



THE EVOLUTION AND CONTEMPORARY PARADIGM OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL AND POLICY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries serve as vital instruments for social empowerment, lifelong learning, and the democratization of information. In India, the evolution of the public library system spans from ancient institutional repositories to structured networks shaped by colonial interventions, visionary princely initiatives, and post-independence policy frameworks. Despite significant progress, modern public libraries face a landscape marked by uneven regional development, legislative deficits, financial constraints, and the urgent necessity of digital transformation. This paper traces the historical trajectory of public libraries in India, analyzes the current legislative and institutional frameworks, identifies systemic challenges, and outlines strategic interventions—including the National Mission on Libraries (NML) and Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)—required to revitalize these institutions as sustainable knowledge hubs for the twenty-first century.



KEYWORDS: Public libraries serve , social empowerment, lifelong learning, ancient institutional repositories.

1. INTRODUCTION

A robust public library system is a cornerstone of democratic societies, acting as a gateway to knowledge and a catalyst for socio-economic development. In a diverse nation like India, public libraries have the potential to bridge the deep-technological and informational divides that separate urban and rural populations.

The history of Indian libraries reflects an evolution alongside changing political, social, and educational landscapes. However, while higher education libraries and institutional research facilities have systematically integrated modern information communication technologies (ICT), the public library sector has historically lagged behind. This paper examines the developmental phases of public libraries in India, evaluates the legislative mechanisms that fund them, and reviews the current national strategies designed to modernise this critical infrastructure.

2. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF INDIAN LIBRARIES

2.1 Ancient and Medieval Foundations

The tradition of preserving knowledge in India dates back thousands of years. In ancient times, knowledge was originally transmitted through oral traditions. With the advent of scripts, writing on perishable materials like *bhurjapatra* (birch bark) and palm leaves emerged. Vast library collections were central to ancient seats of learning, such as the historic universities of **Nalanda** and **Taxila**, which

were managed by leading scholars and attracted international students. Similarly, Buddhist monasteries (*Viharas*) maintained structured manuscript libraries. [1]

During the medieval period, the establishment of libraries received significant royal patronage under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. Rulers like Sultan Jalaluddin Khilji established an imperial library and appointed the renowned poet Amir Khusru as its librarian. The Mughal emperors, notably Akbar, formalised library administration by creating a dedicated government department to oversee library collections in the capital city, solidifying librarianship as an established occupation. [1]

2.2 The British Period and the Dawn of Modern Public Libraries

The contemporary public library movement in India trace its roots to the early 19th century under British rule. A primary milestone occurred in May 1808, when the Government of Bombay enacted a proposal to register libraries and provide them with copies of published books funded by the "funds for the encouragement of literature". The **Sinha Committee** later designated this event as the inception of the first phase of modern public library development in India. [2, 3, 4]

During the first half of the 19th century, subscription-based libraries emerged within the three main presidency towns: **Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras**. Funded largely by resident Europeans, these early institutions were not free; they charged membership fees, meaning their services were consumed primarily by an affluent, educated minority. [2, 3, 5]

[1808: Bombay Library Registration] —> [1835: Calcutta Public Library] —> [1903: Imperial Library Opened]

The establishment of the **Calcutta Public Library in 1835** stands out as a highly significant event. Under the Imperial Library Act of 1902, Lord Curzon merged the Calcutta Public Library with the existing official library to form the **Imperial Library**, which opened to the public in 1903 and was later designated the National Library of India after independence. [2, 3, 4]

2.3 The Baroda Movement: A Visionary Model

The first decades of the 20th century are widely considered the golden age of the Indian library movement. This era was defined by the pioneer work of **Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III** of the princely state of **Baroda**. [2, 4, 5]

In 1910, the Maharaja introduced a free, state-wide public library network with open access for all citizens. He appointed an American library expert, **William Alanson Borden**, to scientifically design and implement this comprehensive system. Due to his systemic approach to embedding library services within primary education, Gaekwad III is recognized as the "Father of the Library Movement" in India. [1, 2, 4]

3. Post-Independence Frameworks and Policy Initiatives

Following independence in 1947, the Government of India launched targeted initiatives to build out its public library network as part of its five-year socio-economic development plans. [6]

