

Public Library Infrastructure in India- National Mission on Libraries

By Madhumita Kumar Rajan (Free Libraries Network)

ILC Registration number: 1781

Date: 14-Dec-22

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Why Public Libraries matter?

Books connect readers to voices- from the past, from alternate universes, from people whose lived experiences we would never know. Books connect us to new worlds and ideas while revealing our own truths by rooting our experiences in a broader context. Books transform- both individuals and communities. Libraries are at the centre of such transformation. The UNESCO Library Manifesto 2022 posits the public library as the local gateway to knowledge that provides a condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development for individuals and social groups.ⁱ

Roles of the Public Library

Libraries are more than book repositories. The IFLA Public Libraries Services Guidelinesⁱⁱ views the primary purpose of the public library as providing resources and services to meet the needs of individuals and groups for (i) education (ii) information and (iii) personal development including recreation and leisure. The role of libraries in cultural development and maintaining the nation's history is also recognized as is their role in the development and maintenance of a democratic society by giving the individual access to a wide and varied range of knowledge, ideas and opinions.

During the pandemic and subsequent lock down, community run free libraries in India educated its members about social distancing and masking, helped them book vaccination appointments, filled the days of home bound children and even connected members to organizations providing rations and relief.ⁱⁱⁱ Public Libraries can turn into classrooms, community meeting spaces, vocational training centres and cultural centres. Public libraries can act as voting stations, polling stations, a space for residents to access the Government and vice versa.

Freedom, equality and access to knowledge are fundamental human values. These can become real only with well-informed citizens exercising democratic rights and actively participating in shaping their societies. Constructive participation is essential to democracy and public libraries can create this mass of participating citizens. In India, economic and social inequalities are a reality. With a population 139 crores, most citizens are kept out of real participation – as envisaged in a democracy, and many are denied their constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights – of freedom and equality. A robust public library infrastructure can change that- by allowing citizens to participate more constructively, by

providing resources and information that can level the existing social inequities or at least reduce the inequalities in access to information.

India's Policy and Legislation on public libraries

This paper examines the National Mission on Libraries, launched in 2014 and its role in developing Indian public library infrastructure, its status and effectiveness. This section is a brief summary of national and state level legislation and policy interventions presented as a backdrop against which to view the work of the National Mission on Libraries.

National Policies and Legislations

India has a National Library Act (1948) providing the National Library the status of an 'Institution of National Importance' open to the public. The Indian Constitution recognizes libraries as a state subject and not a union subject. Therefore while there are state legislations on libraries, there is no national legislation or policy governing public libraries. There have been attempts to create a national framework for the establishment of public library infrastructure. The earliest was S.R. Ranganathan's Model Library Act, 1930, which provided for free and accessible public libraries, with statutory commitment on funding in form of compulsory library grant and cess. However, this was not accepted by the provinces and remained unlegislated. Subsequently, the Model Public Library Bill, 1942, followed by the Union Government Bill, 1948, which was meant to cover the entire nation, was drafted but was never passed.

Administratively, the Ministry of Culture administers and manages the National Library of India, National Archives of India and four independently funded libraries but does not have a department devoted to public libraries. At present, this work is being carried out by the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), established in 1972, as a central autonomous organization established and fully financed by the Ministry of Culture. It is the nodal agency of the Government of India to support public library services and systems and promote public library movement in the country.

Without a national policy on public libraries in India, the implementation of the legislations in the state level has been quite slow. There have been various reports, plans and policies mooted in the last 75 years^{iv}, but any serious attempt to bring into force a national policy or legislation to create a system for development maintenance and promotion of public libraries have failed

State Legislations

Nineteen out of 28 States and 6 Union Territories have passed legislation to allow for set up of public library in the state. In general, states with lower literacy rates are found not to have a library legislation. Out of these nineteen states, five states have provisions of a

library cess or tax levy to fund and operate public libraries. Out of the states that have passed legislation, most states do not report statistics on public libraries though they are meant to. In Tamil Nadu, districts publish statistics pertaining to public libraries in their annual District Statistical Handbook. Other states report differently. Some don't at all. In some states, it is unclear which department public libraries function under like those of art and culture or education.

