

# Impact of COVID-19 in Academic Libraries of Sikkim: A Study

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## Abstract

The major outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) at the end of 2019 caused a huge impact globally in almost all the sectors. Even academic libraries experienced a major impact of this virus. Hence, this article aims to study how this virus affected people globally and its impact on four major areas of academic libraries, like library working hours, library services, preventive measures taken, and also the enhanced services provided by the academic libraries of Sikkim. The study also tries to identify the loophole that originated and further plans to cope with it in the future by the academic libraries of Sikkim. The data was collected through a structured questionnaire, followed by an interview, and distributed to the librarians of all the government degree colleges affiliated with Sikkim University, Sikkim. Purposive sampling has been executed during the study. The paper finds the major problem of library services during this pandemic is the unavailability of e-resources in any of the college libraries in Sikkim, thereby where they provided very few services to its users. The study also finds that the plan to have e-resources in the library has been taken up by a few of the libraries. Several recommendations have been made to help libraries provide services in the upcoming days, to tackle this kind of pandemic and other disasters in the library.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Pandemic, Academic Libraries, Resources, Library Services, Sikkim

## Introduction

The world witnessed a dangerous health disaster at the end of 2019 in Wuhan, China, and it was called a novel coronavirus or COVID-19 (Coronavirus, 2020); it was so tiny and microscopic. This virus was rumored to be a kind of biological weapon prepared for other countries

as well. The whole world had not experienced anything like this before; there was a worldwide lockdown due to the transmission of this tiny virus. Since its origination in Wuhan, China, this virus started affecting almost all the countries of the world within no time. Hence, this COVID-19 pandemic was announced as a global pandemic on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO). This virus started affecting mankind and millions of people lost their lives. COVID-19 posed a global threat, and hence, governments started imposing a lockdown in their respective countries. To cut the spread of the virus through droplets, the government guidelines was to keep a distance of 1 metre in public places and wearing face masks became mandatory (CDC, 2020). It has not left even a single corner unaffected. Educational institutes were closed almost for two years or less, depending on the pace of transmission of this pandemic. There was a need for an hour to shift from traditional or manual (OFFLINE) working, teaching, and so on, to the ONLINE mode. The work-from-office formula was shifted to work-from-home, with some exceptions like hospitals, banking, and public transportation. This pandemic left no stone unturned and affected libraries as well, whether it was a public, academic, special, or national library. The library, which is regarded as the storehouse of knowledge or information centre, became a service, especially in those places where only traditional or manual operations take place, and where online sources are not available. The library was not prepared with any policy to cope with such a situation.

COVID-19 highlighted that the use of electronic resources was the only alternative to cope with the situation in the libraries. The Internet played an

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important role in the dissemination of information during the pandemic, and life started relying on it. However, there is another side to the story, where students who are economically downtrodden and are from the geographically remote areas were unable to avail these facilities. Hence, it is right to say that Internet service does not benefit the students uniformly, and increases the disparity among them. Okike (2020) said that social media can be used as an instrument for marketing and delivering information resources to the people. During this pandemic, most libraries engaged users through social media, and to reduce direct communication between the user and staff, many libraries started circulation services as a drive-thru. Lara (2020), in her paper, advised quarantining the returned books for four days so that there will not be any transmission of the virus from the books. Rogers (2020) also said that the returned books should be stored separately for at least for 72 hours. Some libraries started services like zero library loans during this pandemic (ITS, 2020). The library became service-less as users could not come to the library to access any information (Mac Gregor, 2020). Hence, library services had a high impact in disseminating information. Digital divide, lack of digital literacy skills, and poor Internet connection were found to be the most common challenges when it came to transferring the services from offline to online mode. Hence, this article tries to find to what extent academic libraries of Sikkim have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Statement of the Problem

Sikkim, which lies in the North-Eastern part of India, is very small in area and is a geographically mountainous region. Sikkim University is only the Central University under which all the government degree colleges are affiliated, and is located in all the four districts of Sikkim. As we talk about the status of college libraries, the libraries do not have a good collection of resources, and e-resources were not at all available before the pandemic. However, the pandemic brought some good impact to some libraries, as they started subscribing to e-resources and accessing information through remote access from Sikkim University. Hence, it is necessary to study how the traditional library services work during a pandemic to disseminate information and what measures are taken to cope with the situation. Further, this article is the first

to be studied on this topic in Sikkim. Therefore, a study on the 'Impact of COVID-19 in academic libraries of Sikkim: A study' is undertaken.

