

Prison Libraries and their Role in Inmate Reintegration: A Review

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Abstract

This study examines the development of prison libraries in India, the information needs of prisoners, and the role these libraries play in the rehabilitation process. Through an extensive literature review, the study explores how prison libraries provide access to educational, legal, and personal development materials essential for inmate self-improvement and reintegration into society. A systematic review of 45 relevant studies, gathered using the PRISMA methodology, revealed the significant contribution of prison libraries toward fostering positive behaviours, reducing recidivism, and aiding rehabilitation. However, the research also highlights existing challenges, including inadequate funding, censorship, and inconsistent access to resources, which hinder the full potential of prison libraries. The study underscores the need for reforms, such as increasing funding, updating collections, and integrating digital resources to enhance the effectiveness of prison libraries. Despite its limited geographical scope and potential data gaps, this research offers valuable insights into the current state of prison libraries in India and their crucial role in the correctional system. Future research should aim to broaden the scope and incorporate longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of these libraries on inmate rehabilitation. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a focused analysis of prison libraries in India, emphasizing their role in inmate rehabilitation. It offers practical recommendations for improving prison library services and highlights the need for increased investment and digital integration to meet prisoners' evolving information needs.

Keywords: Jail Library; Prison education; Information needs; Rehabilitation; Prisoners; Convicts, India.

1. Introduction

A prison is where inmates are imprisoned and denied various privileges as a kind of punishment under the authority of the central or state government. People accused of committing crimes or found guilty of them are detained in prisons as part of the criminal justice system until their cases are resolved in court or they have completed their sentences. Across the centuries, access to documents in prisons has evidenced the prison system at the time. Rather than detention institutions, prisons were intended as punitive punishment in ancient times. The widespread use of torture and the death sentence for even minor offenses sparked outrage among jurors and the public. The deterrence theory views prisons as a rehabilitation centre to encourage morality, obedience, and appropriate behaviour. This

strategy was subsequently followed, and jails were constructed as charitable facilities for therapeutic exercises and the eventual rehabilitation of convicts into positive examples for the community. Prison rehabilitation programs can be completely effective if prisoners are given information about these programs through printed literature. This program can be seen in the library services offered to prisoners.

From the beginning of literacy, books have always been a faithful and good friend of man. Books act as a friend, a philosopher, and a companion. Libraries have a rich collection of reading materials that can be utilized to connect to the rest of the world. The library inside the prison premises plays a significant role in effectively overcoming their disgrace and leading a life after release. The prison library is classified as a unique library serving the needs of inmates and prison employees. Library resources improve the emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of prisoners. Inmates may interact with the outside world by reading literature, which helps them feel less alone and may even encourage prison reform. It was the outcome of the prison congress in the 18th century, which promoted prisoners' education, rewards for good attitudes, and rehabilitation of criminals instead of punishment. It was thought that the library would encourage this.

2. Objectives of the study

- 1) To understand the development and history of prison libraries in India.
- 2) To determine the information needs of the prisoners.
- 3) To examine the role of Prison libraries in rehabilitation.

3. Methodology

To meet the study's objectives and investigate the function of prison libraries in improving user information needs and rehabilitation in society, an extensive literature review was carried out. The evaluation procedure included a thorough search of databases known for providing wide coverage of academic papers in a variety of areas, such as Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were chosen for their potential to provide a wide range of relevant research papers. To find relevant material, the keywords "Prison Libraries" AND "Rehabilitation", "Prison Libraries in India", and "Prisoner's Information Needs" were thoroughly searched across several domains, including titles, abstracts, and full texts. This strategy intended to increase the identification of relevant articles while also capturing a comprehensive grasp of the issue.

Initially, the study aimed to cover a period beginning in 1990. During the initial examination, researchers identified articles published in 1987 and 1974 that were essential to the study topic formulation. To include the most recent research in the topic, the date range for screening articles was enlarged to 1974-present. We only evaluated peer-reviewed English-language papers. The researchers carefully removed publications that did not match relevant keyword searches and terminology. The researchers used a systematic strategy for literature synthesis, ensuring consistency and rigor in selecting and analysing papers.

