PATTERNS OF SHADOW LIBRARY USE AND ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE IN NORTHEAST INDIA: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Access to knowledge has become easier with the advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), albeit theoretically. In practice, the rising cost of subscription has continued to limit access to scholarly writings, particularly in developing regions such as India. In response to this, a rapid proliferation is evident in the use of shadow libraries that provide access to scholarly writings without a paywall. Drawing on empirical data, this study examines the use of shadow libraries among higher-level students and scholars in Assam, India. It explores usage patterns and perceptions of access insufficiency by situating Assam as a representative context in Northeast India.

Keywords: Shadow libraries, Assam, Serials crisis, copyright.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), access to academic knowledge has become much easier. Earlier, academic writings were mainly published by journals in print form which had severe limitations. It was costly, harder to disseminate and most importantly it was not easily accessible by researchers around the world, specially in developing nations, including India. With rapid ICT growth, most of the academic writings have shifted to the digital format and it has become more accessible than before, albeit theoretically. In practice, due to the growing *serials crisis*- the rapidly rising subscription prices for academic journals, access to scholarly writings has been severely limited for developing countries.[1] To counter this, different open access models have emerged. While most of these methods are legal, there has been emergence of other access methods, such as shadow libraries which is generally regarded 'rogue'. Shadow libraries are online repositories that provide free access to academic texts, journals, and books- often without regard for copyright restrictions.[2] Keeping aside the copyright infringement contentions often raised against the shadow libraries, from practical perspective, it has been regarded as one of the most convenient methods to access academic materials without depending upon traditional access mechanisms. According to Sci-Hub, which hosts over 80 million academic papers and is among the most widely used shadow libraries globally; researchers from India rank among its top three user groups.[3] To inquire whether this national trend of accessing academic resources via shadow libraries is applicable in regional contexts, this study is done among the higher-level students, research scholars and people connected with the academia in Assam. Assam being the largest north-eastern state in terms of population, was chosen for the study as the focal point within the Northeastern context due to its relatively higher concentration of academic institutions and student population in the region.

In this backdrop, this paper discusses access to knowledge perspective with the help of empirical data collected from academics of Assam as to their use of shadow libraries, frequency of such use and to find whether there is a perceived insufficiency of academic materials among

[1] A.K. Das, *Serials Crisis*, in OPEN ACCESS FOR RESEARCHERS, MODULE 1: SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION (Sanjaya Mishra ed., 2015).
[2] SHADOW LIBRARIES: ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE IN GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION (Joe Karaganis ed., 2018); Balázs Bodó, *Pirates in the Library – An Inquiry into the Guerilla Open Access Movement*, paper presented at the 8th Annual Workshop of the International Society for the History and Theory of Intellectual Property, CREATe, Glasgow (2016).
[3] *Sci-Hub Statistics*, SCI-HUB, https://www.sci-hub.se/stats (last visited 20.12.2025).

the respondents.

2. Doctrinal Background

The interplay between access to knowledge and copyright has become a critical area of scholarly debate in recent times. The tension between democratisation of information and legal framework surrounding unauthorised use of academic materials have raised ethical and legal concerns worldwide. This tension is particularly evident in case of accessing academic materials via unauthorised routes, such as shadow libraries. Shadow libraries are digital repositories of books, reports, academic and scholarly writings which could be accessed free of cost with a valid internet connection. The only and significant concern with these libraries is that it provides free access to otherwise paywalled materials, owned by various publishers. This gives raise to copyright infringement concerns and publishers have already sued well known shadow libraries, such as Sci-Hub and Library Genesis in various jurisdictions.[4]

Copyright law traditionally grants the owner exclusive control over its use and distribution of the work for a limited period of time. It is meant to safeguard the interest of the copyright owners so that their work of labour is not exploited without authorisation. While copyright is historically justified by balance between public interest and private rights, scholars have increasingly critiqued

how copyright been weaponised by publishers to limit access,[5] especially in the context of academic publishing as most of the research are publicly funded yet it has been locked behind paywall. This oligopolistic research acquisition has not only hampered researchers due to high access fees, but also places readers in a vulnerable position, where their ability to access scholarly content is determined by their geographical location and the institutional capacity to afford expensive subscription packages.[6]