## Literature Review

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, not much literature was available about libraries handling such a pandemic; however, after the outbreak of this virus, the research on coping with the situation during the pandemic is exponentially growing.

The following are the related works done on the study:

Asif and Singh (2020) conducted a study on 'Trends, opportunities and scope of libraries during COVID-19 pandemic'. The study was conducted to find new ways to reach the users, to find the opportunities to overcome this situation, and ways to be prepared for a new normal life. The paper has suggested many ways to combat the situation during the pandemic, like keeping the returned books separate for at least 48 hours, limiting the number of users in the reading room, maintaining social distance, using masks, promoting paperless work culture in the library, and so on.

Chakraborty and Jana (2021) carried out a study on 'Challenges and opportunities of academic libraries in India because of COVID-19'. The study aims to see the impact of COVID-19 on various aspects of the library, like space, collection development, service, and overall library management, to identify the challenges faced by the libraries, and to examine the opportunities to enhance the library services due to COVID-19. The study discusses the first challenge of academic libraries, as a space where guidelines dictate the following of a safe distance, and where the library was forced to reduce the number of seats in the reading hall. Another challenge discussed was Information and Communication Technology facility. The study also finds that there is a decrease in the use of printed resources, but an increase in the use of electronic resources, during the pandemic. Several recommendations were made, like remote access service, training on information literacy, lending of digital access tools, constraints on budget, open online educational resources, open access to research, and so on.

Chisita et al. (2022) in their study 'Remaking academic library service in Zimbabwe in the wake of COVID-19

pandemic', explored how the librarians in Zimbabwe responded to the outbreak of COVID-19, how the library provided services during the pandemic, the perception and challenges faced by academic librarians during a pandemic, and the sort of opportunities presented by COVID-19. The study finds that during the lockdown users were redirected to use online resources, and electronic resources were permitted to be accessed by remote logging. The reference service has become completely online. Social media applications like WhatsApp are found to be the most powerful and exciting tools to deliver service. The paper also finds that open access resources and resource sharing gained popularity during the pandemic. Suggestions included disaster preparedness and management plans by the academic libraries, which should be ensured to minimise risk; there should be awareness on how to respond during a pandemic.

Connell (2021), in her paper, 'The impact of COVID-19 on the use of academic library resources', examined the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. She compares the use of library resources, which includes interlibrary loan, website, and discovery tool page views, database use, patron interaction, and so on, in three universities. The paper finds that all the three libraries' websites and the use of major databases decreased during the time. However, there was virtual interaction among the students, librarians, and the library staff. The paper also finds that students started using open-access Web tools like Google Scholar for their information needs. Some recommendations were made: the university should practice shifting from acquisition of printing resources to electronic resources.

Fraser-Arnott (2020) carried out a study on 'Academic library COVID-19 subject guides'. The study was focused on university library subject guidelines during the pandemic. The main aim of the paper is to identify patterns in the types of resources identified and to give recommendations to libraries for information sharing with the institution of their partner library during the pandemic. The paper finds that library subject guides and university COVID resources suggest certain opportunities, like collaboration with other university units and the creation of information literacy resources, as well as offering an opportunity to provide links to library resources and opportunity to provide instructions on data management

and evaluation.

Kang et al. (2022), in their study, 'COVID-19 impact on the Chinese top academic libraries: Libraries response to space, collection and services', seek to find libraries' responses to space design, collection development, and services, and the effect of COVID-19 on all of these. The paper also examines the two-year process of developing a library service and analysing the data during the pandemic. The paper finds that before the pandemic, academic libraries were engaged in a wide variety of activities, like collaborative social learning, engaging in workshops and group activities, using print materials, and so on; however, all libraries under study were closed to a full extent and 98% of the printed materials were acquired and used by the library. However, after the pandemic, purchase of books was done online and the libraries provided enhanced online access to printed books to all users and developed inter-library loan; remote access, document delivery service, and online information literacy were emphasised.

