Empowering the poor with right to information and library services

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Abstract

Purpose – Information is playing a vital role in modern socio-economic developments. The poor homeless citizens of special needs are also empowered with the Right to Information Act 2005 in India. People can ask the government policies for eradication of poverty. Information literacy regarding various rights may change the scenario of society. In India, government started various ICT-based policies for eradication of poverty with public private partnership. Some important projects are: Akshaya, Anand, Bhoomi, E-chaupal, E-Seva, Gramdoot, N-Logue, India Agriland, Janmitra, etc. but actually real needy people are not aware about these policies, so they are not able to get the benefit of these policies. Thus, right to information and libraries can create an environment of information literacy among poor people, so that they may know their rights and improve their living standard. They may also know the details of government initiatives for the welfare of the society. After taking the benefits of policies they will be a well-informed citizen. Indian Government initiatives like right to food scheme or midday meal scheme for schoolchildren, right to education, right to information and role of libraries are discussed in detail.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a case study of Indian Government policies and role of non-governmental organizations for eradication of poverty through information and communication technology applications.

Findings – Internet, libraries and other social media are empowering the users with information. International and national organisations are taking care of basic human rights. It is the real democracy, if we implement right to information effectively. Only free flow of information can reduce the digital divide/information divide among the citizens. Now there are a number of national and international laws related to right to information, so there is a need to apply them effectively for the benefit of the poor human beings and make them well-informed, self-dependent, respectable citizens.

Research limitations/implications – This paper is based on a review of literature and evaluation of policies in India.

Practical implications – There is a need to develop the public library system with extension service to poor and homeless people.

Social implications – There is a need for emphasis on an information literacy programme for the poor.

Originality/value – It is the authors’ opinion with original thoughts.

Keywords Information literacy, Information services, Lifelong learning, RTI Act, Indian Government initiatives, Library extension services, Poverty, Information

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The socio-economic conditions of poor and homeless people differ from one country to another. According to the 2011 census, the population of India is over 1,210 million, and
has the world’s largest number of poor people. As per the Indian Economic Survey, 35 per cent of people earn less than US$1 a day, and 86 per cent people earn less than US$2 a day (Poverty in India, 2013; Census of India, 2011; Indian Economic Survey 2011-2012, 2012).

According to a World Bank (2005) estimate, 41.6 per cent of the total Indian population falls below the international poverty line (US$1.25 a day). As per Tendulkar committee, over 37 per cent of the population comes below the poverty line. These statistics are accepted by the Planning Commission, Government of India (Poverty in India, 2013).

Library can exist without walls, but library services for homeless people are a very difficult task. If a person is suffering from lack of basic human needs like food, clothes and shelter, how can s/he be mentally ready to obtain information? As a library professional, I personally believe that information can change the lives of homeless poor people and turn them into well informed citizens, with homes and respect. Information can generate a lot of money and improve their socio economic conditions.

The Government of India started various ICT based policies for the eradication of poverty with public private partnership. Some important policies are: Akshaya, Anand, Bhoomi, E-chaupal, E-Seva, Gramdoot, India Agriland, Janmitra, and so forth, but those in real need are not aware of these policies, so they are not able to get the benefit of them. The right to information (RTI) and libraries can create an environment of information literacy among poor people, enabling them to have access to their rights, and may improve their living standards. They may also know the details of government initiatives for the welfare of society. After taking the benefits of policies they will be well informed citizens.

Under an RTI one can ask: Why am I poor? Who is responsible for it? What are the initiatives taken by government for the eradication of poverty? All such queries can be fulfilled via an RTI, but awareness is essential for it to be successful. Therefore, information literacy amongst poor people is very essential in solving their basic problems.

Literacy alone cannot change their way of life, there is a need for information literacy. According to the Indian Census 2011, the literacy rate has increased to 74 per cent, but, what about information literacy? A well qualified person may be computer illiterate and/or information illiterate.

Most of the policies are prepared by the government for the benefit of the poor citizens, but as a result of poor communication, these policies have failed, and those in real need are not able to obtain the benefits from them. Therefore, the role of libraries is very important in making them aware of these policies, plans and programmes designed for their benefit.

The National Forum on Information Literacy (2012) defines information literacy as:

The ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand.

Information literacy therefore requires lifelong learning, but for poor people, there is a need to develop the community information system and public library system in India.

**Fundamental rights in India**

The Constitution of India provides the following fundamental rights to its citizens (Fundamental Rights in India, 2013) (Table I). The Indian Constitution acts as a guarantee that all Indian citizens can and will live their life in peace as long as they live in Indian democracy.
Government of India initiatives

The Government of India began various schemes for socio-economic development and the eradication of poverty and a selection of these are discussed below:

- **Right to education.** The Government of India initiated essential free and compulsory education for all children from the age of six to 14 years. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act came into force as of 1 April 2010. This was a historic day for the people of India as from this day the “right to education” is accorded the same legal status as the “right to life” as provided by Article 21A of the Indian Constitution.

