

Private Provision of Public Services: A Strategic Approach to Library Development in India

by

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In India, **estimated number** of public libraries is **100,000**.

In a diverse multilingual country, there are attitudinal differences and varying degrees of social, cultural, and information awareness among **1.4 billion** people.

There is no reliable data on libraries

The IFLA while launching the project '**Library Map of The World**' remarked "How can IFLA advocate at the global, regional, and national level when it does not have basic information about the number and state of libraries across the world?"(2017)

Public Library: How to Recognise

How do we define a public library or how a library can qualify to become a public library?

What is the yardstick applied for the purpose?

The policy documents written by the state agencies are silent on this issue.

In a broader sense, public libraries are social institutions showing positive outcome of human interaction to achieve a goal.

They also reduce and limit the uncertainty of human cooperation, giving a steady structure of everyday life.

Changing Scenario

- Community oriented libraries are largely funded and set up by the public agencies.
- They are one of the few institutions established by the state and provided free to the public without expecting measurable results or tangible return.
- Public libraries will have limited presence in the society if left to private hands.

But this scenario is now changing. Public reading spaces and libraries are becoming private enterprises. They charge fee from students. Public sector property developers like the DDA are also in the fray.

Objectives

This presentation tries to explore and justify:

- a) What is the role of the government in library development.
- b) How it has become necessary to provide once free public library and reading room services through profit seeking private agents.
- c) How the corporate world is becoming a part of the library-related endeavour, and
- d) How the civil society or the local community is getting involved in library-oriented programmes.
- e) What sort of strategic plan is needed to make the library-related programmes a success.

Library as a Public Good

The term 'good' has been used here to refer to a set of services. every good can be classified as either public or private depending upon the institutional framework surrounding the good and the condition of the good's production.

Two main features of public good are:

- a) **Joint, equal and non-rivalrous consumption** by all, and
- b) **Non-excludability**. It signifies that one individual's consumption of a good or a service does not prevent another individual from consuming the same good.

Public Good: Special Characteristics

One problem with the idea of joint and non-rivalrous consumption is all goods are characterised by non-rivalrous consumers at low level of use.

At the very high level of use, no good can be consumed without diminishing the level of consumption of others.

This rather peculiar quality of public good can be explained with reference to opening of a large number of privately-run reading rooms in metropolises like the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi.

Privately Run Public Reading Room

One of the oldest and popular news magazine, *The Economist* published a report in its 26 July 2025 issue on **privately reading rooms** operating in Indian cities.

Highly congested air-conditioned seating spaces are now utilised under pay-and-use system by the aspiring Indian youth.

The write-up is supported by a photograph of a reading room.

The owners are now doing brisk business in the city of Delhi/New Delhi where there is a concentration of coaching institutes.

Role of the Union Government in Library Development

Libraries, archives and museums (which are memory institutions) come under the jurisdiction of states.

The union government has practically very limited role in their upkeep or development.

So far, 19 states and one union territory (UT) have passed library laws (out of the total 28 states and eight UTs).

States like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Karnataka have better public library infrastructure.

The states having a higher level of **social intelligence** have had set up more public libraries as compared to others.

Civil society and the local community leaders have taken a leading role in this venture.

Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF)

The major objectives of the **RRRLF**, an autonomous body under the **Ministry of Culture** include:

- a) to formulate a national library policy and to build a national library system,
- b) to provide financial* and technical assistance to libraries,
- c) to promote research on library development,
- d) to advise the government on all matters related to the public library system, and
- e) to propagate library legislation in states and UTs.

*Financial assistance to libraries maintained by the states is provided under various **matching and non-matching** schemes.

RRRLF: Contd.

The RRRLF has so far granted financial assistance to more than 35,000 public libraries. This is the **first and foremost** activity of this organisation.

Important areas such as the a) development of a national library policy, or b) the promotion of research in the field of LIS have not received enough attention.

RRRLF's annual budgetary allocation of Rs.33 crore (i.e., Rs.330 million) is grossly inadequate to support a public library system in India.

The top-down approach in decision-making system is not suitable for a local community-oriented public library service

National Mission on Libraries

- A Gazette Notification dated 12 March 2012 declared setting up of the **National Mission on Libraries (NML)**.
- The primary objective of the NML was to improve the library and information service sector in the country.
- After a long discussion, the members of the NML identified and prioritised the following in its action plan.
 - ☐a) Creation of a National Virtual Library.
 - ☐b) Creation of Model Libraries.
 - ☐c) Survey of Public Libraries.
 - ☐d) Training and Skill Development for Public Library Staff.

