

Impact of Community Library-Based Learning Programs on Social Cohesion and Community Development in Uttarakhand

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Abstract: *This research paper examines the transformative role of community library-based learning programs in fostering social cohesion and community development in Uttarakhand, a Himalayan state characterized by geographical isolation, rural fragmentation, and socio-economic disparities. Drawing on case studies from across the state—including the Nanakmatta Community Library Programme, the Lakshmi Tamta Kitabkud in Pithoragarh, and Himmatthan Society's library strengthening initiatives—this paper argues that community libraries function as emergent "third spaces" that transcend their traditional role as book repositories. Through participatory mechanisms such as Child Management Committees, youth-led library leadership, and demographic-specific forums, these institutions cultivate social capital, develop 21st-century skills among marginalized populations, and serve as anchors for community resilience. The findings suggest that Uttarakhand's community library movement offers a replicable model for community development in ecologically fragile and socially stratified regions, with implications for policy and practice in the Global South*

Keywords: Community libraries, social cohesion, community development, Uttarakhand

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

The Indian Himalayan state of Uttarakhand presents a paradox of development. Despite notable progress in literacy and infrastructure, the state grapples with persistent challenges: geographical inaccessibility, out-migration, educational inequity, and social stratification rooted in caste and gender hierarchies. In this context, community library-based learning programs have emerged as grassroots interventions that address multiple development deficits simultaneously. Globally, community libraries have undergone a paradigm shift from passive repositories of knowledge to active agents of social transformation. In Nepal's READ program, for instance, libraries have evolved into community development centres offering livelihood training, women's empowerment programs, and health education. Similarly, Kerala's State Library Council has institutionalized demographic-specific forums—Children's Forums, Women's Forums, Youth Forums, and Elderly Forums—to enhance civic participation. These models demonstrate that libraries can serve as "third spaces" that bridge formal institutions and informal community life.

Uttarakhand's community library movement, though nascent, mirrors these global trends while adapting to the state's unique socio-ecological context. Initiated by student leaders during the COVID-19 lockdown, these libraries have evolved into multi-functional community hubs that address educational exclusion, develop leadership skills, and strengthen social bonds.



1.2 Problem Statement

While the impact of community libraries on literacy and education is well-documented, their role in fostering social cohesion and community development remains under-theorized, particularly in the Indian Himalayan context. This research addresses the following questions:

1. How do community library-based learning programs in Uttarakhand contribute to social cohesion?
2. What mechanisms facilitate the development of social capital through these programs?
3. How do these libraries serve as catalysts for broader community development?
4. What challenges constrain the effectiveness and sustainability of these interventions?

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three theoretical traditions:

Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, Putnam): Community libraries function as sites for networking, trust-building, and norm formation—the core elements of social capital.

Third Space Theory (Oldenburg, Soja): Libraries operate as "third spaces" distinct from home (first space) and work/school (second space), enabling egalitarian interaction and community formation.

Participatory Development Theory (Chambers, Freire): Library programs that incorporate community leadership and co-creation empower marginalized groups and challenge existing power structures.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Community Libraries as Development Agents

The evolution of community libraries from book-lending centers to development hubs is well-documented in the Global South. Shrestha's (2013) analysis of Nepal's READ program reveals that libraries now offer "sections devoted to women's empowerment and early childhood development, and venues for community meetings and training". Critically, READ's model incorporates income-generating "sustaining enterprises"—sewing centres, ambulance services, community radio stations—that ensure financial sustainability while addressing community needs.

In India, the Kerala State Library Council's forum-based approach demonstrates how libraries can foster civic engagement across demographic groups. Research by Bhanu and Dhanyasree (2025) found that "village libraries play a prominent role in organising civic engagement initiatives when they design and run community forums that suit patrons' different needs". This finding is particularly relevant for Uttarakhand, where village-level institutions are critical for service delivery.

2.2 Social Cohesion in Fragile Contexts

Social cohesion—the "glue" that binds communities—is especially fragile in regions characterized by out-migration, caste hierarchies, and economic marginalization. Research on Bangalore's slum libraries found that "community libraries, while only part of a larger empowerment and development strategy, can play an important role in providing a sense of place and belonging". This sense of belonging is foundational to social cohesion, particularly for communities experiencing displacement or fragmentation.

