

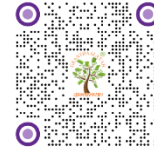


Original Article

## ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN ENHANCING INFORMATION ACCESS THROUGH REFERENCE SERVICES: EVIDENCE FROM GOA

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### ABSTRACT

Public libraries play a vital role in providing equitable access to information through traditional and digital reference services. This study examines the role of public libraries in Goa in enhancing information access through reference services. The objectives include identifying available reference services, evaluating their effectiveness, assessing user satisfaction, and suggesting improvements. The study adopts a survey methodology using questionnaires administered to library users and librarians. Data are analysed using descriptive statistics and percentage analysis. Findings indicate that reference services significantly improve information access, while digital services such as Web OPAC, e-resources, and online communication enhance user convenience. Challenges include limited ICT infrastructure, staffing, and user awareness. The study concludes that strengthening digital reference services and continuous staff training can improve public library services in Goa.

**Keywords:** Public Libraries, Reference Services, Information Access, Digital Reference Services, Information-Seeking Behaviour

### INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are fundamental institutions that promote equitable access to information, knowledge, education, and lifelong learning. As community information centres, they provide free access to diverse information resources irrespective of users' age, educational background, occupation, or socio-economic status. In the contemporary knowledge-driven society, public libraries play a significant role in supporting literacy, digital inclusion, informed decision-making, cultural development, and community empowerment. Their services have evolved from being repositories of printed materials to becoming dynamic information centres equipped with digital resources and technology-enabled services. Access to accurate and timely information has become increasingly important in the digital era. The rapid growth of information resources, coupled with technological advancements, has transformed users' information-seeking behaviour. Although the Internet has made vast amounts of information readily available, users often encounter challenges in identifying reliable, authentic, and relevant sources. Consequently, public libraries have expanded their role by providing organized access to quality information through professional guidance and reference services.

Reference services constitute one of the core functions of public libraries. These services assist users in locating, evaluating, and effectively utilizing information resources according to their specific needs. Traditionally, reference services included ready reference, long-range reference, referral services, current awareness services (CAS), selective dissemination of information (SDI), newspaper clipping services, and document delivery. With the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT),

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these conventional services have been complemented by digital reference services such as Web OPAC, electronic databases, e-books, e-journals, email reference, online enquiry services, and mobile communication platforms. The adoption of these digital tools has significantly enhanced the efficiency, accessibility, and responsiveness of library services. The transition from traditional to digital reference services has redefined the role of librarians. Modern reference librarians are no longer limited to answering factual queries; they facilitate information literacy, guide users in navigating electronic resources, support digital research, and assist in evaluating the credibility of information sources. As a result, reference services have become an essential mechanism for bridging the gap between users and the rapidly expanding universe of information resources.

The state of Goa possesses a well-established public library network comprising the Goa State Central Library, district libraries, taluka libraries, and village libraries. Over the years, these libraries have adopted various ICT-based initiatives to improve information accessibility and service delivery. Despite these developments, the extent to which reference services contribute to enhancing information access among public library users remains an important area of investigation. Factors such as users' awareness, utilization patterns, satisfaction levels, availability of digital resources, technological infrastructure, and professional competencies of library staff influence the effectiveness of reference services. Although previous studies have examined public library services, user behaviour, and digital library initiatives, relatively few have specifically investigated the contribution of reference services to enhancing information access within the public library system of Goa. Existing literature primarily focuses on the availability of services or technological adoption, while comprehensive evidence on users' perceptions, utilization patterns, and the effectiveness of reference services in facilitating information access remains limited. Against this background, the present study examines the role of public libraries in enhancing information access through reference services in Goa. It analyses the availability and utilization of traditional and digital reference services, evaluates users' satisfaction, identifies the challenges faced by libraries in delivering effective reference services, and proposes measures for strengthening information access. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to the improvement of public library services, support evidence-based policy formulation, and assist library professionals in designing user-oriented reference services that meet the evolving information needs of society.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Reference services have evolved significantly from traditional face-to-face assistance to technology-enabled digital services. Early studies emphasized the role of librarians in guiding users to reliable information sources, while recent research highlights the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to improve access to information and enhance user satisfaction. [Fritch and Mandernack \(2001\)](#) and [Francoeur \(2002\)](#) explained that digital reference services extend traditional library services by providing timely and remote information support. [Chowdhury \(2002\)](#), emphasized that digital libraries and electronic reference services have transformed information delivery by integrating online resources with user-centred services. Similarly, [Gandhi \(2004\)](#) highlighted the application of knowledge management techniques in improving reference services.

