



Original Article

Libraries As Transformative Learning Spaces: A Thematic Analysis of the Film 12th Fail

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Manuscript ID:
IBMIIRJ -2026-030702

Submitted: 10 June 2026

Revised: 20 June 2026

Accepted: 08 July 2026

Published: 31 July 2026

ISSN: 3065-7857

Volume-3

Issue-7

Pp. 7-12

July 2026

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Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://ibrj.us>



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21881726

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21881726>



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Abstract

In this paper, the representation of libraries as the settings for transformative learning is analysed in the movie "12th Fail" (2023). Through the protagonists' journey in the civil service, this paper will analyse the functions of libraries in the context of learning, access to information, education, and social mobility. A qualitative interpretive approach has been taken in this research. The Hindi film 12th Fail (2023) has been chosen as the primary data source, and all scenes related to the library are critically analysed through multiple viewings of the film. For analysis, Transformative Learning Theory, Cultural Capital Theory, Communities of Practice, and Information Poverty Theory have been considered. The current study finds that the library is presented as a setting for transformative learning, serving as both a workplace and an educational institution. It provides equal access to information, promotes self-learning, academic discipline, cooperation, and resilience, thereby fostering a reading culture and helping the protagonist rise above socio-economic barriers through knowledge. This paper is among the first attempts to analyse the movie 12th Fail, viewing the library as a transformative agent in education rather than merely a cinematic location. The importance of this research lies in showing how Indian cinema can contribute to interdisciplinary research on the educational and transformative function of libraries in today's world.

Keywords: 12th Fail, Civil Service Preparation, Library Importance, Transformative Learning, Library as Learning Space, Self-Directed Learning, UPSC Aspirants

Introduction

Film can be seen as doing much more than entertaining people; 12th Fail provides a strong case in point for cultural representation through its central narrative of persistent failure and academic redemption. The film tells the story of Manoj Kumar Sharma and his efforts to start a new life after his academic failures in order to become a civil servant, which is based on true events 12th Fail (Pathak Twelfth Fail 2021). 12th Fail is based on Anurag Pathak's non-fiction biographical account of Manoj Kumar Sharma, a young man from the dacoit-ridden Chambal region of Madhya Pradesh who, despite failing his Class 12 board examination in a school culture where mass cheating was normalised, ultimately passes the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) Civil Services Examination and becomes an IPS officer. The film stars Vikrant Massey as Manoj and Medha Shankar as Shraddha Joshi, who becomes an Indian Revenue Service (IRS) officer. Released on 27 October 2023, it was produced by Vinod Chopra Films and Zee Studios, and became one of the most critically acclaimed Indian films of the year, winning five Filmfare Awards, including Best Film and Best Director (Wikipedia 2024). The pivotal role in this film is the library, where Manoj works as a toilet cleaner for Rs. 280 a month in exchange for using the premises, an integral part of the story. As recorded in the film's original script, the depiction captures the dialectical struggle between material deprivation and academic ambition faced by millions of UPSC aspirants from India's poorer sections of society. The library in 12th Fail does not exist merely as a backdrop for the film's action. It plays an important structural role in exploring and resolving key themes of aspiration, self-reliance, community, and identity (12th Fail 2023). In this research work, thematic analysis will be used to discover recurring themes within data in qualitative research.

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How to cite this article:

Sharma, A. & Naskar, S. (2026). Libraries As Transformative Learning Spaces: A Thematic Analysis of the Film 12th Fail. *InSight Bulletin: A Multidisciplinary Interlink International Research Journal*, 3(7), 7–12. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21881726>

The central claim here is that the film presents learning spaces as emotionally intense, socially empowering, and ethically significant. This is significant for both film studies and library studies, since public perceptions shape the value society places on libraries.