Nawaz, Gomes and Saldeen (2020) carried out a study on 'Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications for library services and resources in COVID-19 pandemic'. The study investigates the way to search and provide a satisfactory administration, particularly in advanced education libraries, to fulfil the user needs by considering databases like Pubmed, Baidu, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The study also aimed at providing artificial intelligence applications to library services and resources during the pandemic. The paper suggested that libraries need to develop their infrastructure facilities to give quick and fast services. Use of AI, like identification of a user with AI support, AI-based monitoring, AI Chatbots, AI alarms, and AI-based online tutorials were recommended to overcome the coronavirus outbreak.

Neog (2020), in the paper titled 'Library services through social media during lockdown due to COVID-19 with special reference to university libraries of Assam', sought to examine the status of the library services provided by the university library through different social media tools. The paper also aims to study the effectiveness of social media on library services, as well as to identify the challenges faced by the library. The paper finds that WhatsApp is the most popular social media tool used by library users and the study also reveals that the library

has not taken any initiatives to make the users aware of COVID-19. Few challenges have been discussed, like lack of policy guidelines, lack of positive attitude, and lack of high-speed Internet connection, which are the common challenges.

Rafiq et al. (2021) conducted an exploratory investigation on 'University libraries' response to COVID-19 pandemic: A developing country's perspective'. The study tries to find the type of practices and services followed by the university during the pandemic, when offline classes were suspended and online classes started. The paper finds that libraries revamped their Web pages, reassigned resources, and planned robust online offerings. Social media tools were used as communication tools during the pandemic. The paper finds challenges, like the digital divide, lack of digital literacy skills, slow Internet connection, and so on. The paper suggests that there is a need for individual and collective roles of societal and educational dimensions in this kind of pandemic situation.

Tammaro (2020), in her paper 'COVID-19 and libraries in Italy', carried out a study to investigate how the COVID-19 had a great impact on libraries, which led to the closure of the entire library. The main objective of the study was: which information was given priority for the communities; what library services were provided during the pandemic; any new services started to provide the information needed; and how the service was assessed. The paper finds that library loan is delivered at home and the loan period is also extended. Access to digital resources was increased. Library networks play an important role in the dissemination of information during an emergency. Some challenges were also discussed in the study, like scarcity of library funds, lack of professionally trained staff, lack of library legislation and policies, lack of vision, and so on. Another challenge of digital transformation is the digital divide. The suggestion was made for a digital strategy that should aim at the transformation of libraries with an innovative vision of service.

## Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this article is to study the impact of COVID-19 on academic libraries of Sikkim. However, more specific objectives are as follows:

- To understand the impact of COVID-19 on academic libraries.

- To know the impact of COVID-19 on library working hours and library services.
- To find the preventive measures taken by libraries.
- To identify the enhanced services provided.
- To investigate the problems and further plans to tackle them during a pandemic.

## Methodology

In this study, data was collected through a questionnaire method. The questionnaire comprises both open- and close-ended questions related to library services, working hours, measures for prevention, any enhanced services provided, and so on. Only the librarians of the Government General Degree Colleges affiliated with Sikkim University comprise the study population. The data were carefully analysed and presented through a diagram, for easy understanding.

The scope of the study undertaken is as follows:

- Nar Bahadur Bhandari Government College, Tadong (East Sikkim)
- Namchi Government College (South Sikkim)
- Sikkim Government College, Burtuk (East Sikkim)
- Government College, Rhenock (East Sikkim)
- Sikkim Government College, Gyalshing (West Sikkim)
- Government Arts College, Mangshila (North Sikkim)

## Analysis of Data and Interpretation

**Table 1: Status of the Govt. Degree Colleges**

Sr. No.	Status	No. of Libraries
1.	Open	6
2.	Closed	0
	Total	6

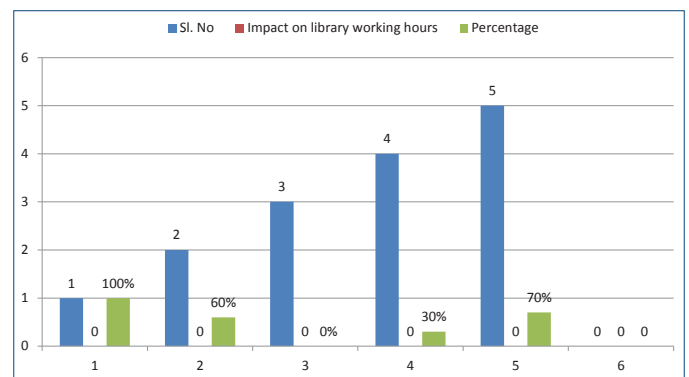
Table 1 shows the status of the govt. degree colleges under study, which were all closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. These college libraries were also closed due to the lockdown. However, after the second phase of the lockdown, the library started functioning partially for the students, with 50% library staff on a roster basis.

