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Accessibility and Inclusive Library Services for Persons with Disabilities in Higher Education

Jayashree Tudu¹, Sangram Keshari Rout^{2,*}

¹Berhampur University, Bhanja Bihar, Berhampur, Ganjam, Odisha, India

²National Institute of Science Education and Research (NISER), Odisha, India

Correspondence: E-mail: sangramkesharirout001@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Academic libraries play an important role in ensuring equitable access to information, learning resources, and educational environments for persons with disabilities. This study examined accessibility and inclusive practices at the Central Library of the National Institute of Science Education and Research (NISER), India. A descriptive approach was employed using direct observation of the library environment and an accessibility checklist covering physical access, internal circulation, seating, sanitation facilities, accessible information resources, and assistive technologies. The findings indicate that the library provides several supportive physical-accessibility facilities, including accessible pathways, ramps, elevators, circulation spaces, study areas, and adapted service facilities. However, important gaps remain in services for users with visual and hearing disabilities, accessible-format collections, specialized information services, and assistive technologies. The study highlights the need for a more comprehensive accessibility framework that integrates physical infrastructure, accessible information resources, assistive technologies, and inclusive library services to strengthen participation and educational access for persons with disabilities in higher education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Accessibility should therefore extend beyond entry into a building. Students with disabilities may require accessible parking, ramps, elevators, circulation spaces, appropriately designed furniture, adapted service counters, accessible toilets, tactile and visual signage, assistive technologies, and information resources in alternative formats. Academic-library accessibility consequently involves the interaction of physical infrastructure, information resources, technology, and service provision [1-5].

Previous research has shown that persons with disabilities may experience difficulties accessing library facilities and services when institutional environments are not designed inclusively [1]. Accessibility of library websites and digital services is also important because students with visual and physical disabilities increasingly depend on electronic information for learning and research [5]. These findings demonstrate that inclusive library services should address both physical and digital access. The issue is particularly important in higher education because access to information contributes directly to participation in learning, research, and academic life. Inclusive educational policies in India have progressively emphasized educational opportunities for children and learners with disabilities [2, 6, 7]. However, the practical realization of inclusion depends on whether institutions translate policy principles into accessible environments and services.

Academic libraries can support this process by implementing universal and inclusive design principles. Features such as accessible circulation routes, appropriate furniture, adapted technology, alternative-format collections, and specialized assistance can reduce barriers experienced by users with disabilities. Assistive technologies are particularly important because they can support access to digital documents, printed information, communication, and independent navigation [4]. Accessibility also has an informational dimension. Library resources should be available in formats that can be used by individuals with different sensory or print-related needs. International developments such as the Marrakesh Treaty have reinforced the importance of improving access to published works for persons who are blind, visually impaired, or otherwise print disabled [8]. Thus, accessibility involves not only physical entry into a library but also meaningful access to its information resources.

The National Institute of Science Education and Research (NISER) is a higher-education and research institution in Odisha, India, with a central library that supports teaching, learning, and scientific research. The original study evaluates existing accessibility provisions in this library through direct observation and a structured checklist. The assessment includes mobility-related facilities, internal library spaces, sanitation facilities, provisions for visually impaired users, accessible library materials, and information services for users with disabilities.

Although previous studies have examined library accessibility for persons with disabilities [1, 3, 5], institution-specific assessment remains important because accessibility conditions depend on the actual infrastructure, resources, technologies, and services available within each library. A local assessment can therefore identify both existing strengths and areas requiring improvement. Accordingly, this study aimed to evaluate accessibility and inclusive practices at the NISER Central Library for persons with disabilities. Specifically, the study sought to: (i) examine the existing physical and service-related accessibility facilities; (ii) identify accessibility gaps and barriers; and (iii) propose priority improvements based on the observed conditions and relevant accessibility practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Inclusive Education and Access for Persons with Disabilities

Inclusive education emphasizes equitable participation in educational environments regardless of disability or individual differences. Achieving inclusion requires more than enrolment in educational institutions; students must also be able to access learning spaces, information resources, communication systems, and institutional services. In India, educational policies have progressively addressed the needs of children and learners with disabilities. Policy initiatives have emphasized educational opportunities, institutional responsibilities, and provisions intended to reduce barriers to participation [2, 6, 7]. However, inclusive policy can achieve its intended purpose only when educational institutions provide environments that students with disabilities can actually use. Higher-education accessibility consequently requires coordinated attention to infrastructure, information, technology, and institutional support. Libraries are especially relevant because they connect students with academic information, study facilities, digital resources, and research services. Restricting access to any of these components can create educational disadvantages for users with disabilities.