Literature Review:

In their research paper, Sharma and Naskar emphasise the importance of libraries as places that bring together cultural memory, ethics, and creativity. In his work *The Storyteller* (2022), Ananth Mahadevan, who bases his film on Satyajit Ray's *Golpo Boliye Tarini Khuro*, presents the library as a place of intellectual honesty and anti-plagiarism. Contrary to typical ideas of librarians as neutral caretakers of knowledge, the movie presents a librarian as a cultural intermediary who disseminates ethical values and protects narrative originality. Thus, the library turns out to be not just a place of storage but a place of truth, originality, and the protection of cultural memory (Sharma and Naskar 2026a). The latest research by Banu and Azeez focuses on the evolving dynamics of college libraries in support of competitive examinations, including the provision of special facilities and services and the creation of an environment conducive to preparation. The findings from the study in autonomous colleges in Kerala have revealed that the majority of the college libraries do offer special preparation materials in the form of books, newspapers, journals, and question banks for Civil Services preparation; however, there is still room for improvement when it comes to the presence of NCERT books, journals, and digital sources. Although the career guidance cell is common across all institutions, specialised library services for Civil Services preparation are unavailable due to resource and infrastructure constraints (Banu and Azeez 2021). In their Research investigation, Sharma and Naskar note that the web series *Library Ek Anokhi Varta* (2023), from Gujarat and directed by Jasmin Bhatt, depicts the library as a key place for learning and socialising, helping people gain knowledge and develop relationships. Set in a college library, the series shows a convenient, systematic library where reading can develop a person intellectually and help them discipline themselves. As a person-centred occupation, the librarian, Mansukh Kaka, is shown to be a caring mentor who goes beyond his basic duties to help his users. Although the series succeeds in presenting a positive image of the library for younger audiences, its portrayal remains stereotypical, failing to account for technological advancements or diverse professional skills (Sharma and Naskar 2026b). The literature review by Shivaraja and Padmamma highlights the importance of public libraries in aiding preparation for competitive examinations in India. With more and more users resorting to using public libraries, these institutions are becoming important sources of newspapers, magazines, reference books, and other resources. Nevertheless, the current body of literature reveals several problems, namely a lack of infrastructure, outdated collections, inadequate Internet facilities, and insufficient competence among library workers. It is crucial that users become actively engaged through career guidance and counselling programs. Improving library resources, technical infrastructure, and the competence of library workers can play an important role in promoting the effectiveness of public libraries (Shivaraja and Padmamma 2023). Research analysis by Sharma and Naskar on Indian documentaries reveals a developing portrayal of libraries and librarians from 1990 to 2025. Although previous documentaries portrayed libraries as places of silence and librarians as strict guardians of books, more recent works depict libraries as active institutions that help people develop literacy skills and learn to work with technology. This representation changes depending on the context – for example, rural and NGO libraries emphasise aspects such as accessibility and societal empowerment. More recently, librarians are seen not as bookkeepers but as teachers who help their patrons acquire the information they need. Additionally, documentary films serve as advocacy tools, as they emphasise not only the power of the library institution but also existing problems, such as poor infrastructure and a lack of technology (Sharma and Naskar 2026c).

Methodology:

The research methodology used in this study is a qualitative interpretive approach that explores the portrayal of libraries as transformative learning spaces and provides funding to the protagonist of his study and to livelihood in the Hindi movie “12th Fail” (2023). The movie serves as the primary data source, and the researcher's interpretation of the library scenes, dialogue, setting, and learning processes featured in the movie forms the basis of the analysis. Rather than using a code-based analytical framework, the research generates themes by repeatedly viewing and interpreting the movie. The interpretation is guided by Library and Information Science theories, including Transformative Learning Theory, Communities of Practice and Information Poverty Theory.

Limitations

This study is limited to a thematic analysis of a single Hindi movie, *12th Fail* (2023), and hence, the results obtained cannot be generalised to all cinematic portrayals of libraries. This study depends on the interpretive nature of visuals and narratives, not on audiences' perceptions or filmmakers' intentions. In addition, this study is confined to scenes depicting libraries and learning in the movie. Future studies can include comparative analyses across different movies, audience analyses, and other approaches.

Research Objectives:

The main objectives of this research work are as follows:

1. To investigate the economic circumstances in which the library is made available to socioeconomically disadvantaged students.
2. To study the operation of the library as an equaliser of socio-economic disparities amongst UPSC aspirants.
3. To discover the kinds of autonomous and self-motivated learning activities that are possible because of the library space.
4. To understand the function of the library as a community space promoting peer solidarity amongst aspirants.
5. To understand the role the library plays in the aspirant's transformation of identity.
6. To investigate the part played by the library support staff as informal allies in the aspirant's learning process.