The growing *serials crisis* and restrictive copyright regime has widened the access inequalities,

[4] Ella Creamer, *Four Large US Publishers Sue 'Shadow Library' for Alleged Copyright Infringement*, GUARDIAN (Sept. 15, 2023), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/sep/15/four-large-us-publishers-sue-shadow-library-for-alleged-copyright-infringement; Apoorva Mandhani, *What HC Battle Between Big Publishers & 'Rogue' Websites Could Mean for Free Access to Research*, THEPRINT (Feb. 15, 2023), https://theprint.in/judiciary/what-hc-battle-between-big-publishers-rogue-websites-could-mean-for-free-access-to-research/1371040/.

[5] PETER SUBER, OPEN ACCESS (2012).

[6] Dongdong Lv, *Measuring the Degrees of Openness of Educational Journals in China with the Open Access Spectrum (OAS) Evaluation Tool*, 8 OPEN ACCESS LIBR. J. 1 (2021).

particularly for the developing countries having a limited fund allocated for academic resource allocation.[7] In response to this, open access models emerged worldwide to facilitate free or affordable dissemination of scholarly work. While initially it was thought to be a good alternative to the traditional publishing, yet these models often remain limited in reach or burden authors with article processing charges (APCs), perpetuating access inequities.[8]

The Access to Knowledge (A2K) movement first started in 2004 addressing the increasing imbalance between privatised and common knowledge.[9] Scholars in support of this movement argues that access to knowledge as a fundamental human right and a major instrument of development.[10] Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which acknowledges the everyone has a right to "…enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits".[11] A similar recognition of the importance of promoting access to knowledge is also echoed by the Constitution of the United States through the Copyright Clause (Article I, Section 8, Clause 8), which empowers Congress to promote the progress of science and the useful arts by securing exclusive rights for authors and inventors.[12]

Although the Constitution of India does not have any direct equivalent, it has a strong free speech clause under Article 19(1)(a), whose scope has been broadened by the courts through rulings such as *Raj Narain*[13] where the Court opined that the public has a right to receive information when a matter concerns any public interest. While Indian jurisprudence regarding the right to access information has largely focused on ensuring government transparency, interpretations provided in certain cases by constitutional courts have also touched upon the broader implications of this right, by interpreting *fair use* under copyright law as to using academic materials by teachers in the course of their instruction.[14]

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[7] Das, *supra* note 1.
[8] M.P. Ram Mohan & Aditya Gupta, *Right to Research and Copyright Law: From Photocopying to Shadow Libraries*, IIMA Working Paper No. WP 2021-09-03 (Sept. 24, 2021), https://www.iima.ac.in/publication/right-research-and-copyright-law-photocopying-shadow-libraries.
[9] Gaëlle Krikorian, *Access to Knowledge as a Field of Activism*, in ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE IN THE AGE OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY 57 (Gaëlle Krikorian & Amy Kapczynski eds., 2010).
[10] Valentina Vadi, *Sapere Aude! Access to Knowledge as a Human Right and a Key Instrument to Development*, 12 INT'L J. COMMC'NS L. & POL'Y 345 (2008).
[11] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, art. 27(1), U.N. Doc. A/RES/217(III) (Dec. 10, 1948).
[12] *Intellectual Property Clause*, CORNELL L. SCH. LEGAL INFO. INST. (2023), https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/intellectual_property_clause.
[13] *State of U.P. v. Raj Narain*, A.I.R. 1975 S.C. 865 (India).
[14] *Chancellor, Masters & Scholars of the Univ. of Oxford v. Rameshwari Photocopy Servs.*, 2016 SCC OnLine Del 5128 (Del. H.C. Sept. 16, 2016) (India).