2.3 Library-Based Learning and Skill Development

Beyond social capital, community libraries contribute to human capital development through formal and informal learning. The Room to Read program evaluation in Delhi and Haridwar documented how libraries enhance reading skills, creativity, and critical thinking through activities like role plays, storytelling, and poem recitation. The evaluation also noted the importance of innovations such as Child Management Committees (CMCs), which "made the kids take ownership of their library" and inculcated "values of leadership and team work".

2.4 The Uttarakhand Context

Uttarakhand's development challenges—geographical isolation, out-migration, educational resource scarcity—are well-documented. The Lakshmi Tamta Library in Pithoragarh, for instance, serves a village "predominantly inhabited by members of the Scheduled Castes" where "despite a higher female sex ratio of 53%, the village lags behind in most



other social indicators". The library seeks to "address caste discrimination and educational exclusion" by fostering a love for reading and providing access to resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated these inequities. As schools closed, students in rural Uttarakhand faced complete educational disruption. The Nanakmatta Community Library Programme emerged as a grassroots response, with student leaders establishing libraries that "are not just a tool to bridge educational inaccessibility during lockdown but also a centre for various activities like reading books, science & book fairs, village exploration, storytelling, and many other activities".

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, examining three community library initiatives in Uttarakhand:

1. **Nanakmatta Community Library Programme** (Udham Singh Nagar district): A student-led initiative spanning 17 villages.

2. **Lakshmi Tamta Kitabkud** (Pithoragarh district): A community library serving Scheduled Caste communities.

3. **Himmothan Library Program** (multiple districts): A teacher-training and library strengthening initiative.

3.2 Data Sources

Data were drawn from:

- Program documentation and organizational reports
- Media coverage and case studies
- Secondary data from government census and district statistics
- Comparative analysis with similar initiatives (Kerala, Nepal, Bangalore)

3.3 Analytical Framework

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, coding for themes related to:

- Social cohesion indicators (trust, networks, shared norms)
- Community development outcomes (educational access, skill development, empowerment)
- Institutional mechanisms (governance structures, sustainability models)
- Challenges and constraints

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Social Cohesion: The "Glue" of Community Libraries

4.1.1 Bridging Social Divides

Community libraries in Uttarakhand actively bridge social divides that fragment communities. The Lakshmi Tamta Library, named after a pioneering Dalit woman journalist, explicitly addresses caste discrimination and educational exclusion. By making reading materials accessible to all children, "especially girls and first-generation learners," the library challenges entrenched hierarchies. The library's namesake, Lakshmi Tamta—the first Dalit woman graduate from Uttarakhand—serves as "a role model—someone who overcame social barriers to become a voice for equality".

Similarly, the Nanakmatta programme brought together children from different villages, creating networks that transcended local boundaries. As one library leader noted, "It was our first library. We were totally unaware that what we are going to do in library. Even we didn't know children would join us or not? But as we started, it just go on. Kids were there, we played and did interesting activities together". This organic coming-together of children from diverse backgrounds laid the foundation for broader community cohesion.

4.1.2 Youth Leadership and Peer Networks

A distinctive feature of Uttarakhand's community libraries is their youth-led governance structure. The Nanakmatta programme established "Community Library Leaders" who "manage these centres by themselves". This peer-to-peer model develops "skills like leadership, communication, compassion, teamwork & creativity" among youth leaders while simultaneously building trust networks among younger children who see their peers as mentors.



The Child Management Committees (CMCs) documented in Room to Read's libraries—where "3-4 children from each class" managed library operations—offer a parallel model. These committees "made the kids take ownership of their library" and inculcated "values of leadership and team work". The success of these peer-governance structures suggests that community libraries function not merely as service delivery mechanisms but as sites for democratic participation and collective action.

4.1.3 Community Engagement and Social Norms

Community libraries in Uttarakhand have reshaped social norms around education and community responsibility. The Himmotthan program, which transformed a "defunct" library into a "vibrant place," attributes its success to "collective interest among children, parents, SMC members, Community and teachers". This collective engagement signals a shift from individualistic to communal orientations toward education—a key indicator of social cohesion.