NML: Contd.

- More than Rs. 4500 million were released for the NML. The amount was to be spent during the Five-Year Plan period.
- A private agency was assigned the task to conduct a qualitative and quantitative all-ndia survey of public libraries.
- A few public and private institutions were shortlisted to start training and skill development programmes.

The NML is working at a slow pace. **State governments do not send proposals for development projects to the implementation agency, i.e., the RRRLF on time.**

Creation of model public libraries in each state and a select number of districts and upgradation MoC-maintained libraries as modern institutions is one of the major projects undertaken by the NML.

Role of the Corporate (Private) Sector

- Under the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the private sector is now sanctioning grants for education and library-related projects.
- INFOSYS Foundation, was founded in 1996. It has completed many projects.
- Setting up over 60,000 school libraries and the upgradation of educational infrastructure such as computer-aided classrooms are aimed to create facilities for children belonging to weaker sections.
- Coforge Public Libraries located in Gurugram and NOIDA, have been set up by a global digital services solutions company. The purpose is to provide free access to knowledge.

READ India: A Case Study

- READ (Rural Education and Development) India is a not-for-profit NGO, set up in 2007. It is setting up community library and resource centers in different parts of the country with the financial support from the corporate sector. (54 centres have been set up
- One distinct feature of these centres is engagement with the local community in management and ownership. READ India is facilitating access to books and IT tools to children from the weaker sections. Classes are held to enhance reading, writing, and basic knowledge of mathematics.
- Nearly half a million rural women, children, and youth have benefited from training and skill development courses run by the READ centres.

READ India:Contd.

Following are the aims and objectives of the READ India

- a) READ India is also **enhancing the capability of the local communities** to set up their own enterprises and to get jobs in various trades.
- b) Since 2012, more than 50,000 men and women have been trained to develop occupational skills.
- c) READ India conducts workshops on basic health and hygiene. Health workers are trained for employment in centres located in rural areas.
- d) Soft skills are now important in India due to the emergence of the service sector. This sector employs more than 50% of the workforce. Soft skill development is a part of READ India programmes.

Public Libraries: Towards a “Strategy”

- The socioeconomic realities, both in rural and in urban areas, have changed during the past twenty years.
- The percentage of youth population (i.e., 15 to 29 years of age) is now 27.3%.
- And a majority of the youth are seeking better education and employment opportunities. Percentage of population in middle income group has increased.
- Number of higher education institutions has grown substantially.
- Many rural areas have become urban agglomerations. There is a demand for “smart libraries and comfortable reading spaces” in these semi urban areas.

A Strategic Plan: Contd.

- In August 2023, a three-day event titled **Festival of Libraries** was organised by the Ministry of Culture in New Delhi.
- Representatives from education departments of different states were invited to present their views on public libraries.
- Also, NGOs working in the field were asked to participate and share their experience.

The following conclusions could be drawn.

a) Community members are interested in setting up public library b) They are ready to arrange/donate a space or a unoccupied building for this purpose. c) All expenditure is met by the community. d) A comfortable and quiet reading room with basic amenities like drinking water, furniture, etc., is a basic requirement.

Strategic Plan:Contd.

- New methods are to be employed to attract schoolchildren. The district magistrate of Baripeta, Assam brought the concept of **hanging libraries** which have been introduced in more than 100 schools.
- Books are prominently displayed in the school campus using hanging ropes. It has created a fun-based learning environment.
- A user-responsive collection of books is needed. Books with illustration for children, religion/spirituality oriented collection for seniors, guidebooks for students (class1-12), English grammar and vocabulary, dictionary are in demand.

Culture of Reading

- Strategy should be to develop a culture of reading in the community. Reading has many virtues. It broadens our awareness of conditions beyond our own.
- Reading also expands our capacity for empathy and empathy is good for society.
- Many of us as promoter of public libraries and book reading believe that libraries can usher a change in the society. To achieve this, the bookview of Indian society is to be rejected and replaced by the fieldview.

Concluding Remarks

A) How public libraries can play a decisive role in the following development related parameters?

a) Children's education.

b) Employability and livelihood training.

c) Dissemination of useful and relevant information in a user-friendly format which relate to various **welfare programmes** announced by the government.

B) How to thwart the **negative qualities** of various social media?

A group comprising community members may explore to what extent public libraries as a public good or as a social capital can enhance the **quality of life** particularly in rural or semi-urban areas. They have to assess the **manpower requirement**.