In the Indian context, [Bhatia and Vohra \(2007\)](#) observed that electronic reference services enhance the efficiency of information delivery, while [Johnson \(2011\)](#) emphasized the changing role of reference librarians as facilitators of digital learning. [Singh \(2012\)](#) and [Dhavlé \(2014\)](#) reported increasing adoption of ICT-based reference services in libraries, resulting in improved accessibility and user support. [Das \(2015\)](#) and [Khan \(2015\)](#) further concluded that digital reference services have become indispensable for meeting users' changing information needs. Recent studies by [Chattopadhyay \(2018\)](#), [Kaur \(2019\)](#), [Kale et al. \(2022\)](#), and [Devi \(2024\)](#) highlighted the growing importance of Web OPAC, electronic resources, virtual reference services, and digital literacy in strengthening public library services. These studies also identified challenges such as inadequate ICT infrastructure, shortage of trained staff, and limited user awareness, which affect the effective delivery of reference services.

Although existing literature provides valuable insights into reference services, digital library initiatives, and user satisfaction, most studies have focused on academic libraries or the technological aspects of library services. Limited empirical research has specifically examined how public libraries in Goa enhance information access through both traditional and digital reference services. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by evaluating the availability, utilization, and effectiveness of reference services in public libraries across Goa.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives for the following research are as follows:

- 1) To examine the concept of Modern reference services.
- 2) To analyse the different reference requirement of the users of Public Libraries in Goa.
- 3) To identify the facilities available in reference services for users of Public Libraries in Goa.
- 4) To evaluate whether presently available reference services at Public Libraries in Goa are satisfying the needs of users in Goa.
- 5) To assess the measures for improvement of reference services for users in Public Libraries of Goa.

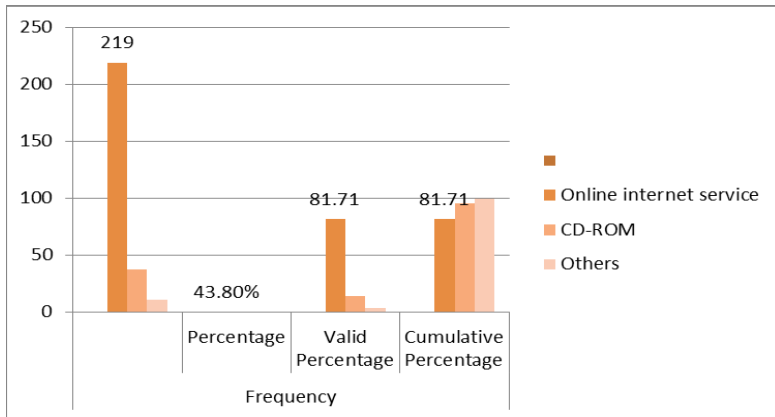
**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The survey research tool or method will be used with a questionnaire for the current research study, keeping in mind the aforementioned destinations. The questionnaires organized or structured questions will be designed to gather information from all Public Libraries patrons in the state of Goa. The questionnaire will comprise multiple choice questions concerning awareness and consciousness regarding the use of modern reference services for librarians of 162 Public libraries. The total sample size of the study will be 1500 out of which 500 questionnaire will be distributed among librarians and 1000 users from different Public libraries of Goa. The questionnaire will be divided by 35-40 questions. Tables, charts, and other visual aids such as diagrams will be used to analyse and present the data gathered from the questionnaire.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