7. To study the operation of the library as a space of meritocratic aspiration in the framework of social inequality.
8. To understand how the screenplay portrays the library as both a literal and a symbolic sanctuary for the aspirant.
9. To understand the contribution of the library depiction in the film to the cultural public understanding of Indian libraries.

Film's Story and Character Analysis:

The library depicted in this movie was Vidya Library (Vidya Vachnalaya). As per the cinema, it was situated in Mukherjee Nagar, Delhi. This was a special library because it served only UPSC aspirants. Manoj works in this library, resides in it, and studies at night in it. So, the library plays a very important role not only in Manoj's life but also in the lives of all other UPSC aspirants 12th Fail. Some of the main characters of this movie can be seen as: Manoj Kumaj Sharma: Manoj plays the main role in this film. He worked in the library for money and study, and as a result, he became an IPS officer. He studied in Mukherjeenagar, Delhi. Shraddha: Shraddha went to Delhi for preparation for the state civil service exam. She interacted with Manoj for the second time in the library. At last, she married Manoj. Hukumchand: he was the library manager or librarian of the library where Manoj worked and studied. Hariram: He was an old library staff member and a very helpful person. His behaviour was very good with Manoj and other users. Gouri bhaiya: He runs a tea stall in Delhi and teaches UPSC aspirants at a very low fee. Deep Mohan: he was one of the characters in the movie who qualified for the UPSC exam before Manoj and assured him of future help with his studies. Dr Mehta: An important character who acts as one of the interviewers for Manoj Kumar Sharma's UPSC interview. He is an experienced board member tasked with evaluating Manoj during the most critical phase of the civil service examination.

Film's Story:

12th Fail (2023), a movie directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, tells the story of Manoj Kumar Sharma, a poor, humble youth from a backward family whose persistent struggle in the face of failure finally enables him to fulfil his long-held dream of joining the Indian Police Service. Initially, Manoj wanted to get a government job, but his ambition changed when he met a sincere police officer who inspired him to take the UPSC exam (Tyagi "12th Fail Movie Review"). One of the movie's distinctive features is the life-changing nature of mentorship. Though Gauri Bhaiya fails to pass the UPSC exam several times, he still decides to teach candidates aspiring to succeed. This example shows that mentorship and information sharing can make a difference in society. At the same time, support from Shraddha and Manoj's mother, father, grandmother, brother and sister emphasises the emotional need for it (Ray "12th Fail: The Heartwarming and Inspiring Real-Life Story of Vikrant Massey's Character, IPS Manoj Sharma"). According to the film, 12th Fail highlights the importance of libraries and information in empowering learners. Preparation for competitive exams largely hinges on access to information resources, such as newspapers, and quiet places to study, both of which are facilitated by libraries. This is because libraries do not exist just to store information but also act as learning institutions where students learn how to locate and utilise appropriate information resources. In addition, librarians help users to find, evaluate, and use information sources (Srivastava, 2024). This movie proves that persistence, mentoring, and equal access to information contribute to education. In this way, 12th Fail reminds us of the importance of the library institution, which empowers students to learn and progress socially through access to information.

The Portrayal of the Library: Thematic Analysis

The reflexive thematic analysis of the *12th Fail* screenplay yielded four primary themes 12th Fail. Each is presented below with direct evidence from the screenplay and story of the movie-

Theme 1: The Library as a Site of Economic Precarity and Democratic Knowledge Access

The library enters the movie at the very outset as an important location that simultaneously serves as a source of income for Manoj and of knowledge. The scene begins with Manoj standing in front of Hukumchand, the librarian, who lays down the **terms of work for him with his typical frankness:**

Manoj's enthusiastic response: (5-minute late nahin, 5-minute jaldi uthunga, Hukum ji!) Not 5 minutes late, I will be up 5 minutes early, Hukum ji! makes the occupation at the library seem like something he eagerly looks forward to rather than a tedious task. According to the stage direction in the screenplay, Manoj is "thrilled" to have a job at the library, where he receives both accommodation and a salary of Rs. 280 per month.

Through this, the story reveals one of the most important arguments about libraries. They have the potential to become a place for democratic access to knowledge, even for those who cannot afford tutoring classes or live in an upscale apartment. Manoj is not coming to this library as a privileged student, but as a janitor; however, the library offers him the same access to information as the UPSC aspirants whose toilets he cleans.