2.2. Accessibility in Academic Libraries

Academic-library accessibility encompasses physical, informational, technological, and service dimensions. Physical accessibility includes the ability to approach, enter, move through, and use library spaces independently. Relevant features may include accessible parking, ramps, elevators, wide circulation areas, suitable furniture, appropriately positioned service counters, and accessible toilet facilities. Research on academic libraries has demonstrated that persons with disabilities may encounter barriers when facilities, services, or information resources are not designed to accommodate diverse user needs [1, 3]. Library accessibility therefore needs to be examined systematically rather than assumed from the presence of a limited number of accessible facilities. Accessibility of digital library environments is equally important. Library websites, electronic resources, and digital interfaces can either expand or restrict access for students with disabilities. Website design and usability have therefore become important components of inclusive academic-library services [5]. Spatial accessibility can also influence library use. The location, arrangement, and physical reachability of library services determine whether users can independently access the resources they need [9]. Thus, accessibility should be evaluated across the complete user experience, from arrival at the library to accessing information and services.

2.3. Assistive Technology and Accessible Information

Assistive technology can reduce barriers experienced by persons with visual, physical, sensory, or print-related disabilities. Technologies such as screen readers, adapted keyboards, text-to-speech systems, Braille-support systems, and accessible digital formats can increase independence in accessing academic information [4].

Accessible information provision should also include materials in formats appropriate for different user needs. These may include audiobooks, digital books, Braille materials, captioned audiovisual materials, and other adapted information resources. The Marrakesh Treaty provides an important international framework for improving access to published works for people who are blind, visually impaired, or otherwise print disabled [8]. The availability of assistive technology alone, however, does not guarantee effective accessibility.

Institutions also require appropriate infrastructure, staff awareness, accessible service procedures, and collections that can be used with adaptive systems. Therefore, assistive technology should be considered part of an integrated accessibility strategy rather than an isolated technological solution.

2.4. Accessibility Assessment in Libraries

Structured accessibility assessment can help institutions identify which facilities and services meet user needs and where gaps remain. Checklist-based approaches are useful because they allow multiple accessibility dimensions to be examined systematically. Previous library-accessibility research has used structured evaluation to examine physical access, service provision, information resources, and facilities for users with disabilities [3]. Such assessments can support institutional planning by distinguishing available, partially available, and unavailable facilities. The present study adopts this approach to examine the NISER Central Library. Its assessment covers parking and entrance facilities, internal library spaces, toilet and washroom accessibility, facilities for visually impaired users, access to usable library materials, assistive technologies, and information services. These areas reflect the multidimensional nature of library accessibility described in previous research [1, 3-5].

3. METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive observational design to evaluate accessibility and inclusive practices at the NISER Central Library. The study focused on the accessibility conditions available to persons with disabilities within the existing library environment. The research did not involve an experimental intervention. Instead, the study documented existing facilities and compared observed conditions with accessibility criteria derived from relevant library-accessibility practices and checklist-based approaches.

3.2. Study Site

The study was conducted at the Central Library of the NISER, Odisha, India. The library supports the academic and research activities of the institution and provides physical and digital information services to its users. The assessment focused on the main library building and its directly observable accessibility provisions.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through direct observation of the library premises. The observation focused on accessibility-related features associated with mobility, internal circulation, study facilities, information access, assistive technology, and services for users with disabilities. A structured checklist was used to organize the observations. The checklist approach was informed by previous accessibility assessments of library facilities and services [3]. The observed criteria were grouped into the following areas:

- (i) parking and entrance facilities;
- (ii) internal library spaces;
- (iii) toilet and washroom facilities;
- (iv) facilities for blind and visually impaired users;
- (v) access to library materials in usable formats; and
- (vi) information services offered to users with disabilities.