With India ranking among the top users of shadow libraries worldwide,[15] it is necessary to examine this phenomenon through specific regional lenses. Assam, the largest state in the North-Eastern India in terms of population is a hub of higher education for the entire north-eastern region. While Assam has allocated 17.8% of its expenditure on education in 2025-26, which is more than the national average of 15%,[16] most of it is spent on primary education. According to a study conducted among 126 colleges of Assam, it is seen that nearly half of the colleges did not have functional institutional repositories.[17]

In this backdrop, this study conducts an empirical study to examine the prevalence of shadow library use in the state of Assam and respondents' perceptions regarding the sufficiency of institutional access, which can be corelated within the existing literature on access to knowledge and be used for legal and policy decisions regarding factors needed to be addressed for equitable access of academic materials.

3. Methodology

The present study adopts a mixed-method descriptive approach to examine the use of shadow libraries, frequency of such use, perception regarding institutional access to academic resources and its correlation with usage of shadow libraries. The research is situated within the broader framework of right to access to knowledge and copyright implications. The present data was collected through a structured questionnaire via Google Forms. The questionnaire contained 25 objective-format questions encompassing awareness, usage frequency, access patterns, legal and ethical perceptions, and institutional access to academic resources. A total of 158 responses were collected, of which 105 were from participants based in Assam. For the scope of this paper, only the Assam-based responses were analysed (n=105). IBM SPSS Statistics (version 27) was used to analyse the data. As descriptive statistical techniques formed the core of the analysis, frequency distributions and cross-tabulations were mainly used to understand the pattern of usage of shadow libraries. Section 4.1 and 4.2 analyses the responses based on their use of shadow libraries and frequency of such use respectively. Ordinal level variables for questions such as *Have you ever used shadow libraries to access research papers or books?* were used. Variables were coded as *Frequently, occasionally, rarely and never.* For Section

[15] *Sci-Hub Statistics*, *supra* note 3.
[16] PRS Legis. Rsch., *Assam Budget Analysis 2025-26* (2025), https://prsindia.org/files/budget/budget_state/assam/2025/Assam_Budget_Analysis_2025-26.pdf.
[17] P.K. Mahanta, *A Study on the Implementation of Institutional Repositories in the College*, LIBR. PHIL. & PRAC. (E-JOURNAL) 5439 (2021).

4.3, respondents were allowed to select more than one option for the question *What types of resources do you access through shadow libraries?* These multiple response variables were then used to generate frequency tables.

A method similar to section 4.1-4.2 was used for section 5.1. For understanding whether any significant association exists between those who use shadow libraries and their perception of lack of institutional access, Chi-square test of independence was applied as it is considered appropriate for testing corelation between two categorical variables.[18] For simplification, the test was conducted using a 2x2 cross-tabulation. For these, respondents were categorized as shadow library users if they reported using them "Frequently" or "Occasionally," and as non-users if they selected "Prefer not to use" or "Not aware." Similarly, perceived institutional access was classified as "Sufficient" for those who believed their institution provided adequate resources and "Insufficient" for those who reported lack of adequate institutional access, which, *inter alia*, also included Institution less respondents.

4. Analysis of Shadow Library Utilization and Access Patterns

To understand how popular shadow libraries are among the academics of Assam, there is a need to find out usage of shadow libraries, frequency of such use and types of materials generally downloaded. This shall reflect how prevalent shadow libraries are in Assam.

4. 1 Shadow Library Usage Patterns

Use of Shadow Libraries

	N	%
Frequently	40	38.1%
Occasionally	45	42.9%
Prefer not	5	4.8%
Not Aware	15	14.3%

Table 1

An analysis of the data regarding the use of shadow libraries in Assam reveals regular

[18] Univ. of Southampton, *Chi Square*, PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF STATISTICS IN THE SOC. SCIS., https://www.southampton.ac.uk/passs/full_time_education/bivariate_analysis/chi_square.page (last visited June 14, 2025).

engagement with these libraries. As suggested by Table 1, the majority of the respondents (42.9%) use shadow libraries occasionally, when other access methods fail, followed by 38.1% of users who use shadow libraries frequently. This suggests that almost 80 % of the respondents are active users of shadow libraries. Notably, 14.3% of the respondents prefer not to use these libraries and a small minority of 4.8% are not aware of the existence of such libraries. Usage of shadow libraries to access academic materials is a prevalent phenomenon among the studied people related to academia in Assam.

