

# The essential role of libraries in rural areas

## Helping bridge the rural-urban divide

Pakistan Today (Lahore) · 17 Feb 2025 · 05 · Abid Hussain The writer is the Deputy Director library at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad. He can be reached at writetoabidhussain@gmail.com

LIBRARIES have always been considered as information hubs. Their role in providing equitable information are essentials in both rural and urban areas, but their importance in rural areas is more important than that of urban areas.

Rural areas are places where access to information, education, and technology is often limited. It is said that significant portions of the world's population still reside in rural areas. Mostly, people in rural areas face numerous challenges like basic health facilities, education, transportation, loadshedding, libraries and so on. Nevertheless, digital inclusion, community development and lower literacies are some burning issues of every rural area.

In a country like Pakistan, most people are living in rural areas where they face different challenges like quality health facilities, loadshedding, poor infrastructure, education and libraries. In community development, the role of libraries is crucial, but a significant portion of the rural population lacks access to these essential services.

Rural libraries serve as vital hubs for social progress, empowerment, and learning. However, they have largely been overlooked by governments. A key role of rural libraries is to bridge the information gap between urban and rural communities, ensuring equitable access to knowledge and resources. In many developed and developing countries, several opportunities have been extended to the people of rural areas, like access to clean waters, basic health communities, educational institutions and reliable internet services; however, in Pakistan, the situation is totally different.

Rural libraries have received no attention from either the provincial or federal government. Libraries provide a space where individuals, particularly students and researchers, can access the wealth of knowledge through the rural libraries. Libraries in rural areas play a vital role in supporting local communities and contributing to the country's literacy rates. Many communities in Pakistan lack proper schools or suffer from poorly equipped educational institutions.

Rural libraries can engage children and adults through reading programs, book clubs, workshops, and skill-building initiatives, provided the government prioritizes their role in improving socio-economic conditions. Libraries in rural areas serve as a gathering place where people engage in discussions, workshops, and community events. Libraries in rural communities can serve as career centers by providing access to business-related information and offering job search assistance through local newspapers.

With rapid advancement in technology, libraries in rural areas can provide internet facilities and digital resources to the local community. As we know, rural areas in Pakistan are facing a signi-

ficant digital division due to poor infrastructure and limited technology literacy. Libraries in rural areas can equip the local community with Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Information Technology can help them to bridge the digital gap between urban and rural areas. Such initiatives will not only enhance the digital literacy of the rural community but also create opportunities to put them in the global knowledge economy.

Rural libraries have the potential to empower marginalized groups, including women and underprivileged communities. In many rural areas of Pakistan, girls and women have limited access to educational opportunities due to their cultural and financial barriers. It is the responsibility of the government of Pakistan to provide them safe spaces where women and underprivileged communities can access educational resources free of cost, particularly in discussion programs and skills development initiatives. This step can be helpful for gender quality and social inclusion.

Libraries are vital hubs for community development. The government should recognize and support the underserved rural population as an integral part of society. Rural areas are facing numerous challenges like inadequate funding, trained personnel, and insufficient infrastructure for schools in rural areas, despite the immense challenges to the government of Pakistan, libraries will enhance their socio-economic lives.

By extending its services to rural areas, the government can help balance population distribution and reduce urban overcrowding. Libraries in rural areas are not just buildings with books. They are true centres of knowledge for the empowerment and progress of the rural public. Rural areas are the backbone of our nation; neglecting them will not only create challenges for the government but also widen the digital divide between urban and rural communities. It is the government's responsibility to invest in and develop libraries and educational institutions in rural areas. Ensuring the sustainability and expansion of rural libraries can significantly contribute to reducing inequalities and providing inclusive development.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of our population resides in rural areas. However, essential services such as healthcare, education, clean water, and libraries are fundamental rights for rural communities, just as they are for urban populations. The government and policymakers must recognize the critical role of libraries with the help of public and private partnerships, community engagement, and innovative funding models to sustain a better future for the rural community. Moreover, the government should extend internet services to empower the youth in rural areas.

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