**1) Digital reference services provided by libraries:**

**Figure 1**

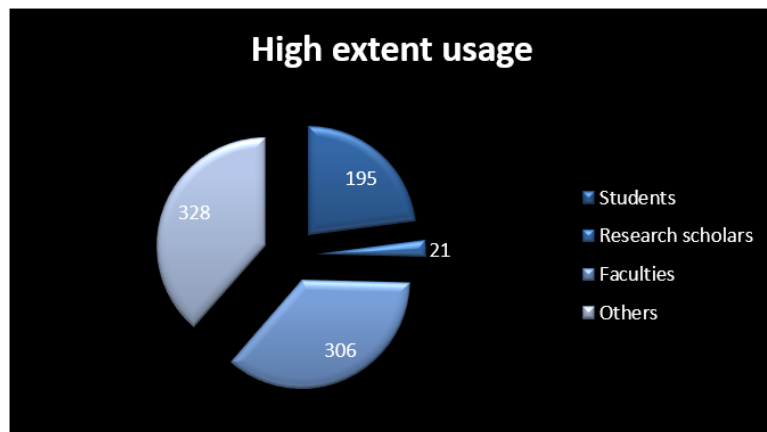


**Figure 1 Digital Reference Services Provided by Libraries**

81.71% of the study's librarian claim to utilize online internet services as the best medium of digital reference services. CD-ROM is used by 14.17% and other digital reference services by 4.1% librarian.

**2) Maximum usage of Digital Reference services:**

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2 Maximum Usage of Digital Reference Services**

Since Digital Reference services are advanced and modernized there is overall more usage which can be seen in today's youngsters. Students usage is maximum in Digital reference services which is 22.94%, Research scholars usage is 2.47%, then faculty members and staff usage is 36% and rest others is 38.58%. study reveals the same.

### 3) Web OPAC in Public libraries

Figure 3

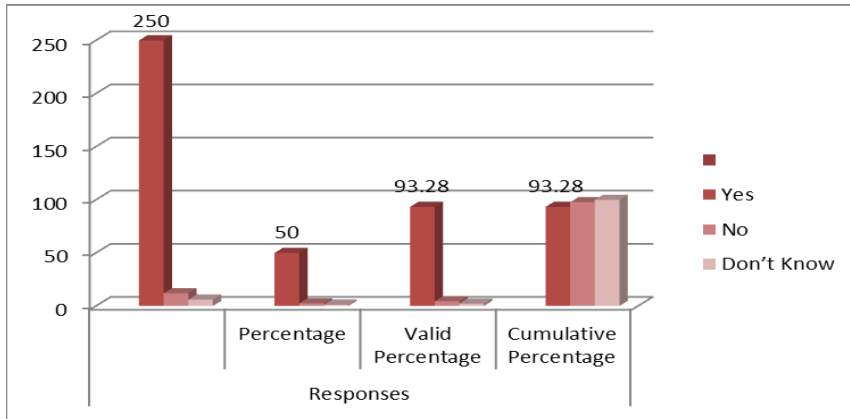


Figure 3 Web OPAC in Public Libraries

The librarians were asked to take note of the services offered by their libraries through web OPAC'S. Maximum that is 93.28% responded that their libraries provide web OPAC facility whereas very few that is 4.4% stated that there is no Web OPAC facility available in their library and remaining handful just 2.2% are not aware of these Web OPAC services. Hence the results.

