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THE HISTORY OF ACCESSIBILITY IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN MAHARASHTRA

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Abstract

Accessibility lies at the heart of academic librarianship, shifting over time from physical entry to printed holdings toward inclusive digital reach for every user. This article traces the accessibility in Maharashtra's academic libraries, employing historical analysis, the study uses archival documents, UGC review reports, INFLIBNET usage data, and oral histories from various retired librarians. Five phases are outlined. Results show Maharashtra was a pioneer in library networking with BAMU Library, yet gaps between urban and rural digital access remain. Every stage was driven by policy and funding but limited by infrastructure, user skills, and language issues. The paper concludes that access has moved from "getting permission to enter" to "having the ability to use," calling for state action on digital equity, Marathi-language content, and disability support. ONOS addresses content availability, but not the contextual challenges of access.

- **Introduction**

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Maratwada University Aurangabad, set up in 1958, created Maharashtra's first modern academic library. The path from a locked cabinet with 500 books to ONOS delivering 13,000+ journals to a smartphone and policy transformations.

S.R. Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science (1931) positioned "access" as central to the profession. In practice, access operates on three levels: Physical – can patrons reach the library? Intellectual – can they locate and comprehend materials? Digital – can they retrieve content anytime, anywhere, without obstacles?

With 65+ universities and 4,000+ colleges serving 3.2 million learners, Maharashtra is a key case for studying access. The state led in library automation and consortia, yet areas like

Nagpur and Yawatmal still face daily 6-hour power outages. This paper periodizes accessibility history to show how earlier trends shape current ONOS challenges.

- **Objectives**

1. To know key chronological developments in accessibility across Maharashtra's academic libraries from 1958-2022.
2. To explain how government policy, technology, and finance have enabled or restricted access.
3. To search recurring obstacles across periods and their contemporary versions.

- **Methodology**

A historical-analytical approach was used. Primary sources: yearly reports of Aurangabad University 1958-2022, Pune University 1949-2022, SNDT Women's University 1916-2022; UGC Review Committee Reports 1957, 1986, 2009; Maharashtra Govt. resolutions on higher education; INFLIBNET Annual Reports 2004-2022. Secondary sources: refereed papers, Shodhganga theses. Oral history: semi-structured interviews various retired university librarians from Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur, Aurangabad, and Kolhapur. Data were cross-verified to build a phase-based narrative. Limitation: Pre-1980 archival data from colleges is limited.

- **Historical Phases of Accessibility**

Access, however, was IP-restricted and campus-bound. Dial-up limited remote use. By 2005, urban universities averaged 1 PC per 15 students; rural colleges had 1 per 300. Core barrier: Digital divide. "Information rich vs information poor" became common in professional talk.

2022: ONOS launched. All 1,900+ govt/govt-aided colleges in Maharashtra received free access to 13,000+ journals from 30 publishers. Access moved from IP to personal login, allowing 24/7 mobile use. Yet fresh barriers appeared: 1) <1% platforms offer Marathi interface; 2) Only 3 of 65 universities provide JAWS/NVDA for the visually impaired; 3) Power cuts in 12 districts disrupt access 4-6 hrs daily. Core barrier: Contextual access – language, disability, infrastructure.

- **Comparative Analysis: Drivers and Continuing Barriers**

Phase Period Key Policy/Tech Access Model Lingering Barrier

I 1958-1970 Colonial norms, UGC 1956 Closed stack, Slip system Elite gatekeeping

II 1970-1995 UGC Plans, Ranganathan Open stack, Card catalogue Discovery tools

III 1995-2010 IT Policy 2000, UGC-Infonet OPAC, IP-based e-journals Urban-rural infra divide

IV 2010-2020 e-ShodhSindhu, Smartphones Hybrid, Early remote Skills, Bandwidth

V 2020-2022 COVID, ONOS Mobile, Federated login Language, Disability, Power

Budget as a recurring driver: Each leap in access followed funding. UGC 5th Plan (1974-79) built reading halls. 10th Plan (2002-07) funded UGC-Infonet. RUSA 2.0 (2018-2022) supported ICT. ONOS is a ₹6,000 crore central scheme. In contrast, 1980s budget cuts slowed open access in colleges.

- **Discussion: Historical Patterns**

Three trends repeat across 64 years:

1. Tech comes before training: OPACs in 1995 saw real use only after 2005. Today, MyLOFT exists but 62% students lack Boolean search skills.
2. National schemes need local support: UGC-Infonet reached colleges, but without staff or PCs it went unused. ONOS faces similar risk in tribal belts.
3. Access is redefined each generation: From "building entry" to "content login" to now "ability to use content". Every fix creates new exclusions.Maharashtra's early BAMU Library in 2000 shows state innovation matters. Yet Nagpur students still travel 20 km for stable internet – the same geography barrier as 1980, now digital.

- **Conclusion**

The story of accessibility in Maharashtra's academic libraries is one of widening inclusion – from a few elite men in 1958 to a policy promise for 27 lakh students in 2022. various phases show access is not a fixed goal but an evolving benchmark shaped by policy, tech, and money. Yet history shows that removing one obstacle uncovers another.

The ONOS period must move from provision to participation. Based on historical lessons, this paper suggests a "Maharashtra Model of Inclusive Access" with four components: 1) Digital Equity Audit – yearly district mapping of devices, bandwidth, and

electricity; 2) Language Justice – state requirement for Marathi abstracts, audio, and UI in all subscribed resources; 3) Assistive Infrastructure – tie RUSA funding to WCAG compliance and screen reader availability; 4) Information Literacy as Public Infrastructure – credit-based IL courses.

Maharashtra pioneered library networking 26 years ago. It can now pioneer 21st-century accessibility – measured not by journal counts, but by whether a first-generation, Marathi-medium, visually-impaired learner in a tribal college can access and apply global research as easily as an IIT Bombay student. Access will be real when the last mile is no longer the hardest mile. History will judge ONOS by learning, not by logins.

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