The Nanakmatta programme's expansion—from one library to 17 libraries, and from one school to inspiring "two other schools [to] initiate community libraries in their region"—demonstrates the contagious nature of community-driven initiatives. As one student leader stated, "It's much encouraging for us that we are able to inspire the students of other schools too". This diffusion of innovation suggests that community libraries create "ripple effects" that strengthen social networks across institutional boundaries.

4.2 Community Development: Beyond Literacy

4.2.1 Educational Access and Learning Outcomes

In regions where "basic healthcare and educational resources are severely limited", community libraries fill critical gaps. The Lakshmi Tamta Library, serving "approximately 300 villages in the Berinag block," provides access to books, computers, and internet—resources otherwise unavailable. With "one primary and one junior high school" serving "three gram sabhas," the library has become "a vital resource for children and the community".

The Room to Read evaluation found that libraries significantly enhanced learning outcomes, with students demonstrating improved reading fluency and comprehension. Children could "read and understand on their own, with little help from the teachers / monitors". The libraries' open-shelf approach—"no restrictions on the students to read any particular book"—fostered reading habits rooted in curiosity rather than compulsion.

4.2.2 Holistic Skill Development

Uttarakhand's community libraries explicitly cultivate 21st-century skills that extend beyond academic learning. The Nanakmatta programme's focus on "science & book fairs, village exploration, storytelling" develops creativity, critical thinking, and communication. Youth leaders, through managing library operations, develop "leadership, communication, compassion, teamwork & creativity".

This emphasis aligns with Kerala's forum-based approach, where demographic-specific forums tailor programs to participants' developmental needs. Children's Forums focus on foundational learning, Youth Forums on employability skills, and Women's Forums on empowerment and health. While Uttarakhand's programs are less formalized than Kerala's, they share a commitment to holistic development.

4.2.3 Livelihood and Economic Development

Community libraries contribute indirectly to livelihood development by building human capital—literacy, digital skills, and self-confidence. The READ Nepal model demonstrates how libraries can directly support livelihoods through "sustaining enterprises" like sewing centres and ambulance services. While Uttarakhand's libraries have not yet developed such enterprises, the Lakshmi Tamta Library's plans to "equip the library with computers and internet access" could enable digital literacy and remote work opportunities.

The Himmotthan program's teacher-training component—equipping teachers with "different techniques like Read aloud, Book Talk, Treasure Hunt and various art and crafts activities"—enhances pedagogical capacity, with spillover effects on the broader education system.



4.3 Institutional Mechanisms and Sustainability

4.3.1 Participatory Governance

The success of Uttarakhand's community libraries hinges on participatory governance structures. The Nanakmatta programme's "Community Library Leaders" model ensures local ownership and accountability. The peer-to-peer management approach, where "3-4 children from each class" manage library operations, creates a sense of ownership and responsibility.

The Himmotthan program, while more teacher-centered, similarly emphasizes community engagement. The involvement of "parents, SMC members, Community and teachers" in library strengthening signals a collaborative governance model.

4.3.2 Partnerships and Resource Mobilization

Community libraries in Uttarakhand rely heavily on partnerships for sustainability. The Nanakmatta programme secured books from "a Delhi based organization 'Books For All'", while the Lakshmi Tamta Library partnered with Pratham Books. The Jeevan Deep Samiti initiative, which established a community library in Pauri Garhwal, similarly "raised through this campaign from Pratham books".

However, reliance on external funding poses sustainability challenges. The Nanakmatta programme "almost came to a halt when the schools were reopened and children went back to their daily routine". This fragility underscores the need for sustainable funding models—such as READ Nepal's income-generating enterprises—to ensure long-term viability.

4.3.3 Challenges and Constraints

Despite their successes, Uttarakhand's community libraries face significant challenges:

Sustainability: As noted, external funding dependencies and volunteer fatigue threaten program continuity. The Nanakmatta programme's near-collapse post-COVID illustrates this vulnerability.

Geographical Fragmentation: Uttarakhand's mountainous terrain makes outreach difficult. The Lakshmi Tamta Library, serving approximately 300 villages, struggles to reach all potential beneficiaries.