The economic considerations involved in accessing the library come through in the following scenes. The passionate speech by Gauri Bhaiya at the Restart Tea Stall explains the cost Manoj incurs in cleaning toilets, mopping floors, and arranging chairs so an illiterate first-generation student from a lower-class background can access the library. Gauri Bhaiya's speech explicitly highlights his reasoning regarding the socio-backwards people in society.

The importance of this first theme here is hard to underestimate. The library's ability to engage first-generation aspirants from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to provide them with access constitutes a form of democratic education practice. Although the library cannot eliminate economic differences, it creates conditions under which the aspirant's 'jazba' (spirit) will be transformed into the process of examination preparation.

Theme 2: The Library as an Environment for Self-Directed and Autonomous Learning

The second theme concerns how the library creates an enabling environment for self-directed learning. Unlike the coaching classes, which also form part of Manoj's preparations, the library does not have a set curriculum or rules that compel one

to learn at a prescribed pace. There are several instances in the movie where scenes and lines reveal that the library is a place of intellectual freedom. The passage of a year since Manoj's arrival at the library gives him an evocative representation of his self-directed learning process. In the movie, this was depicted as: "Manoj sleeping on a table. Books near him." This is followed by another revealing stage direction: "Hariram wakes him. Manoj wakes up. He is UNSHAVEN, very shabby, drained out." On hearing that it was time for his second try at the Prelims from Hariram, his first reaction is one of continued study: (Nahin, revision karni hai) No, I have to revise my lessons! This is followed by a voice-over in this scene that explicitly highlights his self-directed learning process. In this section, the library is transformed into an all-encompassing environment of study—a setting in which Manoj's immersion becomes so complete that it even encompasses the basic activities necessary for his own maintenance. For him, the library no longer serves merely as a place to procure books; rather, it has become a lifestyle, a spatiotemporal framework for channelling his energies. The sequence in which Shraddha enters the library during a rain shower illustrates, through a gentle joke, how the library functions as a space for self-directed learning. As she sees an aeronautical engineering textbook in Manoj's hands, she asks him if he is studying engineering. Instead of clearing up her confusion, Manoj immediately responds positively to her question and, after looking at the book title, says, "Aeronautical Engineering." This joke reflects a truth that characterises self-directed learning in the library: the learner can explore any area of knowledge without institutional barriers or the need to explain anything to anyone else. Later in the film, when Shraddha learns that Manoj does not study at all but works as a library worker, his response illustrates what it means to be an autonomous learner.

This line serves more than one purpose at once: it presents a seeming disadvantage (being employed at the library as a poorly-paid employee) as an advantage (accessing an entire library as opposed to just a streetlight); it draws upon the Indian icon A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who made his way to the position of President by dint of diligence and talent; and it casts the library as a sufficient source of materials for self-study. Thus, the movie presents the library not as a second-best substitute for expensive coaching but as a resource whose richness exceeds even that of the most privileged private study conditions.

This movie also shows how the character Deep Mohan, the ideal UPSC success in this movie, emphasises self-learning over coaching: "None of that, Dr Mehta. It is only self-study. No coaching." The movie's ideal character's endorsement of self-learning underscores the library's role as the primary source of such learning.

Theme 3: Library as Community of Hope & mutual support

The third theme revolves around the social role of the library, where communities of ambition emerge amongst UPSC aspirants. While the library itself is generally thought of as a place of individual, silent learning, the movie shows the library as an environment of socialisation and support through mentorship, which emerges around the library and the associated areas in Mukherjee Nagar, Delhi.

The aspirant community in the film is anchored by the figure of Gauri Bhaiya, who has exhausted all his UPSC attempts without success but who channels his knowledge and experience into establishing the 'Restart Tea Stall and Free UPSC Guidance Centre'. The founding of Restart is explicitly framed as a communal response to individual failure: ("Attempt khatam hue hai, zindagi khatam na hui, samjhe! Chalo. Restart.") The attempts are over, but life is not over, understand! Come on. Restart. Gauri's guidance to aspirants' calls 'legitimate peripheral participation': less experienced aspirants learn from a more experienced member of the community, not through formal instruction but through participation in shared practice.