- **Right to food scheme.** The Indian Government began the “right to food” scheme for children in schools. The scheme is implemented by state government as a Mid-Day Meal Scheme since April 2002. This scheme attracts thousands of children into primary education as otherwise poor people do not send their children to school. The positive impacts are an increase in literacy and a reduction in child labour in India.

- **RTI.** The Government of India enacted the Right to Information Act 2005 (RTI Act), marking a watershed in the nation’s democratic development. It empowers citizens with the right to demand what activities and decisions are being made in their name.

Library services are also covered under RTI. However, librarians have provided information to their patrons for centuries without these laws. Dr S.R. Ranganathan formulated Library laws in the 1930s, for example, which provided guidelines to all library professionals. The scope of the RTI Act is India-wide and it is implemented in all states of India, thus all libraries funded by government or public support come under the provisions of the RTI Act. These libraries are supposed to provide essential information if requested by a citizen of India. As per RTI Act any citizen can request information from any public or government funded institution, and this therefore includes libraries.
RTI is linked to concepts of the information society in which the quality of life, as well as prospects for social change and economic development, depend increasingly on information and its use. In the world of knowledge-based competition, intellectual property rights have emerged as a strategic tool. There is a need to know the extent of intellectual property rights, and their use in the contemporary information and knowledge society.

As per the RTI Act 2005, every institution should disclose essential information for general use. This includes duties and responsibilities of the staff, names of officers and their contact numbers, mission, vision, goal, values, and so forth. Libraries should display this important information and have a complete library manual. It may include a list of staff and their duties or different positions and their assigned duties.

**RTI and libraries**

Library activities and services are user centered. Libraries already try to provide the best services to all their users with librarians keeping users needs in mind constantly. Thus, even before being asked by the users, librarians are ready to provide information to them.

Freedom of expression encompasses the freedom of speech and the corollary right to receive information (Indian Constitution, Article 19(1)a). Libraries and librarians protect and promote these rights by selecting, producing, providing access to, identifying, organising, providing instruction in the use of, and preserving recorded expression regardless of the format or technology. In those states where the Public Library Act is implemented, and a public library system functioning, citizens have the right to access information. If they do not obtain information in time, they may go to a court of law.

**Laws of library science**

There are five laws of Library Science which are still valid in present modern information society. The basic concept of the “Book” is now replaced by documents/information/knowledge/web resources, amongst other media. Among all these laws, the Second law of Library Science is very important and deals with rights of the user that is, “Every reader his/her book”. It indirectly supports the RTI of users.

**RTI in web environment**

Information available on the web or through other social media is for the use of society. Web resources are created for potential users. There is a need for balance between making web resources and the basic right of all users to have access to the web resources they need anywhere in the world. A web site must formulate access policies to ensure that the collection it is building and maintaining is appropriate and adequate to fulfill the expectations of its community of users. A web site must contain resources appropriate to the needs of all its users. Any web site that limits access in any way must ensure that this restriction does not prevent adequate access to the collection by the users that the web site was created to serve.

**The rights of users**

Article 19 of the United Nations says “Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression” is the basic human right (Meinzen-Dick, 2009). Along the same lines,
the Government of India implemented a law which is called “RTI” to the citizen of India as indicated above. Now they have the right to know government policies, decisions related to common men. Now they can fight on the basis of facts closed in files of government offices.

Users are the key of all information related activities; without users, information has no meaning. Now users are empowered by the above laws and rules.

RTI Act of India provides following rights to a citizen of India:

- equity of information to all citizens;
- to know new Government policies and their status of implementation;
- to know government decisions of benefit to society;
- to get any relevant information earlier hidden by officers;
- to know the status of the use of public money and public funds; and
- a public information system.

The internet provides expanding opportunities for everyone to participate in the information society, but many users still experience difficulties in accessing information on the internet due to lack of knowledge regarding retrieval procedures. Libraries can play a critical role in bridging information access gaps for these individuals, and train them to use information successfully. Librarians can develop information gateways to users in their specific subject fields. It provides easy access as well as saving the time of users.

Information communication technologies (ICT) are revolutionising the way people live and work. The telecommunications revolution in general, and the internet in particular, have changed our perception of distance. Promotion of democracy and ensuring equality of opportunity cannot be sustained unless steps are taken to avoid the creation of an “information poor” subclass, which does not have access to the emerging ICTs. The occurrence and widening of the gap between the “information rich” and the “information poor” is not merely an issue between the developed and developing nations, but within a nation also.

Conclusion

Internet, libraries and other social media are empowering users by their provision of information. International and national organisations are taking care of basic human rights. It is real democracy if we implement the RTI effectively. Only the free flow of information can reduce the digital divide and information divide among the citizens.

On the recommendations of National Knowledge Commission, the Government of India appointed the National Library Commission. It may recommend a nationwide public library system, which will help the citizen of India to get the essential information in all fields.

Annan (2001) said:

Information Technology is not a magic formula that is going to solve all our problems. But it is a powerful tool with diverse applications. Our challenge is to put that power at the service of all humankind.

There are numerous National and International laws, and there is a need to apply them effectively for the benefit of the poor to make them well informed, self-dependent, respectable citizens.
References


Further reading


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