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Libraries and Social Justice: Bridging Information Inequalities across Caste, Gender, and Class

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries are often described as neutral, open institutions, yet access to library services remains shaped by caste, gender, and class in many postcolonial societies. This conceptual paper examines how these social hierarchies produce unequal information access, and proposes an integrated theoretical framework for understanding and addressing this problem. Drawing on Chatman's theory of information poverty, Savolainen's model of everyday life information seeking, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, and library and information science scholarship on social justice, the paper builds a four stage model that links structural inequality to insider or outsider status within libraries, to class shaped everyday information habits, and finally to the point where deliberate library practice can interrupt this chain and produce more equitable outcomes. The paper reviews evidence on caste-based exclusion in Indian public libraries, gender gaps in library internet access, and calls within the library profession to move away from claims of neutrality toward active social justice practice. It concludes with implications for library and information science theory, everyday library practice, library policy, and future empirical, comparative research, particularly across South-South contexts.

Keywords: libraries, social justice, information poverty, caste, gender, class, information access

1. Introduction

Libraries are usually described as neutral, open institutions that serve everyone equally. In practice, access to libraries and to the information they hold is shaped by the same social hierarchies that structure the rest of society. Caste, gender, and class continue to decide who feels welcome in a library and who can use its resources with confidence.

In India, membership fees as small as one hundred rupees a year can still exclude working class families, even though the amount barely affects a library's budget (ZNetwork, 2025). Grassroots groups such as India's Free Libraries Network argue that public libraries

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need to be explicitly anti-caste and feminist in practice, not only formally non-discriminatory on paper (ZNetwork, 2025).

Library and information science offers useful tools for understanding this problem. Chatman (1996) described how people who see themselves as outsiders develop habits of secrecy and risk avoidance that keep them away from information controlled by insiders. Savolainen (1995) showed that information seeking behaviour is shaped by a person's broader way of life, which is itself shaped by social class. Cooke, Sweeney, and Noble (2016) argued that library education needs to place social justice at the centre of its curriculum rather than treating it as an add-on topic.

Legal and sociological scholarship helps explain why caste, gender, and class do not act separately but combine to produce compounded disadvantage. Crenshaw (1991) showed that Black women face discrimination that cannot be understood by looking at race or gender alone. A similar logic applies in South Asian contexts, where Dalit women face discrimination shaped by caste, gender, and disability acting together, not as separate categories (Kothari et al., 2019).

This paper brings these two bodies of knowledge together. It asks three questions. First, how do existing library and information science theories explain unequal access to libraries along lines of caste, gender, and class? Second, what mechanisms, such as membership fees, physical space, digital access, and staff behaviour, produce this inequality? Third, how can libraries move from formally neutral institutions to active agents of social justice? The paper builds a conceptual framework connecting LIS theory with social justice theory, aimed at librarians and policymakers in postcolonial and Global South contexts.

2. Literature Review

Libraries, caste, and social exclusion: Research directly linking libraries and caste is still limited, and much of the available documentation comes from advocacy and journalism rather than peer reviewed LIS journals. India's Free Libraries Network, a coalition of more than one hundred community libraries, has pushed for a public library policy explicitly designed to counter caste and class exclusion, arguing that being free of cost is not enough if people do not feel safe or respected inside the library (ZNetwork, 2025). This connects to wider caste discrimination research. A study of caste-based discrimination in South India found that Dalit women face exclusion shaped jointly by caste, gender, and disability, showing that these identities interact rather than operate on their own (Kothari et al., 2019).

Libraries, gender, and the digital divide: Gender based exclusion in library settings has received more sustained empirical attention, particularly around internet access. Dixon et al. (2014) conducted a long-term study of public libraries and community technology centres in Austin, Texas, and found that male users consistently outnumbered female users at public internet access points, even after accounting for age and ethnicity. The same study found that women reported higher levels of both library anxiety and computer anxiety, showing that physical access alone does not guarantee equal use (Dixon et al., 2014). Comfort and confidence matter as much as availability.

Class, information poverty, and everyday life: Two theories from information behaviour research explain why class shapes library use. Chatman (1996) described how people who see themselves as outsiders to mainstream institutions develop behaviours such as secrecy and risk avoidance around information seeking, a pattern she observed among groups such as janitors and the elderly poor. She argued that insiders, who already hold institutional power, often reinforce this poverty by dismissing information sources from outside their own world (Chatman, 1996). Applied to libraries, this suggests that a library designed around middle-class assumptions may unintentionally signal to working class patrons that they are outsiders, regardless of stated policy.