To achieve a thorough and organized literature synthesis, the researchers utilized the PRISMA technique (Moher et al., 2009). This approach was applied to gather a substantial amount of pertinent literature from multiple databases. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) process for identifying relevant resources begins with a comprehensive search of databases and other sources, yielding an initial pool of

studies. In this case, 194 studies were identified through databases and 34 through other sources like news articles, blogs, Doctoral thesis, Textbooks, etc. After removing duplicates, 153 studies remained. These were then screened, resulting in 57 studies. Following a detailed eligibility assessment, 52 full-text studies were selected for review. Ultimately, 45 studies were included in the final review, ensuring a systematic and unbiased selection of relevant literature. This rigorous process helps maintain the integrity and reliability of the systematic review or meta-analysis.

4. Development of Prison Libraries in India

The concept of prison libraries has become a crucial component of inmate rehabilitation. The Oxford Dictionary defines a prison as a secure and restricted facility where criminals or those accused of crimes are confined for punishment. It defines a library as a place that holds collections of books and other reading materials, which can be browsed or borrowed. A prison library, therefore, is a repository of reading materials designed to serve inmates. According to Wikipedia (2017), “Prison libraries serve both prisoners and the public by helping to educate prisoners, reduce recidivism, and improve family bonds through reading.” In the Indian subcontinent, prisons were initially bleak, isolated, and secretive places, where offenders were confined with no focus on reform or education. During British rule, particularly under the East India Company, prison management prioritized punishment over rehabilitation. A committee formed in 1836 to review prison conditions rejected moral or educational reforms. It was only in 1864 that a second prison committee recognized the importance of educating prisoners. Legislative reforms followed with the Prisons Act of 1870 and the Prisons Act of 1894, which formalized the foundation of India's prison system (Anupama, 2001).

Prison libraries in India developed alongside these reforms. Initially, the concept of prison libraries focused on religious and moral instruction. Clergymen brought books to prisons to foster devotion and curb criminal tendencies (Adkins, 2010; Conrad, 2017). Over time, this limited scope expanded. In the early 19th century, prisons adopted public library models, broadening the range of reading materials available (Garner, 2017; Fyfe, 1992). By the mid-19th century, prison libraries gained more attention, with efforts to improve prisoner conditions and establish libraries (Kabir, 1982). These libraries began to offer not only religious texts but also educational and recreational materials, supporting personal development and rehabilitation (Hussain et al., 2019).

Despite these advancements, prison libraries in India still face challenges. Limited resources, censorship, and a lack of trained library staff continue to hinder their effectiveness (Eze, 2015; Harrington, 2020). Many prison libraries remain scarce and poorly resourced. Mahale (2016) points out that prison collections often lack meaningful reading materials. Some prisons in Himachal Pradesh coordinated with state district libraries to improve prisoner access to materials, but many did not (Anupama, 2001). Singh (2014) noted that some prisons in Punjab had well-stocked libraries, while others lacked basic resources like daily newspapers. However, notable exceptions, such as the Viyyur Central Jail in Kerala with over 10,000 books, and the Central Prison library at Poojappura with 15,000 books, stand out as examples of progress (Singh, 2014; Amaravathi, 2019).

In the 20th century, rehabilitation became central to the prison system, and the role of prison libraries grew in importance. Libraries became a direct means for inmates to pursue rehabilitation. Librarians and volunteers played a key role in improving prison library

services, often advocating for the necessity of these facilities to support rehabilitation efforts (Anupama, 2001). Non-profit organizations and inmates themselves also pushed for better library services, recognizing their potential to promote self-development and reduce recidivism.

The importance of prison libraries gained further international attention in the 21st century. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, established in 1955 (the Nelson Mandela Rules), recognized inmates' right to information (IFLA, 2005). Rule 40 emphasized that every prison should have a well-stocked library accessible to all prisoners, encouraging full use of it. The International Book Committee and UNESCO's 1994 Charter for the Reader affirmed that all people, including prisoners, have the right to access information and that prison libraries should fulfil these needs (Lehman, 2011).

In India, prison libraries have evolved beyond places for books. In Tamil Nadu, for example, prison libraries offer resources for industrial and vocational training, formal education, and recreational reading, functioning as supplementary education institutions (Tamilmani, 2018). Although documentation on the history of these libraries remains limited, their role in supporting rehabilitation and reducing recidivism is clear. Over time, prison libraries have become vital educational tools within the prison system, though many continue to struggle with resource constraints and inconsistent services (Tamilmani, 2018).