### 4) Does Participant libraries follow cataloguing system?

Figure 4

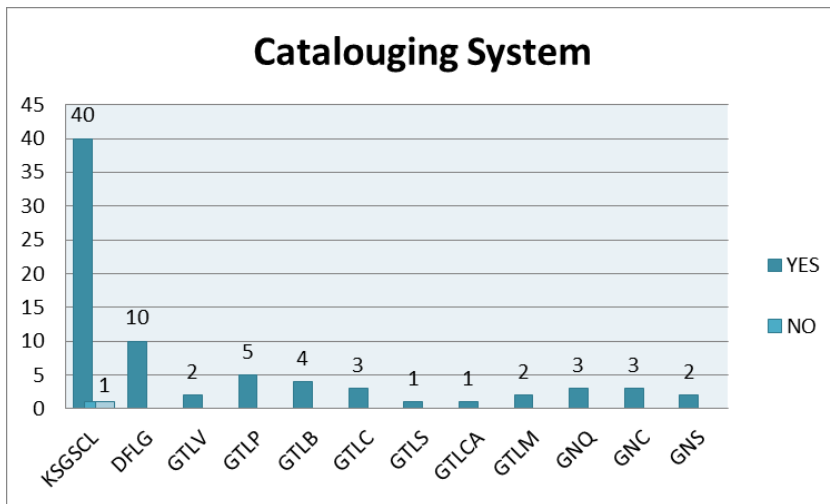


Figure 4 Libraries Follow Cataloguing System

Cataloguing is the crucial process of generating bibliographic entries and information, such as author, title, and subject, to describe and arrange library resources so that users may find items with ease. It converts digital or physical materials into searchable data that is usually stored in an online catalogue or integrated library system. KSGSCL ,DFLG , GTL and Nagar libraries follow cataloguing system on Librys Version 10 for Cloud. All NGO libraries follow manual system for cataloguing books as they are small libraries and are not digitalized as compare to others. Results are shown as per librarians responses.

5) Acquisition mode of books

Figure 5

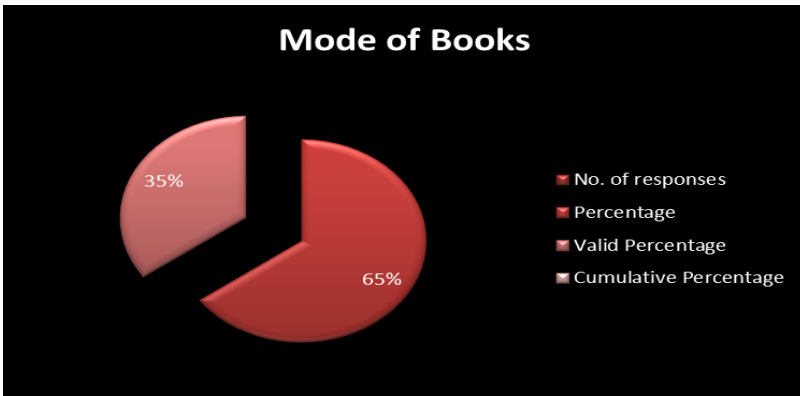


Figure 5 Acquisition mode of Books

The following pie chart describes the mode of books. It is clear that 66.79% follow purchased mode of acquisition books. Central library, DFLG follow purchase mode of books whereas the GTL's and nagar libraries follow donated method of acquisition of books.

6) Whether libraries are automated?

Figure 6

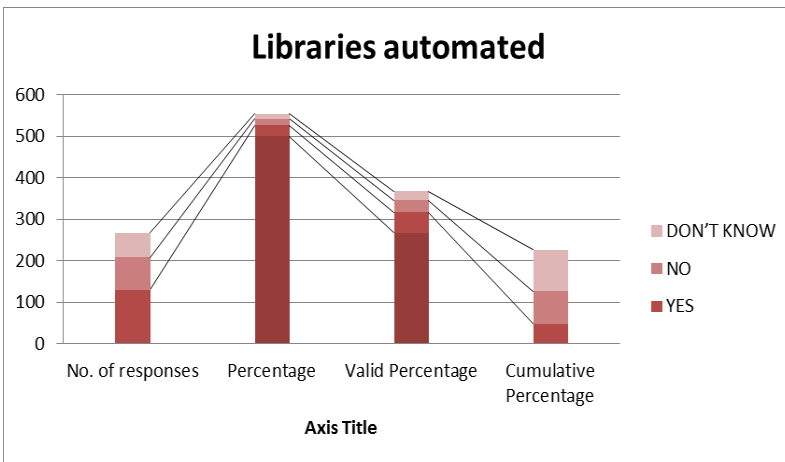


Figure 6 Whether Libraries Are Automated

Utilizing computer technology to handle conventional, manual library tasks like circulation, acquisition, cataloguing, and serials control is known as library automation. To increase productivity, accuracy, and user access, it makes use of Integrated Library Systems (ILS), which frequently incorporate RFID technology for self-checkout and improved security. From the bar graph above it is clear that 48.50% libraries are automated as per librarian responses, 29.47% librarian states that they don't know about library automation and 22.01% are fully not aware or don't know anything regarding automation especially NGO aided libraries.

