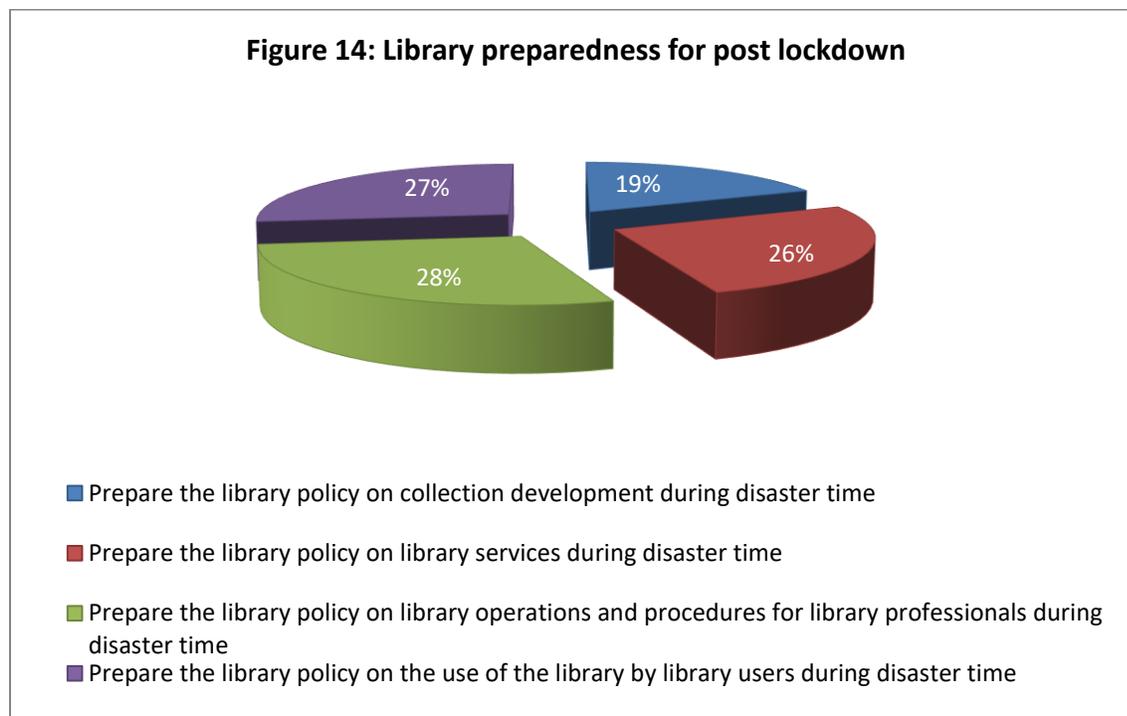


### **Library difficulties and preparedness for post lockdown**

Like other developing countries, Indian libraries faced many challenges due to the sudden paradigm shift in the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the roles of libraries drastically changed. When the academic staff performed work from home, library staff members continued their support to the communities throughout the pandemic. When libraries experienced a budget restriction due to the downgrade of the Indian economy (Figure 11), publishers increased the subscription price of e-books and e-journals with a bit change in the license agreements, sometimes five times more than the print version, which was unfair. Even the course reserved books not included in the subject package offered by publishers still the library purchased e-books. But it is true that a small number of publishers came forward to support the libraries during the pandemic and offered remote and free access to their e-resources. Few libraries faced difficulties in implementing remote access solutions because of some administrative and financial reasons. In addition to the problems, libraries prepared themselves to overcome the ever-met issues and bridge the gaps of information requirements of their patron. Many libraries implemented the remote access service (Figure 10) and proactively updated the websites to reach the community during the pandemic. As a gateway to interact and engage them with the library, the library website becomes the central source of information for users throughout the pandemic (Dadhe & Dubey, 2020, (Landgraf, 2021). Moreover, Plagiarism checking, Grammarly, Email Alert services, and ILL/document delivery services were also extended to the WFH users during the pandemic.

Further, libraries have engaged in preparing various guidelines during the lockdown period to overcome the requisite changes after post lockdown, keeping in mind that the post lockdown

period will be completely different from lockdown at the beginning(D. Mestri, 2020). While asking the libraries regarding their preparedness after post lockdown, 28% of libraries responded that they made policy on library operations and procedures for library professionals to tackled the present and future situation during the pandemic. 27% of libraries made policy on library users' use, and 26% of libraries made a policy on library services. Whereas 19% of libraries engaged in preparing the library policy on collection development during the disaster, as shown in **Figure 14**.



### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Continuing library services is fundamental to the institutional mission, particularly to achieve excellence in learning, research and innovation. The drastic changes in the library's role, operations, and services due to the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 have pleated library staff's responsibilities and enhanced the visibility of the library portal for remote users. The remote access solution has become a reality for libraries during the pandemic. Libraries in India faced identical difficulties as the libraries faced worldwide. Libraries in India have taken enough measures to safeguard the library materials and staff during the crisis. The libraries' involvement in different awareness programmes during the pandemic has been an excellent factor for academics and governments, as far as community development is concerned. Like public libraries, academic libraries have been involved in spreading information within the institutions and the surrounding communities. This study evidences that the libraries have always been a driving force for the academic and its surrounding communities. The considerable planning within a strict principle of social distancing made the libraries a better support system for

academics during any outbreak. Despite many hitches, libraries have maintained their value within a Higher Education system during such an unprecedented time. The strong partnership between libraries and scholarly publishers helped libraries play a pivotal role in the education industry and support the Government and Institution's missions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Preparedness is the best way to achieve the continuity of the earlier workflow. Therefore libraries have taken a lot of initiatives (Figure 7) during the crisis and post lockdown.

The study shows that virtualization has been the key factor during the pandemic. Therefore, it is recommended to invest more than fifty per cent of the annual library budget in digital libraries. The libraries strategic planning would be to overcome the unexpected changes caused by misfortunes like the COVID-19 pandemic. Libraries must give each professional an equal opportunity to obtain new skills, learn practical implications of various library tools and techniques, different approaches to engage their communities, and strengthen relationships to tackle uncertain emergencies. Staff professional development is equally important as collection development and space planning in the library. Social networking platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc., are the crucial tools that can help libraries reaching the user community with information services and attract readers' usage.

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