**Table 2**

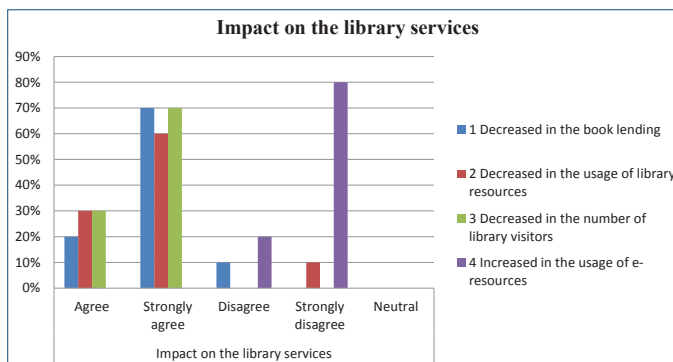
Sr. No.	Impact on Library Working Hours	Percentage
1.	The regular working hours of the library are reduced.	100%
2.	The library is open for the circulation process.	60%
3.	The library is open during the usual hours.	0%
4.	The library did not have any users.	30%
5.	The library was closed.	70%

Fig. 1 represents the impact of the library working hours, where it shows that the regular working hours of the library was reduced to 100%, and 70% of the libraries, where there were fewer collections, along with fewer students and library staff, were closed. The data also shows that 60% of the libraries were open for circulation, as the electronic resources were not available in any of the libraries before the pandemic. So, circulation of books in

the offline mode was kept open, especially for the students of those colleges located in the city where transportation was easily available during the pandemic. The library did not open during the usual hours, as the data shows 0%, and the reason behind this was that only a few students visited the library and the communication for visiting the library was over the phone.

**Fig. 1****Table 3**

Sr. No.	Impact on the Library Services	Impact on the Library Services				
		Agree	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Neutral
1	Decreased book lending	20%	70%	10%	0%	0%
2	Decreased usage of library resources	30%	60%	0%	10%	0%
3	Decreased number of library visitors	30%	70%	0%	0%	0%
4	Increased usage of e-resources	0%	0%	20%	80%	0%

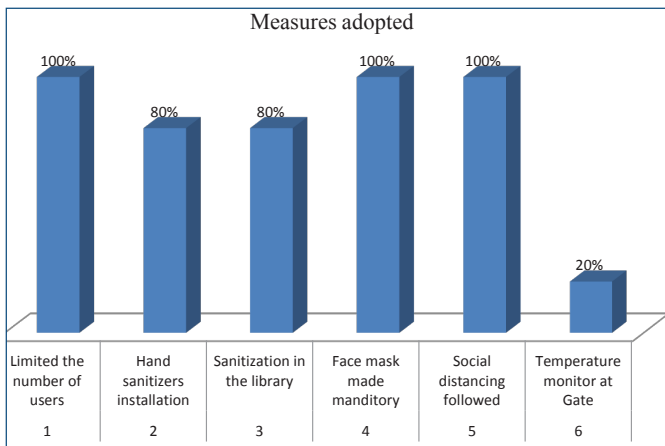
**Fig. 2**

The bar diagram in Fig. 2 shows the impact of COVID-19 on library services. It is found that the pandemic had

the most impact on book lending, as well as the number of visitors to the library (70%). The data shows that 60% of the libraries faced a decrease in the usage of library resources, because the lockdown minimised the availability of transportation, which hindered the students from using the library resources. The data shows that 80% strongly disagreed that there was an increase in the usage of electronic resources; the reason behind this is lack of digital literacy, lack of digital divide, poor Internet connection in Sikkim, lack of knowledge on open access materials, and above all, none of the college libraries under study had the library e-resources to provide to the students in this pandemic.