Since, there is no national aggregation of data and we have no reliable data on the number of public libraries in India, per capita expenditure on public libraries. Nor do we have clear numbers on National level or state level budget allocation for development of public libraries in India.

The National Mission on Libraries, 2014

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) in its *Report to the Nation (2006-2009)* made ten major recommendations on libraries. As one outcome, a High Level Committee -the National Mission on Libraries (NML) was set up by the Ministry of Culture (MoC). The composition, terms of reference, tenure, management support and method of operation was detailed in a Gazette notification published on 4th May 2012^v followed by a meeting on 18th May, 2012.^{vi} However, according to the PIB press release, NML was launched on 21 February 2014, after the schemes approval with a budget allocation of 400 crores to be spent over three years.^{vii} The Mission recognized the pivotal role of libraries and intended to ensure sustained attention to the development of libraries. The scheme with Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRMLF) as the nodal agency, consists of four components with working groups constituted to administer each component. The four components are:

1. Creation of National Virtual Library of India (NVLI) – Creating a digital library, a virtual repository of cultural artefacts
2. Setting up of NML Model Libraries -to upgrade 6 MoC libraries, 35 State Central Libraries and 35 District Libraries
3. Quantitative & Qualitative Survey of Libraries -to acquire statistics about public libraries; size and quality of the libraries; number of books issued, frequency of visits, levels of satisfaction, and impact of library on the quality of life and economic gains of local people, among other aims.
4. Capacity Building for development and training of library personnel- -Development of library personnel through training/workshop; to develop on-line training modules/tutorials and e-learning module for libraries; to develop expertise in handling technology tools and inculcate in library personnel the managerial, analytical, decision-making, planning and organizational skills.

See [Annexure 1](#) of this paper for a short table summarising NML objectives, implementation and status so far

National Virtual Library of India

As on today, the largest fund allocation under NML i.e. INR 72.34 crores^{viii} has been spent on developing the Indian Culture Portal^{ix} a bi-lingual (Hindi and English) internet portal. Content is presented in 28 categories such as rare books, e-books, paintings, stories, snippets, historical cities and forts, etc.

However, the database is not easy to search. For example- I could not find the gazette notification setting up NML despite a section for Gazettes. Searches for authors Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Geetanjali Shree will turn up zero results. There are a significant number of digitised material -rare books, books out of copyright etc, however many of these are in English. The portal does not clearly document book and information collections available at state and district libraries. The portal serves a small group of digitally savvy researchers who already have access to national public libraries, private libraries and access to premium research databases. The portal does nothing to serve the needs of millions of Indians, without access to books and information.

Model Libraries

The next big chunk of the budget, INR 54 crores has been allotted to developing model libraries.^x Under the NML Model Libraries scheme, infrastructure of 6 MoC Libraries, 35 State Central Libraries and 35 District Libraries covering all the States/U.Ts are to be upgraded and modernized. Setting up of NML Model Libraries falls under matching scheme, where 75% of the funds is provided by the Central Government and 25% is provided by the State/UT. In case of North Eastern States, the Centre's share is 90% while the states is 10%. A sum of approx INR 32 crores has been spent towards modernizing state central and district libraries.^{xi}

Bulk of these funds have been allotted to state central libraries. Few district libraries appear in the list. State Library departments and other libraries are expected to submit proposals to RRRLF to access funds. This process and this scheme itself means that many smaller libraries, and especially district and village libraries will be unable to access funds from this scheme

According to a research paper^{xii}, out of general financial assistance offered by RRRLF large states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Jharkhand have not bothered to even apply for the money available. Only 2% of the total 12,000+ RRRLF registered libraries that received assistance were in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in the country. The paper further states that Delhi used all the funds available, followed by Chandigarh at 81%.