7) Satisfaction :

Figure 7

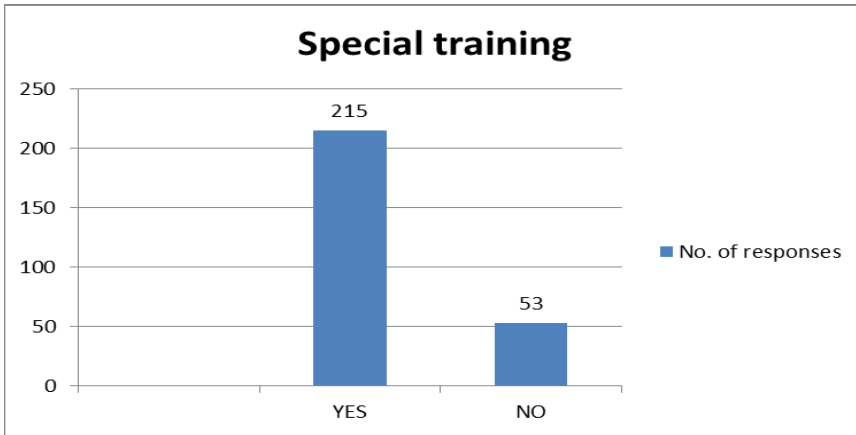


Figure 7 Reference Services in Digital Libraries Require Training

Digital libraries are maintained online repositories of digital artefacts, including as text, photos, audio, and video, that provide information access over the internet around-the-clock. The staff who are in 40-50s specially stated that they do require training as they are not fully aware of digital libraries as it's a new concept and need a thorough training to answer the future youngsters. 80.22% of librarians responded that managing Reference services in digital libraries require training as some they are not aware and need to be studied. Whereas 19.77% stated that they don't require any training. Hence the results.

8) Is the available manpower sufficient in reference section?

Figure 8

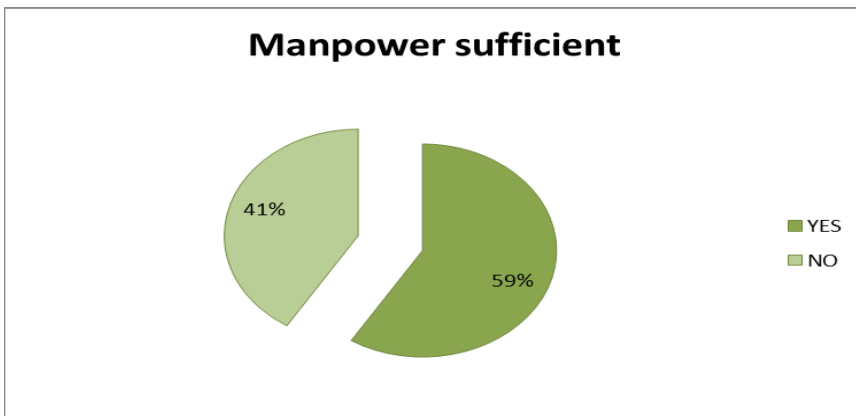


Figure 8 Manpower Sufficient

The librarians from selected public libraries were asked whether available manpower is sufficient for them to carry out the regular library activities in their particular reference section. 58.95% librarians respondent that available manpower is sufficient whereas 41.04% stated that they require more staff to carry out the reference services in this digital era and its difficult to handle the youngsters.

9) Do you feel that computer based information services are better than manual services.