Each criterion was classified according to its observed availability in the library. Secondary information was also used to support the description of institutional facilities and relevant accessibility practices. However, the principal findings of the study were based on the direct observation and checklist assessment of the NISER Central Library.

3.4. Accessibility Assessment

The assessment recorded each accessibility criterion as Available, Partially Available, or Not Available. This classification made it possible to identify areas in which the library already provided accessibility support and areas where further development was required. The evaluation covered physical access, accessible circulation, signage, furniture, sanitation facilities, assistive technology, alternative-format resources, and information services. Particular attention was given to provisions relevant to users with mobility, visual, hearing, and other accessibility needs. The observed checklist data were subsequently summarized to describe patterns of accessibility across the evaluated facility categories. These results are presented in **Table 1** and subsequently synthesized in **Figures 1 and 2**, which illustrate the distribution of accessibility provisions across major facility and disability-related categories.

3.5. Scope and Limitations of the Assessment

The study was limited to the main NISER Central Library building and did not directly involve library users as research participants. Therefore, the findings describe the accessibility of observed facilities and services rather than users' perceptions or experiences. The assessment primarily focused on physical and sensory accessibility. Consequently, the study does not provide a comprehensive evaluation of all forms of disability or all dimensions of inclusive library use. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and when planning future user-centered accessibility research.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Existing Accessibility Facilities at the NISER Central Library

The observational assessment showed that the NISER Central Library already provides several facilities supporting users with disabilities. Existing physical provisions include accessible parking near the entrance, circulation paths, ramps, handrails, elevators, wide corridors, study tables, service counters, appropriate lighting, quiet study areas, and assistive technology such as JAWS software. These facilities indicate that accessibility has been incorporated into several components of the library environment. However, accessibility should not be evaluated only by the presence of individual facilities. An inclusive academic library requires continuity of access from arrival at the building to movement within the library and, ultimately, access to information resources and services. Previous studies similarly emphasize that effective library accessibility involves facilities, information services, and usable resources rather than physical entry alone [1, 3, 5].

The original facility assessment is summarized in **Figure 1**. The evaluated facility groups demonstrate different levels of accessibility. Toilet and washroom facilities show the strongest result, while parking and internal library space demonstrate moderate levels of provision. Lower levels are observed for facilities supporting visually impaired users, accessible library materials, and specialized information services for persons with disabilities. The variation indicates that strong physical infrastructure in selected areas does not

necessarily result in comprehensive accessibility across the complete library service environment.

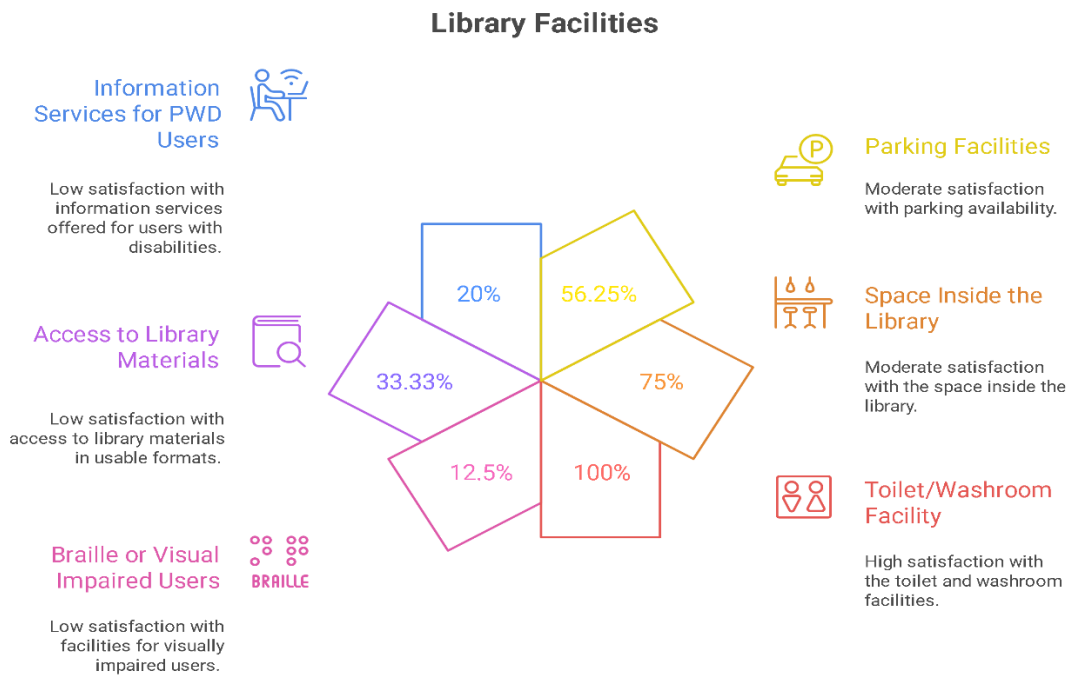


Figure 1. Library facilities details.