From a legal perspective, the high level of usage patterns of shadow libraries in Assam points out to important assumptions. The fact that so many respondents rely on shadow libraries suggests that institutional access to academic resources may be insufficient or unaffordable, prompting individuals to seek alternative means of accessing materials. Furthermore, it points out that while shadow libraries operate in a legal grey area, whereby its legality in terms of copyright infringement is still not determined, academics from Assam nevertheless rely upon such usages making it a viable alternative to access academic materials.

4.2 Frequency of use of Shadow Libraries

Frequency Of Use

	N	%
Daily	12	11.4%
Weekly	27	25.7%
Monthly	4	3.8%
Occasionally	49	46.7%
Rarely/Never	13	12.4%

Table 2

As shown in Table 2, Among the respondents, nearly half of the respondents reported using shadow libraries occasionally, often as a supplementary source. An additional of 25.7% of users reported weekly use and 11.4% accessed them daily. Combing the two, 37.1%, forming just above one-third of the respondents rely on shadow libraries regularly. Interestingly, only 12.4% of people reported of rarely or never using such libraries, and a marginal 3.8% agreed using these libraries monthly. These findings suggests that while shadow libraries are not being used as a primary source of getting access to academic materials, and is not frequent, it is nevertheless widely normalised and integrated into their academic life for a substantial number

of respondents.

This pattern of frequency of use points out dual nature of shadow libraries: For majority, it works as a supplementary and sustained source of accessing materials and for at least one third, it is a tool which is being used regularly despite of having other means to access materials. This duality complicates the legal framing of such platforms, as they may be seen as either necessary for academic freedom or infringing on copyright.

4.3 Materials accessed via Shadow libraries

Materials accessed using Shadow Libraries

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Materials accessed[a]	Research Articles and Papers	84	49.4%	80.0%
	Textbooks	55	32.4%	52.4%
	Fictions and Non Fiction Books	26	15.3%	24.8%
	Others	5	2.9%	4.8%
Total		170	100.0%	161.9%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Table 3

Table 3 shows what kind of materials users tend to download using shadow libraries. The data suggests that Research Articles and papers are most frequently accessed materials as 49.4% respondents agreed of using shadow libraries for this purpose. This indicates shadow libraries are primarily being used for accessing core academic writings such as scholarly writings, which is crucial for academic reading and writing. This data also suggests that after research papers, it is the textbooks that are mostly downloaded via these libraries. A total of 32.4% of users reported of downloading textbooks using shadow libraries, which is another crucial material needed for increasing academic rigour. In fact, in higher education it is a basic need. Thirdly, it is revealed that a limited portion of respondents (15.3%) also use shadow libraries to get access to fiction and non-fiction books. While this category is less frequent compared to research articles and textbooks, it still represents a notable portion of usage, indicating that shadow libraries also serve recreational and general reading needs. A very minute, 2.9% users reported using shadow libraries for other purposes such as downloading news articles and magazines in Assam making it a rare usage of such libraries.

From a legal and policy perspective, the over reliance on shadow libraries to access research articles and textbooks points to systemic gaps in institutional access. As many users turn to

unorthodox methods such as visiting such libraries to download textbooks and research articles suggests that there is inadequacy in existing mechanisms for accessing academic resources. This points out that there is a need to rethink implications of strict implementation of copyright laws and consider policies that may help in giving more equitable access to academic materials.