Figure 9

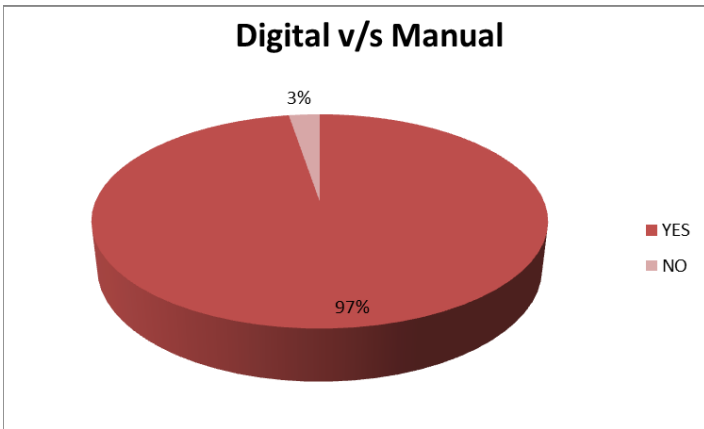


Figure 9 Digital v/s Manual

Although the basic goal of both digital and manual (traditional/physical) libraries is to disseminate knowledge, they differ greatly in terms of accessibility, format, and user experience. While manual libraries give physical access to books and a specific study space, digital libraries allow 24/7 remote access to electronic materials. A hybrid strategy is frequently seen to be the best way to satisfy a variety of consumer demands. When the question was asked to the librarians most of them 97.38% do feel That computerized services are must as it is very easy to find the book in shelves through OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue) which wasn't there before and was creating a lot of problems for the librarian to search the book and to provide reader services to the users. Librarians of 50-60 years of age also had the same suggestion. Hardly few 2.61% stated that manual services are better than digitalized. Librarians also stated that though they feel digitalized services are important still the pleasure of holding the book in hand and reading it will never die in future too.

10) Do you carry out digitized documents in your library?

Figure 10

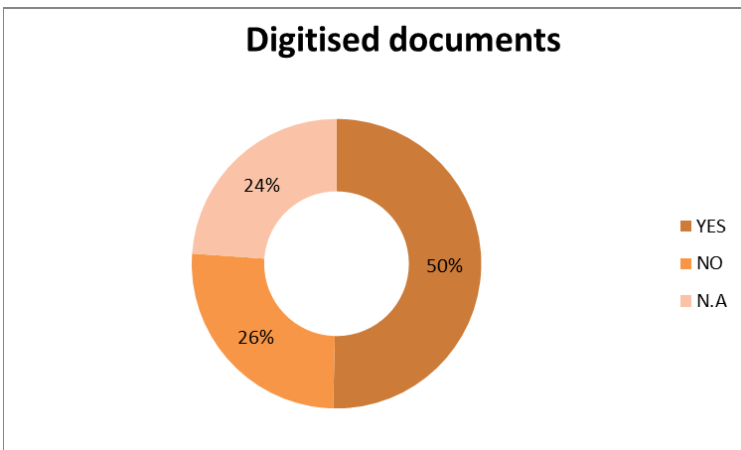


Figure 10 Digitized Documents

The results are as follows regarding the digitized documents in their libraries. 50.37% librarians responded that they have recently carried out digitization process in their libraries. KSGSCL possess fourth floor rare book section which consist of digitalization section where the process is carried on by the different team. 25.74% said that till now they haven't started it in their libraries. 23.88% are not aware of this process (NGO) Libraries.

CONCLUSION

Public libraries play a crucial role in enhancing information access by providing both traditional and digital reference services to diverse user communities. The findings indicate that reference services significantly support users in locating reliable information,

while ICT-based services such as Web OPAC, e-resources, and online reference facilities have improved the efficiency and accessibility of information delivery. However, challenges such as limited user awareness, inadequate ICT infrastructure, and the need for continuous staff training affect the effective utilization of these services. Strengthening digital reference services, expanding electronic resources, and promoting user awareness programmes will further enhance the role of public libraries in Goa as inclusive knowledge and information centres, supporting lifelong learning and informed decision-making.

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