Many states hovered around the 40% mark, but states like Bihar, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana did not use any of the funds available. While financial assistance is available, it defeats the purpose, if there is no mechanism to deploy these funds to states that most lack a library infrastructure.

Another concern is the understanding of what “model” and “upgradation” is in the context of libraries. The guidelines provided to NML for upgradation of libraries providing service to the public^{xiii} state that these model libraries should meet recreational and cultural needs of the community, provide free access to all publications, including government and institutional documents and online full text resources, facilitate reference service to help public in finding appropriate resources for study and research. The guidelines also address upgrading of existing physical infrastructure and providing modular furniture and fixtures. The guidelines also recognize that model libraries should have appropriate facilities to meet needs of senior citizens, differently-abled persons and children. The Model libraries are also to be equipped with modern technological tools. However, besides information on fund allocation there is no information on how much of these guidelines have been met or implemented. From the pictures available in the gallery, there seems to be little done towards upgradation besides providing paint and large reading rooms. It is unclear if these model libraries have developed programs for outreach, programs to bring into its fold the excluded etc.

Even though the guidelines take a broad view of what a model libraries should be, it still doesn't quite take into account other factors that make a library a dynamic thriving institution. For example- People. The NML guidelines or model library scheme doesn't take into account the need to pay librarians and library staff at par with government pay scales. It doesn't talk about the staff required to run model libraries. It also does not provide for budgets for special outreach programs.

Capacity building

Under this mission, 18 training programmes have trained 685 library professionals.^{xiv} There is no data on the budget. An effective public library infrastructure needs qualified, empathetic librarians. A librarian plays multiple roles, connecting readers with resources, maintaining a collection relevant to its community, being an advocate and champion for the library, developing a library curriculum, besides being manager, administrator, clerk all rolled into one. Most public libraries in India are understaffed, some libraries sharing their librarians with another. Public Librarians are ridiculously underpaid. According to the NML survey out of the 5000 libraries surveyed only one-half of the librarians/heads received salaries according to Govt pay scales and in more than one quarter of the libraries, no staff member was paid on the government pay scale. In this context, capacity building has to

mean so much more than ad-hoc training programs. It also means acknowledging the minimum staff required to run a library, staff required to run outreach and advocacy programs and finally a sustained and on-going training program that can be replicated in various state and district libraries. While the guidelines on NML included a mandate to develop on-line training modules/tutorials and e-learning module for libraries; and to develop a system of on –going training programs, this part of the mandate seems to have been ignored and instead the focus is on ad hoc trainings conducted- the course and content of which we have little information on.

Quantitative and Qualitative Survey

The only component of the scheme which has the most visible outcome is the 400 page Quantitative and Qualitative survey report^{xv} published by Kantar. This survey is based on data collected till 2019 from 5140 Libraries and 7120 citizens. The survey aims to assess existing infrastructure, study patterns of library usage, and gather insights into what library services citizens require.

In a country of our size, a survey of 7120 citizens (5000 of whom are public library users) represent than 0.01% of the population. The survey draws insights and makes recommendations, for the whole country, based on a small data set, which is worrying. Also worrying are observations that some library services can be fee based. This misses overall mandate of NML which is to promote establishment of a library infrastructure as a public good. Advocating for payment misses the point that libraries provide access to information, a way of mobilising populations to be meaningful participant in shaping their society.

The survey, limited as it is, provides interesting data like library memberships have been growing at a rate of 10-12 % since 2014. This is despite pandemics, despite lack of any outreach program by the libraries. People want to read, want to be informed and this puts to rest common laments like the lack of book reading culture in India. The survey also shows other blind spots- that libraries have very few children and differently abled members. It also lays bare how understaffed and underpaid library staffs are.