Advocates for better prison libraries argue that these facilities should serve as a substitute for home libraries, providing inmates with access to information and knowledge that can support personal growth and reintegration into society.

5. Information needs among the prisoners

Prisoners have distinct and unmet information needs because of the restrictions and challenges in correctional facilities. The American Library Association (ALA) believes that reading and accessing information is a basic right for inmates. This is important for their rehabilitation and return to society (ALA, 2019b). However, many prison libraries cannot fully meet these needs due to censorship and lack of resources (Monobe, Bushman, & McCall, 2021). The 'Prisoners' Right to Read' document emphasizes that intellectual freedom and access to information are essential for prisoners' personal growth and reintegration (ALA, 2019b). Despite these guidelines, most prison libraries depend on donations, leading to outdated collections (PEN America, 2019; Michaels, 2020). This creates a gap between the ALA's professional standards and the actual condition of prison libraries (Lehmann, 2011).

Prisoners need information on a variety of topics, including health, education, legal aid, and personal development (Greenway, 2007). For example, a study by Gama et al. (2020) found that inmates mainly seek health, educational, and spiritual information. Their primary sources are friends, teachers, radio, television, books, and newspapers. Similarly, Sambo, Usman, and Rabi (2017) showed that prisoners in Kwara State, Nigeria, have important information needs related to health, finances, spirituality, legal issues, and education. However, these studies also revealed that the current prison libraries are inadequate. Emasealu (2018) highlighted the role of prison libraries in meeting these needs, which aligns with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration prioritizes education and productive use of time over punishment. Despite high information needs, prisoners have limited access to resources due to strict regulations, poor library environments, and irrelevant materials (Hussain et al., 2023).

Meeting the information needs of prisoners is crucial for their rehabilitation and return to society. Emasealu and Popoola (2016) found that prisoners need information on professional training, career opportunities, family relationships, housing, and income sources. This information helps with personal development and re-entry into society (Jacintha, 2016). Libraries play a key role in meeting these needs by offering educational and recreational materials that help prisoners stay connected to the outside world (Stevens & Usherwood, 1995). Providing legal information is also important because it helps prisoners understand their rights and navigate the legal system (Eze, 2016). Fulfilling these needs is essential to reduce recidivism and support rehabilitation (Coyle, 1987; Dixen & Thorson, 2001).

Prison libraries have always been important in educating and rehabilitating inmates. Emasealu (2019) stressed that information is critical for the mental well-being and survival of incarcerated people. Access to educational resources helps with personal growth and reintegration into society (Marshall, 2011; Costanzo & Montecchi, 2011). These libraries also offer programs like literacy classes, life skills training, and group discussions, which help inmates form relationships and improve mental health (Curry et al., 2003). Studies show a direct connection between access to information and lower recidivism rates, proving the importance of well-equipped libraries in supporting rehabilitation (Gerken, 2003).

Like anyone else, prisoners need information for growth and survival. Education is a basic need, and without it, rehabilitation becomes difficult. Stevens (1992) found that prisoners' information needs vary depending on the length of their sentence and how much time they have left. Whether these needs are met depends on prison policies and how effective formal information channels are. Stevens identified several barriers, such as inconsistent access, impartial information sources, and poor timing. Many prisoners hesitate to express their needs because of fear, mistrust, the rapid incarceration process, and low morale. In some cases, these information needs are not addressed at all. Even when needs are met, prisoners often feel dissatisfied with the process (Stevens, 1992).

A study by Bajic (2015) in Croatia, involving 504 prisoners, found that common information needs include rights in prison, life after incarceration, family matters, prison rules, and job opportunities. However, prisoners have little access to information on education, law, training, and health. Emasealu and Popoola (2016) assessed the information needs of Nigerian prisoners and found that they need legal help, lifelong learning, professional growth, financial information, and health resources. Participants noted that many library materials were either outdated, unavailable, or irrelevant to their actual needs. The study concluded that Nigerian prison libraries do not adequately meet prisoners' information needs. Emasealu and Popoola called for more funding for educational programs and improved library resources.

Sambo (2017) also looked at how Nigerian prison libraries meet inmates' information needs. The study involved four prisons across the country and identified key needs in areas like health, economics, spirituality, post-release information, law, education, civil rights, and prison regulations. However, many prisoners said that prison libraries were inadequate, and they relied on religious organizations, family, or health professionals to meet their needs. Sambo concluded that Nigerian prison libraries fail to meet essential information needs.