This distinction is important for inclusive education. Students with disabilities require not only physical access to educational buildings but also meaningful access to learning materials, technologies, and support services. Academic-library accessibility should therefore be interpreted as a multidimensional educational-support issue rather than solely an architectural requirement.

4.2. Accessibility Checklist

A more detailed assessment of the observed facilities is provided in **Table 1**. The checklist evaluates specific criteria as Available, Partially Available, or Not Available, allowing the accessibility profile of the library to be examined beyond the aggregated information shown in **Figure 1**. As presented in **Table 1**, the library demonstrates several strengths in physical mobility and internal circulation. A smooth, non-slip passage from the parking area to the entrance is available, as are safety railings along accessible ramps. Adequate clearance and maneuvering space are also available at doorways to accommodate wheelchairs and mobility aids.

Inside the library, several important accessibility features are available. These include clear directional signage, shelves at heights accessible to seated users, work tables and study surfaces at different heights, audio and visual fire-alarm systems, a service desk near the entrance, and adequate seating. These provisions are relevant because physical accessibility must continue beyond the entrance. Users who can enter a building but cannot independently reach shelves, tables, service desks, or other facilities still encounter functional barriers.

Table 1. Accessibility facilities checklist for the NISER Central Library.

FACILITIES	CHECKLIST	AVAILABLE	PARTIALLY AVAILABLE	NOT AVAILABLE
Parking Facilities	Designated parking spaces located near library entrance		✓	
	Symbols and signage identifying spaces reserved for persons with disabilities		✓	
	Smooth, non-slip surfaces providing accessible passage from parking to entrance	✓		
	Safety railings installed along all accessible ramps	✓		
	Sufficient clearance and maneuvering space at doorways to accommodate wheelchairs and mobility aids	✓		
	Clearly marked stairways with high-contrast color coding (preferably yellow) for visual identification	✓		
	Braille labels and tactile indicators on elevator buttons and signage	✓		
	Audio announcements and voice guidance systems for wayfinding and orientation	✓		
Space Inside the Library	Clear, simple directional signage and universally recognizable symbols	✓		
	Shelves under reach heights accessible to seated users	✓		
	Work tables and study surfaces available in multiple heights to accommodate different user needs	✓		
	Fire alarm systems, both audio and visual	✓		
	Service desk near the entrance	✓		
	Seating options in adequate quantity throughout the library space	✓		
Toilet/Washroom Facility	Prominent signage indicating the location and direction of toilet and washroom facilities	✓		
	Spacious toilet cubicles and bathroom areas designed to allow wheelchair entry and movement	✓		
	Washbasin and mirrors at appropriate height for seated and standing users	✓		
	Grab bars, railings, and flushing mechanisms positioned within comfortable reach of all users	✓		

Table 1 (continue). Accessibility facilities checklist for the NISER Central Library.

FACILITIES	CHECKLIST	AVAILABLE	PARTIALLY AVAILABLE	NOT AVAILABLE
Facilities for Braille or Visually Impaired Users	Dedicated reading and research area	✓		
	Separate information/reference desk staffed to provide specialized assistance to visually impaired users			✓
	Collection of audio recordings, digital formats, and multimedia materials designed for visual learners			✓
	Computers with adaptive technologies	✓		
	Collection of audiobooks, recorded periodicals, and digital audio versions of library materials			✓
	Braille editions and tactile illustrated books for blind users			✓
Access to Library Materials in Usable Formats	Digital books and e-publications	✓		
	Video/DVD books with sign languages			✓
	Computers within reach	✓		
	Specialized keyboards, touchpads, and input devices designed for users with limited mobility or dexterity			✓
Information Services Offered to Users with Disabilities	Library website designed with accessibility features (alt text, readable fonts, keyboard navigation)		✓	
	On-site or virtual sign language interpretation services for deaf users during library programs			✓
	SMS/Telephone/Email communication channels for information and assistance	✓		
	Large Print Books			✓
	Video content featuring captions, subtitles, and text descriptions of audio elements			✓