Analysing Table 1-3, it can be concluded that in the academic circles of Assam, Shadow libraries are widely used. Most of the users use it to supplement the already available access, institutional or otherwise. Similarly, although the frequency varies as to users, most of being occasional users, a large portion also use these libraries regularly. Among the users, most of them download research papers and articles followed by textbooks. The overwhelming use of shadow libraries in Academia of Assam suggests that theirs is not enough mechanism available for having sufficient access via legal means and because of that, scholars and other higher-level students tend to use shadow libraries. By addressing the root causes of shadow library usage, policymakers and institutions can work toward creating a balanced ecosystem that respects copyright laws while ensuring equitable access to knowledge.

5. Analysis of Institutional Access Perceptions Among Shadow Library Users and Non-Users

While the previous section suggests that there is a large number of respondents from Assam who are accessing shadow libraries, there is a presumption of not having adequate access to institutional libraries that primarily provide access to both- digital and printed academic materials. To verify whether there is any association between users of shadow libraries and perception of lack of institutional resources, there is a need to first find out perception of respondents about institutional access and their relationship between users and non-users of shadow libraries.

5.1 Perceived adequacy of access to an Institutional Library

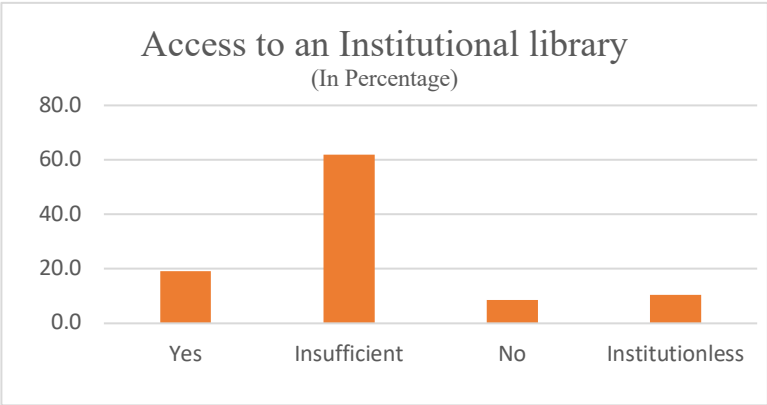


Figure 1

Figure 1 shows how respondents answered when asked about the access to an institutional library. The data reveals a stark disparity in access to academic resources among the respondents (N=105). A significant 65 respondents (61.9%) perceived that although they have access to an institutional library, it is largely insufficient. This highlights systemic inadequacies in the infrastructure governing academic resource availability. Only 20 respondents (19%) reported having adequate institutional library access. Further, 9 respondents (8.6%) reported having no access to institutional libraries and 11 respondents were institution less, who may be independent researchers, or students outside formal academic settings.

Combing all the respondents who marked insufficient, no access or are presently institution less, 80.95% of respondents perceived lack of sufficient institutional support to access academic literature. This suggests that an overwhelming majority of respondents are structurally excluded from accessing academic resources and for that, they had to rely upon other access methods, including shadow libraries. These findings support the arguments that says institutional barriers persists despite claims of having rapid digitisation in education.

In addition to this, there is also a need to check whether the perceived inadequacy of access to academic materials is only among the users of shadow libraries, or it is a general perception among all the respondents, irrespective of shadow library usage.

5.2 Perceived Institutional Access and Shadow Library Usage

Shadow Libraries * Perceived Institutional Access Crosstabulation

			Perceived Institutional Access		
			Sufficient	Insufficient	Total
Shadow Libraries	User	Count	17	68	85
		% within Shadow Libraries	20.0%	80.0%	100.0%
	Non User	Count	3	17	20
		% within Shadow Libraries	15.0%	85.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	20	85	105
		% within Shadow Libraries	19.0%	81.0%	100.0%