**Table 4**

Sr. No.	Measures Adopted	Percentage
1	Limited the number of users	100%
2	Hand sanitisers installed	80%
3	Sanitisation in the library	80%
4	Face mask made mandatory	100%
5	Social distancing followed	100%
6	Temperature monitoring at the entrance	20%

**Fig. 3**

In Fig. 3, the data shows the different measures adopted by the library to combat the problem of COVID-19. All the libraries (100%) limited the number of users, the use of face masks in the library was made mandatory, and the guidelines of social distancing were strictly followed. Around 80% of the libraries installed hand sanitisers and sanitised the library. The study finds that only 20% of the libraries adopted measures like monitoring the temperature at the entrance.

**Table 5**

Sr. No.	Enhanced Services	Percentage
1	Remote access to library e-resources	10%
2	Extension of due dates of books	100%
3	Did not charge a fine	100%
4	Alternative working days for the staff	100%
5	Online assistance	10%

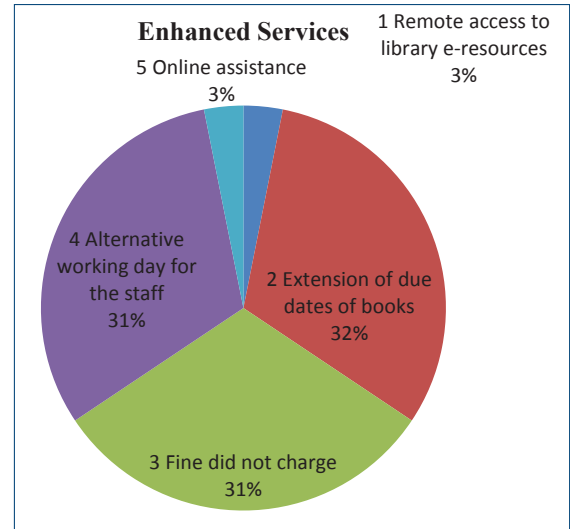
**Fig. 4**

Fig. 4 presents the data related to enhanced services provided by the libraries, where it shows that the entire library (100%) did not charge any fine, extended the due dates of books, and the staff were made to work on alternative days. The data shows that the biggest challenge faced during the pandemic was providing e-resources, and hence, remote access as well. Online assistance was also limited.

## Findings

The following are the major findings of the study:

- After the second phase of the lockdown, libraries started functioning partially, with 50% capacity, while following the COVID-19 protocols.
- The entire library working hours were reduced and 70% of the libraries were closed for half-a-day due to fewer collections, students, and staff. Circulation was 60% open, with the entire library functioning manually.
- The study showed that 70% of the libraries had the most impact on book lending and 80% strongly disagreed that there was an increase in the use of e-resources, because of lack of digital literacy and digital divide, poor Internet connection, and lack of knowledge of open access sources.
- The libraries limited the number of users and followed the COVID protocols and adopted the mea-

asures. Only 20% of the libraries took measures like monitoring the temperature of the customers at the entrance.

- The libraries did not charge any fine and the due date had been extended.
- The biggest challenge faced by the library was unavailability of e-resources in the college library.

## Suggestions

After investigating and analysing the data, the following recommendations are made:

- Academic libraries in Sikkim should increase their collection so that most of the students would benefit from its resources.
- Libraries must plan to have electronic resources so that students can be provided with remote access to library resources.
- Libraries should conduct an awareness programme on how to respond to pandemics and other disasters, along with education on digital literacy and the use of open-access resources.
- The library should encourage the students to use an online platform or social media to share knowledge or information, especially during a pandemic.
- The recommendation is given by the librarians to use the various applications on mobile phones, to enhance library services.
- The academic library should plan for a digital strategy to overcome and manage the pandemic, to minimise the risk.
- To overcome the poor Internet connection, the academic library should arrange a high-speed Internet connection for smooth service.

## Conclusion

Around the world, the outbreak of COVID-19 has had a great impact on all aspects of our life. It posed a threat, caused frustration and depression, which led to poverty, unemployment, and so on. It also had a great impact on the education sector, as there was almost two years of lockdown, which caused the education sector to move from OFFLINE to ONLINE classes. Academic libraries

around the world have faced the biggest challenges in transforming offline resources into online resources. Most of the libraries around the world, which were operating manually, were affected a lot as they could not serve their users efficiently. The information did not reach the user in their time of need. Hence, this paper conducted a study to explore the impact of COVID-19 on academic libraries. COVID-19 has offered both challenges and opportunities to learn technological advancements, to maximise the usage of library resources and services during such a pandemic. So, there is a need to re-plan and re-organise services according to the situation.

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