Savolainen (1995) added a complementary layer through his model of everyday life information seeking. His study compared industrial workers and teachers and found that a person's way of life, shaped strongly by social class, affects how they seek and evaluate information. Workers leaned toward a more practical and affective style, while teachers leaned toward a more analytical style, a difference linked to their different social and educational worlds (Savolainen, 1995). This theory suggests that class differences in library use reflect learned habits and expectations rather than differences in ability or interest.

Social justice as a framework for library practice: Cooke and colleagues argue that library neutrality, meaning the idea that libraries should avoid taking a position on social issues, actually works against marginalised communities, since silence tends to protect existing power structures rather than challenge them (Gibson et al., 2017). Cooke, Sweeney, and Noble (2016) further argue that library and information science education needs sustained institutional commitment to social justice, not single elective courses.

Intersectionality as a conceptual bridge: Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectionality showed that Black women face a form of discrimination that cannot be captured by looking at race or gender separately, because antidiscrimination law and social movements were built around single category thinking. Her broader argument, that institutions can only be challenged in ways that reflect their own internal logic, is directly relevant to library reform, since it suggests surface level policy changes will not work if the underlying institutional logic still assumes a single, unmarked type of user (Crenshaw, 1991).

Gap in the literature: Taken together, this literature shows strong separate strands of research on caste and library access, gender and the digital divide, class and information behaviour, and social justice as a value in library practice. What is missing is a combined framework treating caste, gender, and class together, using LIS specific theories alongside intersectionality.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on four theoretical strands and integrates them into a single framework for understanding libraries and information inequality.

Information poverty and small world theory: Chatman's (1996) theory of the impoverished life world is the starting point. Chatman found that people who consider themselves outsiders to mainstream institutions develop four behaviours around information: secrecy, deception, risk avoidance, and situational relevance, meaning that information is only judged useful if it fits the immediate concerns of daily survival. She argued that insiders, those who hold institutional power and status, reinforce this poverty by rejecting information sources that come from outside their own social world (Chatman, 1996). This theory is useful here because it does not treat information poverty as simply a lack of resources. It treats it as a social relationship between insiders and outsiders, which fits directly with how caste, gender, and class operate inside library spaces. A library can have full shelves and free internet and still function as an insider space if its staff, rules, and design assume a particular kind of user.

Everyday life information seeking: Savolainen's (1995) model adds a second layer by showing how a person's broader way of life shapes their information behaviour. In his study, industrial workers and teachers showed different patterns of seeking orienting information, the background knowledge people gather to understand their world, and practical information, the knowledge needed to solve immediate problems. Workers displayed a more affective and practical orientation, while teachers displayed a more cognitive orientation, a difference Savolainen linked to social class (Savolainen, 1995). Applied to libraries, this model suggests that class shaped habits of information seeking, built up over years outside the library, do not disappear the moment someone walks through the door.

Intersectionality: Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality provides the connecting logic between the separate categories of caste, gender, and class. Crenshaw showed that Black women in the United States faced a distinct form of discrimination that could not be explained by race or gender considered on their own, because law and activism at the time were built around single category thinking. Her insight, that institutions can only be challenged effectively in ways that match their own internal logic, is directly useful here (Crenshaw, 1991). Kothari et al. (2019) apply this same logic empirically, showing that caste, gender, and disability combine in South Indian institutional settings to produce a distinct pattern of exclusion that none of the three categories alone can fully explain.

Libraries as sites of social justice: The final theoretical strand comes from LIS scholarship on neutrality and social justice. Gibson et al. (2017) argue that library neutrality functions as a form of support for the status quo, because silence protects existing power structures rather than challenging them. Cooke et al. (2016) extend this by arguing that social justice needs to be built into the structure of LIS education and practice, not treated as an occasional training module.