While the survey provides interesting statics and recommendations, the information the survey doesn't provide and doesn't seek tells a more interesting story. Why do the survey questions focus on need for digitization but no survey question to measure physical library area? Why are there survey questions on how much users would be willing to pay for services, rather than how much of the population around the library actually uses existing services and if fees were a barrier to such use? Why was the total number of library members not measured against population size of the district or community served by the library? The survey doesn't use basic standards like how many books there are per member to assess if our libraries have diverse and relevant collections. It doesn't measure if libraries

have programs to bring into its fold those excluded from reading and accessing information. This indicates that the survey does not fully address or comprehend the various roles a library can play and more importantly the status of a public library as national institution to ensure equality in access to information, a space to combat and level existing economic and social inequalities, a means to combat the growing digital divide- that leads to large populations without access to information and education.

The survey is also sadly a missed opportunity to shed some light on library funding and budget models. The report data on budgets does not provide any guidance on how much investment this area will actually need and what is costs to run a high quality library that meets the need of its community members. The survey could have provided reasonable guidelines on what current library budgets are and co relate it to number of members i.e. per member expense or examine library budgets against total population size served by the library, i.e. per capita library expense. The survey also does not provide any macro level data, that is sorely needed to plan and map the way forward in ensuring we have a good public library infrastructure. The survey does not have any information on how many public libraries we have, what per capita expense on public libraries are etc.

The Survey also has many blind spots- that may be indicative of the lack of commitment to the area of public libraries and reveals existing biases on who public libraries are meant to serve. For example, while surveying infrastructure, there is no recognition on what kind of infrastructure should be measured in the context of libraries. There is no examinations of questions like- does the library have open shelving system (to determine how easy to access the resources are). Neither does the survey examine- what barriers exist for membership (in form of fees, in form of access to information etc), or if the libraries located at accessible locations.

While one of the guidelines for the survey was to study the impact of libraries on local communities – impact on quality of life and economic gains, the report does not venture into this territory at all. There is also no study to consider what a community's needs are and whether they are met by the library. The research methodology would have been significantly enhanced, if in addition to surveys of users and non users, public consultations were held at the libraries themselves, inviting inputs from the community to better understand their needs. The report does not have any questions designed to understand how libraries need to interact with their communities. Another gap is missing the success of libraries where communities are actively engaged in owning, running and managing libraries. The Kerala model of public libraries could be examined to study the effectiveness of community owned libraries with government funding.

Policy Paralysis

The National Mission on Libraries, a much needed intervention, is a colossal disappointment. It follows in the legacy of various failed national interventions. National missions are time-bound, with budget outlay for a fixed period. While the National Mission on Libraries has been extended, missions cannot be depended on for libraries to have a permanent footing.

Social exclusion

For a serious commitment to building India's public libraries we need to analyse why previous policies and national interventions, that advocate for free and accessible libraries have failed. S.R Ranganathan's model legislation for the governing of public libraries that could be replicated at the state level and his efforts with the Union Library Bill, 1948 was never legislated. A National Policy on Library and Information Systems, developed in 1986, which worked with the premise of free and accessible public libraries also met a similar fate. The Ministry of Culture or Ministry of Human Resource Development have had many opportunities for development of public library policies, which haven't moved forward. Libraries are not well integrated as instruments for learning and development in the National Policy on Education. Are these failures a reflection of our society's bias in viewing the domain of literature, culture and art as meant for specific elite? India is a vast country with a growing and diverse population. We need to understand the role of public libraries in the context of social exclusion. There are existing caste, class, gender and religious inequalities already in place – restricting access to resources and power. Libraries can act as a great leveller in this area. Public libraries can leverage its capacity to tackle social exclusion, contribute to community engagement, human rights and work for social justice. For any policy intervention to work we must be aware of these exclusions. Policies must recognize that their role is not simply in developing and financing virtual or model libraries, but that it must do so in a manner that acknowledges the harm of exclusion and is devised to combat these exclusions. Policies that focus primarily on digitization, on introducing fee based services etc can exacerbate existing inequalities rather than reducing them.