Table 4

Table 4 suggests that out all the respondents (n=105), merely 20% (17 users) of shadow library users perceived that there is sufficient institutional access. On the other hand, 80% (68 users)

thought it to be insufficient. Likewise, those who said there do not use shadow libraries or are not aware of, only 15 % (3 non-users) perceived that institutional access of academic writings is sufficiently available and 85% (17 non-users) said, it was not sufficient. To determine whether there is a correlation between the use of shadow libraries (user vs. non-user) and the perception of inadequate institutional access (sufficient vs. insufficient), an independent Chi-square($\chi 2$) test was conducted.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.263[a]	1	.608		
Continuity Correction[b]	.038	1	.845		
Likelihood Ratio	.275	1	.600		
Fisher's Exact Test				.758	.439
Linear-by-Linear Association	.260	1	.610		
N of Valid Cases	105				

a. 1 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.81.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Table 5

Table 5 shows the SPSS output of the Chi Square test conducted. Although the Pearson Chi-Square results indicated that there was no significant association between the two variables, $\chi^2(1, N = 105) = 0.263$, $p = 0.608$, one cell had an expected count below 5 (minimum expected count = 3.81). This means the test may not be fully reliable, as in Chi Square test, it is recommended that no more than 20% cells should have expected count less than 5. In this case, as one value (i.e. 25%) has expected count less than 5, Fisher's Exact test *p* value was considered to determine the association. Here, it was seen that the Fisher's Exact test p value is 0.758 which is >0.05, that is in agreement with the result obtained by the Pearson Chi Square test, and hence there is no significant association between use of shadow libraries and the perception of inadequate institutional access to academic resources and we may not reject the null hypothesis (H_0). As elaborated in Section 5.1, while the perception of inadequate institutional access is extensive, the Chi-square test indicates that this perception is shared by both users and non-users of shadow libraries, and there's no significant statistical connection between the two.

The widespread perception of inadequate institutional access highlights a potential gap between the availability of academic resources and the needs of the academic community. Even among those who do not use shadow libraries, there is a strong sense of dissatisfaction with current

access levels. This could indicate that institutional repositories, subscription models, or digital infrastructure are not meeting the expectations of students and researchers. It also underscores the importance of exploring alternative solutions such as open access publishing, interlibrary loans, or institutional partnerships to improve access to academic materials.

6. Conclusion

The study found out a significant reliance on shadow library users Among academics of Assam. First, with almost 80% of the respondents reporting shadow library use regularly, it is certain that shadow libraries have emerged as an alternative mechanism for bridging the gap in knowledge dissemination. Further, the data reveals that most users tend to download research articles, academic papers and textbooks using these libraries, which suggest that these libraries are primarily fulfilling academic needs rather than recreational reading needs.

Second, the data revealed that there is a widespread dissatisfaction among the respondents in terms of adequacy of available academic materials. Almost 81% of the respondents perceived that the access of academic library available to them is not sufficient. This highlights that there may be a need to provide better access to academic materials or need to provide better awareness as to the methods of accessing those materials.

Third, to find out whether the perceived lack of insufficient materials is only limited to those who regularly used shadow libraries, a Chi-Square test was done. The test revealed that there was no statistically significant relationship between shadow library usage and perceived institutional access, which suggests that the perceived feeling of insufficient access is not only limited to shadow library users and non-users too perceived the same. This widespread dissatisfaction highlights a broader crisis in equitable resource allocation.

These findings reflect the broader legal tension between copyright enforcement and the right to access knowledge, as shadow libraries mostly operates in the legal grey area. While from a traditional copyright perspective it may amount to copyright infringement, from a public interest perspective it is reducing significant access barriers prevalent among researchers. It is also pertinent to understand that under the law of copyright, the fair dealing or fair use is an important doctrine which could help policy makers and courts to decide the legality of shadow libraries.

By addressing the perceived structural barriers to academic resources, stakeholders could formulate policies which balances both- creators' rights and the imperative of scholarly inclusivity. Ultimately, this paper highlights that there is need to have interdisciplinary collaboration among policymakers, legal experts and those who are engaged in distribution of academic materials, ensuring that access to knowledge remains a cornerstone of academic and societal development.

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