Integrated framework: These four strands connect into a single explanatory chain. Structural inequality along lines of caste, gender, and class, understood through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991; Kothari et al., 2019), produces patterns of information poverty and insider or outsider status inside institutions (Chatman, 1996). This status interacts with a person's everyday information habits, built up through their social class position over time (Savolainen, 1995). Libraries that fail to recognise this chain risk reproducing exclusion even while claiming neutrality. Libraries that actively work against this chain, following the social justice model proposed by Cooke et al. (2016) and Gibson et al. (2017), can instead interrupt it.

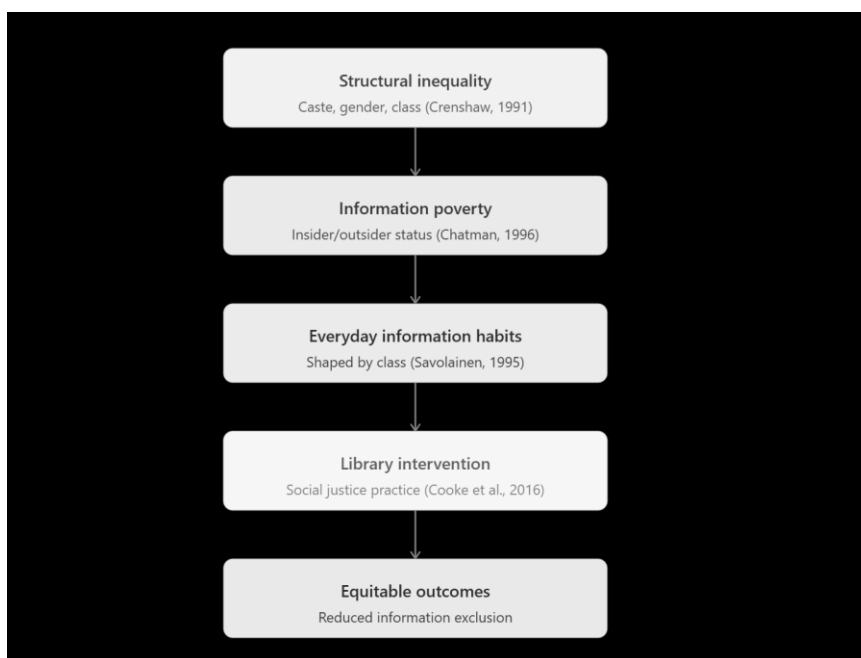


Figure 1 illustrates this integrated model: structural inequality leads to information poverty, which shapes everyday information habits, which library intervention can interrupt to produce equitable outcomes.

4. Conceptual Synthesis

The model proposed in this paper treats library exclusion as a four stage chain rather than four separate explanations. The chain begins with structural inequality. Caste, gender, and class do not act as separate, additive disadvantages. Crenshaw (1991) showed that overlapping identities produce a distinct form of exclusion that cannot be reduced to any single category, and Kothari et al. (2019) demonstrated this empirically for caste, gender, and disability in South India. For a librarian designing services, this means a program aimed only at women or only at Scheduled Castes may miss the compounded exclusion faced by, for example, a Dalit woman from a poor household.

This structural position then shapes a person's status inside the library as an insider or an outsider. Chatman (1996) showed that outsiders develop secrecy, risk avoidance, and a narrow definition of what counts as useful information, while insiders reinforce this by dismissing information sources that do not match their own worldview. A library that hires staff, sets rules, and designs spaces around an implicit insider, typically an educated, upper caste, male, middle class user, will produce outsider status for anyone who does not match that profile, regardless of formal policy.

Insider or outsider status then interacts with a person's everyday information habits, which Savolainen (1995) linked to social class. A patron whose daily information seeking is built around immediate, practical survival needs will experience a library organised around long term, analytical research differently than a patron whose class position has trained them in that analytical style. This is not a matter of intelligence or motivation. It is a matter of fit between institutional design and lived habit.

The fourth stage is where the model becomes actionable rather than only explanatory. Gibson et al. (2017) argued that library neutrality functions as tacit support for existing power structures, since silence protects whoever already benefits from the status quo. Cooke et al. (2016) showed that meaningful change requires embedding social justice into the structure of library education and practice, not treating it as a one-time training session. This is the point in the chain where deliberate library action, such as fee waivers, staff training on caste and gender bias, multilingual signage, or outreach into marginalised neighbourhoods, can interrupt the pattern that the earlier three stages describe.