3.1 Key Committees and Policies

- **The Sinha Committee Report (1959):** Officially known as the Advisory Committee for Libraries, it recommended that state governments treat public library services as a fundamental state responsibility rather than relying on private subscriptions.
- **Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF):** Established in Kolkata in May 1972 by the Ministry of Culture, the RRRLF remains the central nodal agency for coordinating and financing public library development across India. It manages matching and non-matching grant assistance schemes to support book collections and infrastructure projects. [7, 8]

- **National Policy on Library & Information System (NAPLIS - 1986):** NAPLIS advocated for a village-level library model. It recommended that every village cluster maintain a community library-cum-information centre funded by pooling rural development resources. [9, 10]
- **National Knowledge Commission (NKC - 2005):** Chaired by Dr. Sam Pitroda, the NKC published its definitive report, "*Libraries: Gateways to Knowledge*," in 2009. The commission recommended an overhaul of Library and Information Science (LIS) training, the creation of a national electronic network, and the modernization of public library services using information and communications technologies (ICT). [7]

4. Legislative Infrastructure and Financing

A central issue within India's public library framework is the lack of a standardized national legal structure. Under the Constitution of India, libraries are categorized as a state subject, meaning legislative authority sits entirely with individual state governments.

4.1 State Library Legislations

The legislative model was pioneered by the **Madras Public Libraries Act** in 1948. Currently, 19 out of India's states have enacted dedicated public library legislation. [11, 12]

State	Year Enacted	Funding Mechanism (Library Cess)
Tamil Nadu (Madras)	1948	Yes (Surcharge on property tax)
Andhra Pradesh	1960	Yes
Karnataka	1965	Yes
Maharashtra	1967	No (Direct government grants)
West Bengal	1979	No
Bihar	2008	No
Chhattisgarh	2008	No
Arunachal Pradesh	2009	No

4.2 The Financing Challenge

Funding mechanisms vary considerably between states. Only five states include an statutory provision for a **library cess** (a targeted tax levy added to property or municipal taxes). States without a library cess must rely on unpredictable, discretionary annual state budgets. Consequently, states with lower literacy rates often lack library legislation entirely, and many existing libraries face major funding gaps. Right to Information (RTI) inquiries to the Ministry of Culture have revealed a lack of consolidated national data on per capita expenditure for public libraries, highlighting a systemic gap in financial tracking. [11, 12]

5. Critical Challenges Facing Indian Public Libraries

1. **Uneven Regional Growth:** Library development remains highly unequal across regions. Southern states (such as Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) maintain structured, legislation-backed library networks, while several northern states face major infrastructural shortages. [13]
2. **Outdated Collection Paradigms:** Many municipal and rural libraries continue to house older collections without matching local language preferences or contemporary educational needs. [5]

3. **The Digital Divide:** While academic libraries have shifted toward digital subscriptions, many public libraries lack basic automation, computers, or broadband internet connections. [11, 12]
4. **Human Resource Shortages:** A lack of professionally qualified staff, combined with limited training opportunities in modern data systems, affects the daily operations of rural and district-level libraries. [8]

6. Contemporary Modernisation Strategies

To address these systemic challenges, the Government of India has focused on infrastructure modernization and public-private models.

6.1 The National Mission on Libraries (NML)

Launched under the Ministry of Culture, the **National Mission on Libraries (NML)** addresses infrastructure upgrades, human resource training, and digital content integration. A key component of the NML is the creation of the **National Virtual Library of India (NVLI)**, a centralized digital platform designed to collect, index, and share India's cultural heritage and educational resources online. [8]

6.2 Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)

Following recommendations from the National Knowledge Commission, India has increasingly explored **Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)** to modernize its libraries. The PPP model allows municipal authorities to maintain ownership of public properties while partnering with private corporations, NGOs, or philanthropic foundations to update IT systems, manage operations, and fund digital collections without increasing the public tax burden. [14]

7. CONCLUSION

The development of public libraries in India has transitioned from elite subscription rooms to an inclusive national goal of open, equitable access to information. While early visionary projects like the Baroda public library network proved what was possible, the current decentralized model remains fragmented by uneven state funding and a lack of nationwide legislative backing. [2, 4, 8, 11, 13]

To build sustainable public libraries for the future, India must update out-of-date state library laws, secure stable funding streams, and expand initiatives like the National Mission on Libraries. Integrating digital resources, establishing public-private partnerships, and transforming libraries into active community knowledge hubs will be essential to supporting lifelong learning and rural empowerment across the country. [8, 11, 14]

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