No Information, misinformation and other malaises

As stated previously in the paper, we do not have useful and reliable data on public libraries in India. For instance, we do not a straight forward response to the question- How many Public Libraries does India have. According to RRRLF we have 46,746 public libraries as on date.^{xvi} A 2014 report by the Ministry of Culture relies on a survey that says we have 54,846 public libraries.^{xvii} The 2011 National Census states 75,000 libraries.^{xviii} Yet other figures emerge from other surveys by independent researchers, including a figure of 1,46,000 libraries from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) ^{xix} This lack of national aggregation means there are no reliable statistics on finance, number of

public libraries and per capita expenditure on libraries.^{xx}.The administrative structure of the state library legislations varies with their organizational structure and the department under which the public libraries are functioning. Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, have a Department of Public Libraries, and Director of Public Libraries. Kerala has a distinct library set up where 'the libraries are owned by people (registered as a trust or society). Tripura and Haryana's public libraries are managed by the Department of Higher Education. In many states, no qualified professional library staff are appointed, rather officers of the culture/education/art department look after the library affairs solely or with additional other responsibilities

The organization structure of RRRLF, which advocates, funds and supports public libraries, does not have scope for research and development and standardization of library services or means to integrate libraries with the broader framework of galleries, archives and museums, collaborating with academic libraries, cooperatives and regional networks.

This lack of data and organizational infrastructure is a serious impediment in planning and mapping the way forward with respect to public libraries. The NML survey could have engaged with a broader mandate to collect this data. However, the survey was limited to information gathering from 5000 libraries, which while useful, does not solve the gap of lack of information we have.

At the same time, while there is a need for data, information and standards at a national level, many of the successful models at the state level show us that de-centralisation and providing autonomy to local bodies has helped create dynamic and thriving public library culture. Over centralisation of functions like book purchase and in some cases even financing can lead to stunted growth of library infrastructure on the ground.

Where do we go from here?

The role of a public library in shaping and transforming a community is undeniable. Public Libraries can also have a significant role in strengthening democracy, levelling social inequities, providing a connection between citizens and their government. The need for national attention on the areas of public libraries is critical. However, for a national or state policy or legislation to be effective, some non negotiable requirements should be:

Recognizing free library services for the people as a matter of right

Many of the state legislations on public libraries do not define public libraries. Neither do they reflect a full understanding of library services. Many states charge a membership fee and security deposit. The Delhi Public Library charges Rs 25-100 as an annual membership fee. Some Karnataka libraries charge Rs 100-200 as lifetime membership fees. Tamil Nadu

charges Rs 10 annual fee with a deposit of up to Rs 50 for borrowing books. These fees are nominal. However, in our country where a large percentage of population spend 6 out of 10 Rs they earn on food even “nominal” fees become barriers. Added to this is the bureaucracy involved in filling out forms and registering as a library members. These nominal fees make up such a tiny portion of the library’s budget that their purpose is not clear at all. Libraries serve all and need to acknowledge that the library needs to be active in bringing in the otherwise excluded into their fold- either by specific programs for first generation readers, by reducing entry barriers like fees. Any national policy must recognize that it is paramount to help set up a system of libraries- that are accessible and free. That while public libraries are providing a service, they have a larger role to play as a public good.

Creating a system to drive implementation of state legislation

The central government should make it mandatory for the states to provide library services through a library legislation. The role of a national policy would be to provide for minimum standards for a public library, create means for libraries to access central funding and to integrate libraries into the National Education Policy. A national policy should also working on creating a “system” rather than infrastructure. A system that allows for libraries to work with each other, to help provide training on library practices to create a pool of well qualified librarians etc. A system that allows for easy aggregation of data and information on libraries and library services. The policy also would need to recognize the value of a decentralized structure and the critical need empower urban local bodies. Library Associations and other stakeholders need to lobby for a robust national policy and collectively reclaim their position in the public sphere as public institutions with a crucial role in nation building.