Toilet and washroom facilities represent another relatively strong area. The checklist identifies signage indicating toilet locations, spacious cubicles allowing wheelchair movement, washbasins and mirrors positioned for seated and standing users, and grab bars and flushing mechanisms within accessible reach. These facilities support greater independence and demonstrate the importance of considering everyday activities when evaluating inclusive educational environments.

Nevertheless, **Table 1** also identifies important limitations. Several facilities relevant to visual impairment are not fully available. These include specialized information assistance, accessible audio and Braille collections, and other resources required for independent information access. The checklist therefore reveals an important pattern: physical accessibility is generally stronger than information and sensory accessibility. This distinction

should guide future institutional improvements because accessibility is incomplete when students can physically enter and navigate a library but cannot independently use its information resources.

4.3. Accessible Library Materials and Information Services

Access to learning materials represents a critical component of inclusive library services. The checklist shows that digital books and e-publications are available, and computers are positioned within accessible reach. However, other resources are absent or limited, including video or DVD materials with sign language and specialized keyboards, touchpads, and input devices for users with limited mobility or dexterity. Similar limitations are visible in specialized information services. Communication through SMS, telephone, and email is available, whereas sign-language interpretation, large-print books, and video content incorporating captions, subtitles, and textual descriptions are not fully provided. The accessibility features of the library website are also reported as only partially available. These findings reinforce the need to distinguish between access to the library and access to library information. Physical ramps and elevators address mobility barriers, but they cannot compensate for inaccessible learning materials. Students with visual, hearing, or print-related disabilities may require alternative formats and technologies to use academic information independently. Assistive technologies can contribute substantially to reducing these barriers [4]. Accessible websites and electronic resources are also important for students with visual and physical disabilities [5]. Furthermore, access to adapted published materials is consistent with broader efforts to improve information availability for persons who are blind, visually impaired, or otherwise print disabled [8]. For the NISER Central Library, future accessibility development should therefore integrate physical infrastructure with collection development, accessible digital resources, and specialized information services.

4.4. Accessibility According to Disability-Related Needs

The original study further summarizes accessibility according to major disability-related categories in **Figure 2**. Physical or mobility accessibility represents the strongest disability-related accessibility dimension among those assessed, whereas provisions for visual disability are substantially lower. The figure also indicates an absence of facilities specifically identified for users with hearing disabilities and limited availability of adaptive technologies. This finding is important because an institution can appear physically accessible while remaining inaccessible to particular groups of users. Mobility-related infrastructure addresses only one dimension of disability. Visual accessibility may require tactile information, screen-reading technologies, Braille or audio resources, and appropriate digital interfaces. Hearing accessibility may require captioned audiovisual materials, visual alerts, sign-language support, and other communication accommodations. The absence of identified hearing-accessibility facilities represents a particularly important gap. The checklist similarly reports that on-site or virtual sign-language interpretation and captioned or subtitled video resources are not available. Consequently, the finding shown in **Figure 2** is supported by the detailed checklist assessment. From an inclusive-education perspective, this imbalance indicates that accessibility planning should move from a general concept of a “disabled user” toward recognition of different accessibility needs. Physical, visual, hearing, and other disabilities can create different barriers and therefore require different institutional responses.