The library represents the physical hub of this UPSC aspirant community. When Manoj runs out of Restart shouting (Library! Late ho raha hoon!), getting late for the library, the use of exclamation points emphasises that the library is the place where all serious work is done, and the tea stall becomes the community place where people gather informally. The movie, therefore, creates an aspirational geography in which the tea stall becomes the place of community making, and the library is where the individual labour of aspiration is performed.

The matter of library staff is highlighted by portraying them as part of the aspirants' community in the movie. The library caretaker, Hariram, serves as an accomplice to Manoj's ambitions. It is Hariram who wakes up Manoj from his tired sleep on the library table, reminding him of the date on which he is supposed to sit for his second attempt at the Prelims.

The disdainful tone with which Naval addresses the "aspirants who come like sheep and goats from all parts of the country and waste the nation's resources" is narratively constructed to be in opposition to Gauri's vehement defence of the aspirant community. Gauri's reply, made while she serves tea between shots of Manoj in the library, casts the aspirations of the aspirant community as a collective hopefulness that does not depend on personal success or failure.

This theme presents a theory of collective aspirational identity that is highly relevant to library science. The significance of the library lies not only in its ability to provide resources for learners but also in the fact that it is an institution where a sense of purpose and a collective identity have been maintained over the years, amidst individual failures that have become statistical inevitabilities due to the highly competitive nature of the UPSC exams.

Theme 4: The Library as a Catalyst for Aspirational Identity Transformation

Theme four, and the most theoretically interesting one, is that of the library being an instrument for catalysing a transformational change in the protagonist's identity. This transformational change in the protagonist's identity occurs in the screenplay of 12th Fail, through Manoj Kumar Sharma.

Before arriving in Delhi, Manoj wanted to be a peon in Chambal to obtain a government job and support his family. It was his first desire to get himself a job as a peon, a civil servant position at the bottom of the hierarchy. As Manoj interacts with the library across different phases (as an employer, a resource, and an environment), he increasingly understands the possibilities available to him. It is important to note that the library's role here lies not solely in being informative (offering him the necessary books to prepare for the UPSC examination) but also in being ontological.

This identification transformation is reflected in Manoj's journey with the library. As a toilet cleaner, he evolves into a sweeper and chair-setter, and then finally a complete inhabitant of the library's study area, sleeping on its tables and coming out after one year as a bearded, 'dishevelled, drained out' intellectual transformation of a man. This transformation in the physical geography of the library, from the toilets to the study tables, reflects the same journey socially for the protagonist from janitor to IPS topper.

The climax of this identity transformation is encapsulated in the film's final scene. As the list of UPSC-qualified candidates was published, Manoj's IPS selection came up. Pandey proudly refers to Manoj as "The 12th Fail, library sweeper, atta-chakki boy and my friend" who becomes "IPS TOPPER MANOJ KUMAR SHARMA." The three-fold identity of "12th Fail," "library sweeper," and "atta-chakki boy" is indicative of the transformation of a person whose identity has been shaped by educational failure, manual work, and poverty into one of the most honourable posts in public service through the library.

The movie, 12th Fail, has indirectly captured the importance of the library to Manoj through his reaction to being fired from it. While Hukumchand falsely accuses him of theft involving the money raised by selling off the waste papers from the library, Manoj reacts not by accepting the charge but by trying to beat Hukumchand with his chappal, before finally managing to control his anger and leave the place. The reason Manoj acts in such a manner is that the library was his territory, having invested many months of effort there, and leaving it means real dispossession, warranting the voice-over announcement, "Manoj new library chhod di" Manoj left the library.

Findings:

1. The library is presented as a place where the main character undergoes a transformative learning experience that plays a vital role in shaping his intellectual development and discipline.
2. The library is portrayed as a place of work and learning, where Manoj Sharma works while also realising his dream of becoming educated.
3. The library is shown as providing equal access to books, newspapers, and other study materials needed to prepare for the Civil Services Examination.
4. The library provides an environment that enables self-learning by facilitating an independent space for reading, critical analysis, reflection, and continuous engagement in study.
5. The rigorous academic environment of the library helps students concentrate on their studies, manage time effectively, persist in their efforts, and develop study skills.
6. The library serves as a collaborative learning environment where aspirants can interact, exchange information, motivate one another, and help one another succeed.
7. The library's representation shows that regular access to information sources boosts educational confidence, academic curiosity, and lifelong learning among economically disadvantaged learners.
8. The movie shows the library as a democratic place that provides access to knowledge based on educational merit rather than social status, thus emphasising information equality.
9. The protagonist's regular visits to the library show that educational resilience can be strengthened through consistent engagement with information sources.
10. The library serves as an important facilitator of social mobility by providing opportunities for the protagonist to translate knowledge into educational success and career advancement despite extremely limited financial resources.
11. The movie subverts traditional depictions of the library in films as mere storage facilities of books by showing them as centres of education and empowerment.
12. Libraries are the places where the relationship between protagonists and shraddha took place. Once, the protagonist mentioned that President Abdul Kalam used to study under a streetlight, but now he has a full library.

Discussion:

These themes revealed in this analysis come together to form the library of 12th Fail across multiple dimensions material, pedagogical, social, and ontological all working simultaneously. Materially, the library's ability to utilise first-generation aspirants as work in exchange for access to its resources constitutes economic support for aspirants who cannot afford coaching fees and rent. Pedagogically, it offers a space conducive to sustained self-study, which is particularly needed for the UPSC examination. Socially, it acts as the centre for a community of aspiration that helps learners endure the emotional and time-consuming process of preparing for exams over several years. Finally, ontologically, it initiates a profound change in the main character's perception of their social self (Srivastava 2024).

This research has shown that, in 12th Fail, the findings make it clear that the movie provides a unique and progressive representation of libraries, depicting them as institutions that transform into learning sites that help people learn and advance educationally, personally, and socially. Unlike other films where libraries serve only as backdrops or storehouses of books, the library in this film is depicted as an active learning institution that significantly impacts the protagonist's academic experience. This film shows that the library is not just a place where information is accessed but is an environment that helps cultivate discipline, hard work, self-learning, and intelligence (12th Fail 2023).

One of the most important findings is the library's dual function as not only a place of work but also of learning. The inclusion of Manoj as a library worker helps him not only cope with his financial problems but also be in an academic setting surrounded by books, newspapers, and other learning materials. This special representation of the library as an organisation that facilitates both economic and academic needs distinguishes it from the usual definition of libraries. This portrayal of the library goes beyond the conventional definition and shows how it helps economically disadvantaged students sustain their education.

The results of the study are also significant for library development and education policy in India. The learning community presented in 12th Fail shows that well-equipped libraries serve as educational institutions that promote educational equality, encourage lifelong learning, and empower people socially. By portraying the library as a workplace, a source of knowledge, a space for collaborative learning, and an agent of social transformation, the movie demonstrates libraries' relevance in today's world. Therefore, the research contributes to the library's development by demonstrating the role of movies in shaping opinions about libraries.

Conclusion

This paper analyses the depiction of libraries as transformative learning sites within the Hindi film '12th Fail'. It becomes clear from the paper that the movie shifts the depiction of the library away from its typical portrayal as a repository of books toward a dynamic learning environment where people learn and develop their skills and knowledge. In the movie, the library becomes a significant part of the protagonist Manoj Sharma's educational life, as it provides him with a way to make a living and achieve his dream of becoming a civil servant (Srivastava 2024).

It is clear that the library plays various roles in education and society. For instance, it provides equal access to information, facilitates disciplined study, helps aspirants learn collaboratively, and offers a stimulating environment that fosters intellectual development. Through consistent interaction at the library, the protagonist gains the knowledge and confidence required to overcome socioeconomic obstacles. From the above, it is clear that the library is presented as an institution that empowers people socially and educationally, enabling them to change their lives through education.

This research further highlights the need to build library infrastructure and service capacity, especially for learners preparing for competitive exams. Accessible, inclusive, and well-equipped libraries could help build an equitable society and strengthen the nation's human resources in a big way. Finally, 12th Fail makes it clear that the role of the library goes beyond being a mere repository of knowledge and is instrumental in shaping aspirations and opportunities.

Acknowledgment

The author expresses sincere gratitude to Dr. Snigdha Naskar, Assistant Professor, Department of Library and Information Science, Rabindra Bharati University, for her valuable guidance, insightful suggestions, continuous encouragement, and scholarly support throughout the preparation of this research paper.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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