6. Impact of Prison Libraries on Inmate Rehabilitation

Prison libraries have a significant impact on the rehabilitation of inmates. Studies show that they provide essential resources that aid in lifelong learning and skill development. Bowe (2011) emphasized how prison libraries offer accessible and reliable self-help information,

which supports inmates in building skills that are useful even after their release. Piotrowski and Lathrop (2012) explained that educational programs, often facilitated by prison libraries, are crucial in helping inmates adapt to life after prison and avoid reoffending. Costanzo and Montecchi (2011) highlighted the historical importance of prison libraries in Italy, where they have played a major role in maintaining educational and ethical standards within correctional facilities. Similarly, Ephraim (2011) noted that prison libraries provide study materials that support inmate rehabilitation and help them reintegrate into society. Collectively, these studies show that prison libraries play a vital role in promoting education, reducing recidivism, and encouraging positive changes in behaviour.

Inmates have diverse information needs, ranging from legal and educational information to health and recreational materials. Providing these services through prison libraries helps in their overall development and reintegration into society. As Balasubramanian (2016) pointed out, prison libraries are essential in achieving these goals, which directly contribute to reducing recidivism rates. Mishra et al. (2022) conducted a study in Uttar Pradesh, India, exploring the influence of prison libraries on incarcerated individuals. They found that prison libraries provide a crucial outlet for inmates to cope with the stress and anxiety that come with imprisonment. These libraries offer a space for inmates to engage constructively, reducing negative mental health impacts and giving them a sense of purpose. The concept of ‘whole person librarianship’ was a key element in this study, which focuses on addressing the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of inmates. This holistic approach not only helps reduce recidivism but also supports inmates’ overall well-being and reintegration into society.

Prison libraries offer educational resources that can make a huge difference in the lives of inmates by promoting positive changes in behavior and improving literacy levels. Sharda and Tiwari (2021) found that these libraries can significantly reduce recidivism by encouraging inmates to learn and grow. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) guidelines suggest that prison libraries should follow a public library model. This model would offer a diverse collection of materials, including legal and educational resources, to help inmates in their rehabilitation (Lehmann & Locke, 2005). Historically, prison libraries have been crucial in aiding inmate reform. Wilhemus (1999) noted that prison libraries have been a part of the correctional system since the early 19th century, playing a vital role in helping inmates develop skills that aid in their reintegration into society. Other studies have shown that inmates who use library resources are more likely to gain vocational skills and pursue higher education, which helps them transition back into society (Shirley, 2004; Kaiser, 1992).

The success of rehabilitation efforts depends on collaboration between service providers, including prison libraries, which play an integral role. The American Library Association (ALA) supports the ‘Prisoners Right to Read’, affirming that inmates have the right to access information and ideas. This intellectual freedom is key to their rehabilitation and reintegration into society (ALA, 2019b). Lehmann (2011) acknowledged the challenges prison librarians face in balancing the need for free access to information with the restrictions imposed by correctional facilities. Despite these limitations, programs like the Prisoners Literature Project have demonstrated that providing books to inmates fosters a love for reading and self-empowerment, which supports their rehabilitation (Michaels, 2020). The introduction of online technologies in prisons has also contributed to educational achievements, such as the rise in GED completions in Kentucky (Hennick, 2017). These

examples highlight the importance of prison libraries in helping inmates re-enter society successfully.

Emasealu (2019) emphasized that prison libraries are crucial for inmate rehabilitation, offering programs like literacy classes, life skills training, and bibliotherapy. These programs encourage inmates to develop a positive attitude toward learning, which is essential for reintegration into society. Research has shown that inmates who engage with prison libraries tend to have better psychological adjustment. They benefit from the connection between library use and improved mental well-being (Emasealu, 2019). Additionally, prison libraries help maintain family bonds by providing inmates with a sense of connection to the outside world. This connection is critical for preparing inmates for life after their release (Marshall, 2011). Overall, well-equipped prison libraries contribute significantly to inmate rehabilitation, underscoring the need for continued investment in these facilities.