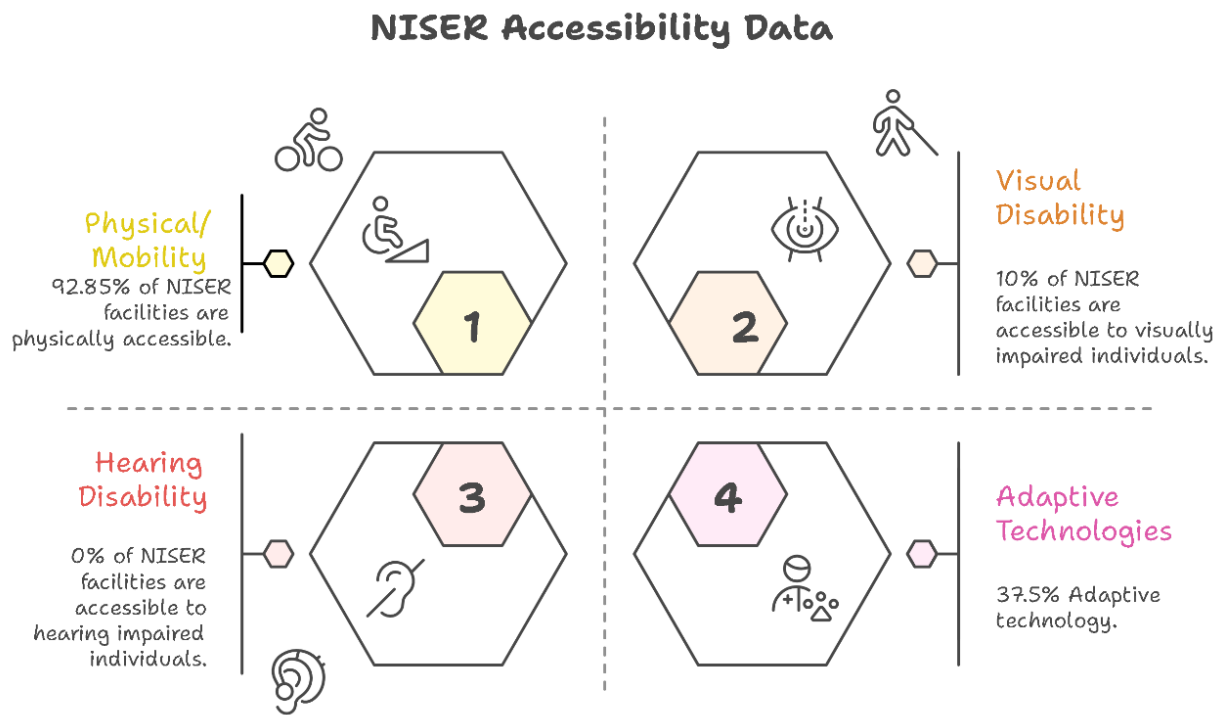


Figure 2. NISER accessibility details.

4.5. Comparison with Accessibility Practices in Neighboring Institutions

The original study also identifies practices implemented by neighboring academic institutions to illustrate possible directions for improving accessibility at NISER. These examples should be interpreted as contextual benchmarks rather than as a formal comparative institutional ranking because the present study did not apply the same checklist directly to each comparison institution. Berhampur University provides a useful example of specialized information support through a “Talking Library” and audio-recording facilities. The institution is also reported to use assistive technologies including NVDA software, KIBO devices, adaptive keyboards, and digital recorders. These provisions demonstrate how accessibility can extend beyond architectural design into dedicated information-support environments. Ravenshaw University is reported to maintain substantial accessible-format collections, including audiobooks, Braille books, and Braille journals. It also uses printing technology to convert conventional materials into Braille formats. This example is particularly relevant to the gaps identified at NISER concerning accessible library collections. KIIT University provides another example through the use of assistive software intended to support digital access. This study used tools such as NaturalReader, WebAnywhere, Emacspeak, and AVA. Taken together, these examples suggest that improvements at NISER need not focus exclusively on major structural modifications. Accessible collections, assistive software, specialized service areas, and adapted information technologies can complement existing physical facilities.

4.6. Priority Improvements for Inclusive Library Services

Based on the checklist and accessibility patterns shown in **Figures 1 and 2**, several improvement priorities can be identified.

- (i) The first is the development of a dedicated assistive-access zone. The original study proposes a space comparable to a Talking Library equipped with adaptive hardware and information resources for users with visual and mobility-related needs.
- (ii) The second priority is strengthening assistive technology. This study identifies several potential technologies, including multilingual text-to-speech systems, document-reading technologies, text-to-Braille systems, and tools intended to translate visual information into alternative forms. Such technologies should be selected according to actual user needs, compatibility with existing library systems, staff capacity, and long-term maintenance requirements.
- (iii) The third priority is expanding accessible collections. The checklist indicates weaknesses in Braille, audio, large-print, captioned, and other accessible-format materials. The study therefore recommends increasing Braille and audiobook collections and developing mechanisms for converting existing research resources into accessible formats.
- (iv) The fourth priority is strengthening assistive software provision. The original recommendations specifically identify screen-reading and accessibility tools intended to reduce technological barriers for visually impaired users. This recommendation is consistent with previous literature emphasizing the role of assistive technology in improving library access for persons with disabilities [4].