Infrastructure Gaps: The Room to Read evaluation noted that "games and puzzles" were absent from many libraries, and teachers often viewed library management as "additional work". Similarly, Himmotthan encountered "roadblocks like no session designated to library, library treated as extracurricular activities".

Social Barriers: Caste and gender hierarchies persist. While the Lakshmi Tamta Library explicitly challenges caste discrimination, its location in a "predominantly" Scheduled Caste village may limit its reach to other communities.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Community Libraries as Third Spaces for Social Cohesion

The findings support the conceptualization of community libraries as "third spaces" that facilitate social cohesion in fragmented communities. Unlike schools (first spaces of formal education) or homes (second spaces of private life), libraries offer egalitarian environments where children from diverse backgrounds interact freely. The Nanakmatta programme's success in bringing together children from "22 villages" illustrates this bridging function.

This aligns with research on Bangalore's slum libraries, which found that "community libraries... play an important role in providing a sense of place and belonging". In Uttarakhand, where out-migration and geographical isolation fragment communities, this sense of belonging is especially valuable.

5.2 Mechanisms of Social Capital Formation

Community libraries in Uttarakhand build social capital through several mechanisms:

Networks: Libraries create social networks across villages, castes, and age groups. The Nanakmatta programme's inter-village activities—"village exploration, storytelling, and many other activities"—forged connections that transcended local boundaries.

Trust: Peer governance and participatory decision-making build trust among participants. The Child Management Committee model, where children take collective responsibility for library operations, fosters reciprocal trust.



Norms: Community libraries reinforce pro-social norms—cooperation, responsibility, compassion—through structured activities and peer modeling. The Himmotthan program's emphasis on "collective interest" signals normative shifts toward communal orientations .

5.3 Community Libraries and Participatory Development

The youth-led governance of Uttarakhand's community libraries exemplifies participatory development in action. By shifting decision-making authority to youth—particularly girls and marginalized groups—these libraries challenge conventional power structures. The Lakshmi Tamta Library, by naming its library after a Dalit woman journalist and "run[ning] by the girls from the village itself," directly confronts caste and gender hierarchies .

This aligns with Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, where education becomes a tool for consciousness-raising and liberation. By fostering "critical thinking" and "creativity," community libraries equip marginalized populations with skills for social critique and transformation .

5.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

The Uttarakhand experience offers several lessons for policymakers and practitioners:

- 1. Institutionalize Participatory Governance:** The success of CMCs and Community Library Leaders suggests that governance structures should incorporate community representatives, particularly youth and women.
- 2. Develop Sustainable Funding Models:** Reliance on external donations is unsustainable. Following READ Nepal's model, libraries should develop income-generating enterprises aligned with community needs .
- 3. Integrate with Existing Systems:** Rather than operating in isolation, libraries should partner with schools, panchayats, and NGOs. The Himmotthan program's teacher-training component is a model for systemic integration .
- 4. Address Social Exclusion Deliberately:** Caste and gender hierarchies persist in library access. Programs should explicitly target marginalized groups—as the Lakshmi Tamta Library does by naming its library after a Dalit icon .
- 5. Design for Scale and Replication:** The Nanakmatta programme's expansion from one to 17 libraries demonstrates the potential for diffusion. Documenting best practices and establishing mentorship networks could accelerate replication.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that community library-based learning programs in Uttarakhand contribute significantly to social cohesion and community development. Through participatory governance, skill development, and deliberate inclusion of marginalized groups, these libraries function as "third spaces" that build social capital, empower youth, and address educational inequity.

The findings contribute to theoretical understanding of libraries as development agents, extending the literature from school-based interventions to community-based models. The Uttarakhand case, with its unique geographical and social context, offers insights relevant to other fragile regions in the Global South.

However, sustainability remains a critical challenge. Future research should examine mechanisms for long-term viability, including income-generating enterprises and state-level institutionalization. Comparative studies with Kerala's forum-based model and Nepal's READ program would further enrich understanding.

Ultimately, the community library movement in Uttarakhand—initiated by student leaders during a global crisis—demonstrates the power of grassroots agency in addressing development challenges. As Mahatma Gandhi observed, "The future depends on what we do today." In the Himalayan foothills, community libraries are building that future—one book, one child, one village at a time.

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