Prison libraries not only provide access to information but also help inmates develop social capital. Prisoners who learn how to navigate information sources and think critically through library services are better equipped to reintegrate into society. Lehman & Locke (2005) argue that prison libraries should not challenge prison hierarchies but rather give prisoners a voice and advocate for their rehabilitation. Wilhelmus (1999) observed that the prison library is one of the few places within a prison that mirrors a traditional social environment. This space promotes pro-social behaviour, which is a key goal of rehabilitation. In some cases, inmates describe the library as a neutral zone, separate from the harsh dynamics of prison life (Department of Justice Corrective Services, 2010). Socializing in the library can help prisoners engage in positive, pro-social activities, which contribute to their rehabilitation.

In addition to fostering social engagement, prison libraries play a major role in promoting education by bridging the gap between critical thinking and transformative learning. According to Garner (2017), libraries help inmates develop personal growth and teach them how to engage critically with information. These activities improve correctional outcomes by promoting good behaviour, building community connections, and facilitating inmates' personal development. The library becomes a space for prisoners to learn, socialize in a healthy manner, and imagine a better future.

7. Results and Discussion

The concept of prison libraries in India has evolved significantly from its colonial roots, where initial emphasis was placed more on punishment than on rehabilitation. A notable shift occurred in 1864, when the importance of educating prisoners was recognized by a prison committee, leading to legislative reforms like the Prisons Act of 1870 and 1894 (Anupama, 2001). Initially focusing on religious and moral instruction, the scope of prison libraries expanded over time as clergymen introduced a range of books aimed at fostering devotion and curbing criminal tendencies (Adkins, 2010; Conrad, 2017). By the 19th century, the libraries began adopting public library models, significantly diversifying the materials offered to inmates (Garner, 2017; Fyfe, 1992). Despite these advancements, modern prison libraries in India face numerous challenges such as inadequate funding, outdated collections, and a lack of trained staff. However, facilities like Viyyur Central Jail in Kerala and the Central Prison library at Poojappura, with their extensive collections, stand out as exceptions (Singh, 2014; Amaravathi, 2019).

Prisoners have a broad range of information needs, encompassing legal, health, and educational materials. Studies have shown that inmates frequently seek health and spiritual information, with their primary sources being friends, teachers, and available media (Greenway, 2007; Gama et al., 2020). However, prison libraries often struggle to meet these needs due to censorship and resource constraints. The mismatch between the professional standards set by the American Library Association and the actual conditions of prison libraries is a persistent issue, leading to a gap in the provision of necessary services (Monobe, Bushman, & McCall, 2021).

The role of prison libraries in rehabilitation is substantial as they provide essential educational and recreational resources that aid in reducing recidivism. Providing access to such materials helps inmates acquire useful skills for their life post-release (Bowe, 2011; Piotrowski & Lathrop, 2012). The concept of 'whole person librarianship' plays a significant role here, addressing the educational, emotional, and spiritual needs of inmates, which enhances their overall well-being (Emasealu, 2019). Moreover, prison libraries facilitate the development of critical thinking and social skills, which are crucial for inmates preparing to reintegrate into society (Garner, 2017; Lehman & Locke, 2005).

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, prison libraries play a crucial role in the rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates by providing access to educational, legal, and personal development resources. These libraries offer inmates the opportunity to engage in self-improvement, gain valuable knowledge, and foster positive behaviours that are vital for their reintegration into society. Despite these significant benefits, the effectiveness of prison libraries remains limited due to challenges such as inadequate funding, censorship, and inconsistent access to relevant materials. To fully harness the potential of prison libraries, there is a pressing need for reforms and increased investment in prison information services, both in India and globally. Enhancing collections, introducing digital resources, and providing proper training for staff will ensure that these libraries can better support the rehabilitation process. Continued development and support for prison libraries are essential for reducing recidivism and helping inmates rebuild their lives, making them a vital component of the correctional system.

This study introduces new insights into the current state of prison libraries in India, revealing their impact on inmate rehabilitation, yet it faces limitations such as the potential lack of comprehensive data from all regions, which might affect the understanding of these impacts. Future research should aim for broader geographical coverage and include longitudinal studies to better assess the long-term effects of prison libraries. To address the identified issues, increasing funding and resources, updating collections, and training staff are essential steps. Implementing digital libraries and online learning platforms could also significantly enhance the reach and effectiveness of these facilities. Continued investment and development in prison libraries are crucial to ensure they remain a key component in the rehabilitation process, ultimately helping inmates reintegrate into society and reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

9. Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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