These priorities can be summarized in **Table 2** without changing the underlying findings. Accessibility improvement should be approached as an integrated process. Improving only one dimension, such as physical mobility, would leave significant informational and sensory barriers unresolved.

Table 2. Priority areas for improving accessibility at the NISER Central Library.

PRIORITY AREA	IDENTIFIED GAP	RECOMMENDED DIRECTION
Assistive-access space	Limited dedicated facilities for users with disabilities	Develop a dedicated assistive or Talking Library zone
Visual accessibility	Limited specialized resources and services	Expand screen-reading, Braille, audio, and text-to-speech support
Hearing accessibility	No specific facilities identified in the assessment	Develop captioned resources, visual communication support, and appropriate assistance
Accessible collections	Limited alternative-format materials	Expand Braille, audiobook, large-print, and accessible digital collections
Adaptive technology	Limited availability of specialized technologies	Provide appropriate assistive hardware and software
Digital accessibility	Website accessibility only partially available	Strengthen accessible design and compatibility with assistive technologies
Specialized information services	Limited specialized support	Develop staff-supported inclusive information services

4.7. Implications for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

The findings have broader implications for special needs and inclusive education. Academic libraries are part of the educational environment, and barriers within library spaces can affect students' ability to obtain information, complete coursework, participate in research, and engage independently in academic activities. The NISER case demonstrates that accessibility is multidimensional. Stronger provision in mobility-related infrastructure can coexist with

weaker visual, hearing, technological, and informational accessibility. Therefore, institutional assessments should avoid treating accessibility as a single binary condition. Inclusive academic-library development should instead connect four components: accessible physical environments, accessible information resources, assistive technologies, and inclusive services. Previous library studies similarly demonstrate the importance of examining facilities and services available to persons with disabilities [1, 3], while research on digital accessibility highlights the need to ensure that online information environments are also usable by students with disabilities [5]. For higher-education institutions, accessibility should therefore be considered part of educational quality and equal participation. Library accessibility can support greater independence by allowing students with disabilities to locate, access, and use learning resources with reduced dependence on others. The present findings also indicate the value of routine accessibility assessment. A structured checklist can help institutions identify gaps that may not be immediately visible through general observation. Repeated assessments can subsequently be used to evaluate whether improvements in infrastructure, technology, collections, and services result in a more inclusive library environment.

4.8. Limitations and Future Direction

The findings should be interpreted within the scope of the study. The assessment was conducted in the main NISER Central Library and therefore does not represent all academic libraries in India. In addition, users with disabilities were not directly involved as participants. Consequently, the study evaluates the availability of accessibility provisions, not the actual experiences, satisfaction, or perceived usability of those facilities. The study also primarily focuses on physical and sensory accessibility. Other dimensions of disability and individual learning needs were not comprehensively evaluated. Future studies should therefore incorporate direct participation from users with different disabilities to determine whether facilities classified as available are genuinely accessible and usable in practice. Despite these limitations, the combined evidence from the results identifies a clear pattern. NISER Central Library has established several important physical-accessibility provisions, but further development is required in accessible collections, hearing and visual support, assistive technologies, digital accessibility, and specialized information services. Addressing these dimensions together can strengthen the library's contribution to inclusive higher education and equitable academic participation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study evaluated accessibility and inclusive practices for persons with disabilities at the NISER Central Library. The findings demonstrate important strengths in physical accessibility, including mobility, circulation, study, and sanitation facilities, while identifying gaps in visual and hearing support, accessible collections, assistive technologies, digital accessibility, and specialized information services. Inclusive academic libraries require more than barrier-free physical environments. Physical access must be integrated with accessible information, adaptive technologies, and inclusive services. Strengthening these dimensions can enhance independent access to academic resources and support equitable participation of persons with disabilities in higher education.

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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