The final stage, equitable outcomes, is the goal rather than an automatic result. Without deliberate intervention at stage four, the chain runs from structural inequality straight through to reduce library use among marginalised groups. With intervention, the same starting point can lead instead to genuine inclusion. This model gives librarians and policymakers a diagnostic tool: for any observed pattern of exclusion, they can ask which stage of the chain is failing and target their response accordingly.

5. Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

For LIS theory: This paper extends existing information behaviour theory by connecting it explicitly to intersectionality. Chatman's (1996) insider or outsider framework and Savolainen's (1995) everyday life model were both developed without a sustained focus on how multiple social categories combine. Reading them alongside Crenshaw (1991) shows that outsider status in a library is rarely produced by one factor alone. A poor, lower caste woman does not experience three separate barriers that happen to overlap. She experiences one compounded barrier that none of the three theories fully explains on its own. Future LIS theory building should treat this compounding as the normal case rather than an exception, particularly in postcolonial and South-South contexts where caste, gender, and class histories are deeply intertwined.

For library practice: The four stage model gives librarians a practical diagnostic checklist rather than only an abstract argument. At the level of structural inequality, librarians can ask

who is not showing up at all, and why, using membership and footfall data broken down where possible by neighborhood, gender, and other available proxies for caste and class. At the level of insider or outsider status, librarians can examine their own hiring patterns, dress codes, language use, and unwritten rules of behaviour, since these are the everyday signals that tell a patron whether they belong. India's Free Libraries Network's call for libraries to be explicitly anti-caste and feminist, not just formally non-discriminatory, is a direct example of action at this stage (ZNetwork, 2025). At the level of everyday information habits, library staff can rethink how services are organised, for instance by supporting oral and community-based information sharing alongside catalogued print collections, recognising that not every patron approaches information the same way Savolainen's (1995) teacher respondents did. Finally, at the level of library intervention, Cooke et al. (2016) and Gibson et al. (2017) both point toward the same practical step: social justice training needs to be built into regular staff development and institutional planning, not delivered as an occasional workshop disconnected from daily practice.

For policy: At a policy level, this framework suggests that library funding and accreditation bodies should require evidence of inclusive practice, not just evidence of physical infrastructure such as building space or book counts. A library can meet every infrastructure target and still function as an insider space if hiring, fee structures, and everyday conduct exclude marginalised patrons. Policymakers designing public library acts or national library missions could use the four stage model as a set of minimum standards, covering fee structures, staff composition and training, physical accessibility, and community outreach, so that formal openness is matched by lived openness.

For future research: This paper is conceptual and does not include original fieldwork. The most useful next step would be empirical studies that test each stage of the model in specific settings, for example comparing library use patterns across caste groups in an Indian state, or comparing staff attitudes in libraries that have and have not adopted explicit social justice training. Comparative, South-South studies would be especially valuable, since most of the empirical literature on library exclusion and the digital divide currently comes from the United States, as seen in Dixon et al.'s (2014) Texas based study, while direct empirical work on caste and libraries remains limited to advocacy sources such as the Free Libraries Network reporting used in this paper (ZNetwork, 2025). Comparing library systems across India, South Africa, and Brazil, for instance, could test whether this four stage model holds across different postcolonial contexts or needs to be adapted for each.

6. Conclusion

Libraries are not automatically neutral simply because they are open to the public. This paper has argued that caste, gender, and class continue to shape who feels welcome in a library and who is able to use its resources with confidence, through a chain that runs from structural inequality, through insider or outsider status, through class shaped everyday information habits, to the point where deliberate library action can either reinforce or interrupt the pattern.

By bringing together Chatman's (1996) theory of information poverty, Savolainen's (1995) model of everyday life information seeking, Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality, and the social justice scholarship of Cooke et al. (2016) and Gibson et al. (2017), this paper offers librarians and policymakers a single, connected way of thinking about exclusion rather than four separate ones. The model is deliberately practical. It asks not only why exclusion happens, but at which specific stage a library can intervene.

For librarians working in postcolonial and Global South contexts in particular, this framework offers a starting point for turning formal commitments to equal access into lived, everyday inclusion. Future empirical and comparative research, especially across South-

South contexts, will be needed to test and refine this model further. The central claim of this paper, however, is a modest but important one: libraries that wish to be truly open institutions must be willing to examine, and act on, the ways caste, gender, and class quietly shape who walks through their doors.

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