Committing statutory source of funding

Almost all state local department of libraries point to lack of funding as the main impediment to offering services. As per a research paper, expenditure by the Ministry of Culture on public libraries has increased from Rs. 575 million in 2010–11 to Rs. 1,300 million in 2013–14, while the estimate for 2014–15 is Rs 1,990 million.^{xxi} While this is heartening, a comparison with other countries will show India’s per capita spend on libraries is much lower than other countries.^{xxii} Some states charge a library cess to finance and run state libraries. This empowers states to exclusively use the tax collected for library development. However, here too there are cases where local municipal bodies do not make timely payments to the public library departments.^{xxiii} For instance, in Karnataka the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), the city corporation of Bengaluru, owes more than Rs 226 crore to the Department of Public Libraries as on 2019.^{xxiv} Even after threats of criminal action and showcause notices, the cess has not been transferred to the department of libraries.^{xxv} Therefore a tax and cess model is not the perfect solution, especially when there is no political will or demand from citizen that recognizes the importance of public

libraries as a state institution. A national policy on libraries needs also to be backed up with a commitment on funding for libraries and recognize that public libraries need financial autonomy and independence. This can be driven by legislations providing for cess or taxes, by effective administration measures allowing the libraries to collect these cesses, by making commitment in Central budgets for libraries, by integrating portion of the National education budget towards development of public libraries.

The challenges in setting up a robust public library infrastructure are big but not insurmountable. Several states including Tamil Nadu and Kerala have a basic public library network in place. There are hundreds of free libraries run by individuals, NGOs and communities on shoestring budgets that demonstrate how dynamic and vibrant libraries can transform their societies. We need to broaden the voices that call for and participate in setting up public libraries, by including stakeholders like publishers, authors, educators, local communities. Public Libraries need to be interwoven in the cultural fabric of society through strong legislation, backed up with robust policies to fund, govern and administer the library services for all. Libraries create better learners, increase readership, and create more informed citizens. The right to access information is well recognized in our society and laws. The role of libraries in ensuring realizing of this right is overlooked.

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Annexure 1

National Mission on Libraries - Summary of the mandates, budget, implementation partners and status as on 30 Nov 22.

Mandate	Implementation partners	Budget	Status
Creation of NVLMI	IIT Bombay with Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC) and IGNOU	72.34 Cr	Main output: Indian Culture Portal, www.indianculture.gov.in with a soft launch on 15 February 2018 consisting of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content presented in 28 categories such as rare books, e-books, paintings, stories, snippets, historical cities and forts, etc. Bilingual - English and Hindi language.
Model Libraries	State library departments with RRMLF	54 crores out of which 32.51 crores released.	List of model libraries and budget here: http://rrrlf.nic.in/NML/Status.aspx
Quantitative & Qualitative Survey of Libraries	Assigned Indian Market Research Bureau (IMRB) Report released by Kantar	No data	Report published in 2018 with updates from July 2019. 5140 Libraries and 7120 citizens surveyed
Capacity Building	INFLIBET and RRMRF	No data	18 training programs conducted. 685 library professionals trained.

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- ⁱⁱ IFLA Public Library Service Guidelines (2nd, completely revised edition), (<https://repository.ifla.org/handle/123456789/988> issued on Jul 2010) accessed on 29-Nov -22
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- ^{iv} See a list of various national level policy interventions in the paper in Table 5, Section 3.1 of “A Policy Review of Public Libraries in India” By Preedip Balaji, Vijay Ms and Mohan Babu published on March 2018 (<https://doi.org/10.24943/prpliwp1.2018>) available at <https://iihs.co.in/knowledge-gateway/a-policy-review-of-public-libraries-in-india/> accessed on 29-Nov -22.
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- ^{xi} A list of NML Libraries being upgraded into model libraries and funds allocates is available here - rrrlf.nic.in/NML/Status.aspx accessed on 29-Nov -22
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