FAQs

Section 1: The Free Libraries Network & Membership Eligibility

What is the Free Libraries Network (FLN)?

FLN is an alliance of free library organisations, library practitioners and library activists across India and South Asia who advocate for the right to read and equitable access to books for everyone. FLN strives to ensure free access to books to all and nurture new readers, who may or may not have the means to do so themselves.

What do we do?

FLN is an advocacy and facilitator organisation that is forging the free library movement in India and demands a robust public library system that is truly accessible to all. FLN promotes creation of free libraries through;

a. advocacy on the importance of free libraries, access to books and reading for all and commitment to resources and funding in the public library system, with governments and other stakeholders.

b. developing and sharing library curriculum and best practices through pedagogical research and field experience.

c. supporting members and organisations through training in the know-how of good library practices and library curriculum, and by sharing resources on access to public funding, publishers and acquisition of books.

d. facilitating books distribution through its books for all programme.

e. building a strong network and alliances with different stakeholders in the free library movement.

Who can be a member?

Any organisation running a free library can become a member. Individuals who are free-library practitioners or free-library activists with current or prior experience in public-access, community libraries can be FLN members.

Educators, social workers, advocacy groups and researchers actively engaged with access to books & reading may also qualify (pending review by FLN).

Who is not eligible for an FLN membership

a. Funding and implementation organisations

b. Private and or institutional libraries/organisations and library practitioners that charge a membership fee or any other costs (such as security deposits) to access library services.

c. Institutions, organisations, libraries and library practitioners that do not follow the principles of non-discrimination and inclusion.

How can those who do not qualify for FLN membership be involved?

Organisations and/or individuals that align with FLN principles and are working in the field of education, libraries, access to books and reading, etc. can work with FLN and its member organisations to promote the free library movement, right to read and access to books and reading for all, in the capacity of funding, research, advocacy and training. All collaborations shall be facilitated by FLN through its member organisation or appointed Co-ordinators.

If you see yourself and your organisation in this role, we welcome you to identify yourself as a friend of FLN. Just drop us a mail to keep updated on FLN news and to understand how you can participate without being a member.

How can I/my organisation become a member of FLN?
If you qualify for FLN membership (as per the eligibility criteria mentioned above) you can fill out the forms here. Please note that after filling the form, your application will be under review. Once the review is complete, you will receive an email containing a welcome kit. You will then officially be an FLN member.

When and How can an FLN member cease to be part of FLN?

a. An organisation or individual can leave FLN membership by informing FLN officials via email. Upon leaving, they shall discontinue any claims of affiliation to FLN in all forums (including social media) and cease to expect or collect those benefits accruing from membership in FLN .
b. FLN holds the right to discontinue any membership if the library organisation or individual changes their practices and no longer align with the mission or values of FLN.
c. FLN holds the right to discontinue any membership if it finds the library organisation or individual misrepresenting its work & values.
d. FLN holds the right to discontinue any membership if the library organisation or individual indulges in harmful activities to FLN or any other member.

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Section 2: Free Libraries & The Free Library Movement

What is a free library?

A free library provides books & reading services free of cost, in an environment that supports freedom to think, create and empower oneself through learning. The member cannot & must not bear any financial burden for the maintenance of the library. The removal of a membership fee must be seen as a right rather than tokenism. The free library does not restrict access to anyone on the basis caste, class, religion, gender, disability etc.

What is the free library movement?

Free Library Movement calls for creation of libraries that are free and accessible to all, without discrimination and without prejudice to any caste, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender, disability, educational background, etc. The movement is being forged by free libraries, library practitioners and library activists across India and South Asia and it aims to realise the right to read and make books accessible to everyone, everywhere. The movement promotes (a) the Right To Read (b) Reading For Pleasure and (c) Reading is Thinking.

What is the FLN model of a community-owned free library?

FLN believes that the right to read is a fundamental one, which is to be delivered by free libraries that offer excellent services. A free-library should model:

1. **Free Membership & Access to All**: It provides the best possible books & reading services free of cost, in an environment that supports freedom to think, create and empower oneself through learning. It welcomes all regardless of their socio-economic status or identity and provides the same standards of librarianship to all, without prejudice.
2. **Excellent Book-Resources & Other Materials**: A free library should have an ideal ratio of member to book-resources of 1:10 or a collection of at least 2500 books, (including academic & non-academic books in diverse genres, magazines & newspapers) that cater to the community's language-choices, contexts, interests, and aspirations including resources for people with disabilities.
3. **Reading Programs:** A free library is mandated to not just serve those who already read but to nurture & grow those who have not yet become readers due to lack of access to excellent libraries. In India, this means having a strong Reading Program in any library where a majority of members are likely to be first-generation library-users, especially if they are children & young adults.
4. **Community Engagement & Ownership**: The only way to create a sustainable & excellent library is if its community takes ownership of its policies, programs and collection. The library should have leadership & librarian training models that build capacity within the local community. The library must maintain a steady relationship of accountability and consultation with the local community through regular engagement with member-families and non-members.

5. **Safety & Inclusivity Policy**: All excellent libraries have codified policies for (i) Child Safety & Protection (ii) Inclusivity for all genders, castes, classes, religions, ethnic identities and people with disabilities. (iii) Social & other media policy (iv) Digital rights, responsibility & safety policy

6. **Records & Documentation**: Libraries must maintain written or digital records of (i) Members (ii) Book Catalogue (iii) Circulation History (iv) Reading Programs (v) Footfalls (vi) Before-After evaluations for special interventions/ workshops etc.

7. **Trained Library Staff**: A trained and supported librarian is the heart of any community-owned library. She is a library and community-relationship manager, a read-aloud & storytelling expert, an educator and an information specialist. She must be supported with pay commensurate with her work as well regular opportunities for capacity building & professional growth.

Are you working in a Model Library?

A checklist for all free-libraries to locate themselves in their librarianship journey

1. **Free is Good**
   ● You're a Free Library i.e. you do not charge any fee for any library services
   ● You welcome all regardless of caste, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation etc.

2. **Library Space**
   ● You have a physical infrastructure in place
     OR
   ● You have a temporary set-up with a plan to upgrade to pakka structure
     OR
   ● You travel as a librarian to different reading/library spaces which are Free.

3. **Library Team**
   ● You have dedicated librarians/ library caretakers to open the library on designated days, maintain the space & collection, run library programs and ensure the safety & happiness of all members.

4. **Books Collection**
   ● Collection size ensure ratio of at least 7 books for each member
   ● Collection reflects members' interests, reading levels and language of thinking etc.
   ● Collection includes members' aspirations in terms of types of books, reading levels and language etc.

5. **Reading Program**
   Designed to serve the most under-served members of the library
   ● Daily/ weekly read alouds
   ● Storytelling
   ● Literacy or Fluency sessions
   ● Book Clubs
   ● Book Talks ETC.

6. **Other Library Programs**
   ● Arts & Crafts

- ● Health & Wellness
- ● Digital/ Internet facilities
- ● Games
- ● Community-Interest events
- ● Tuition for school/college curriculum ETC.

7. **Documentation & Cataloguing**

You follow documentation practices i.e.
- ● Cataloguing & keeping written/computer records of all books in your collection
- ● Member database with names/ libraries IDs/ Contact Details/ Demographic. details etc. (with a privacy practice in place to not reveal individual details without consent).

8. **Circulation**

You issue books to the members i.e.
- ● Let members take books home for a day/ week.
- ● You do not have a lost/damaged book fee.

9. **Community Ownership**
- ● Your library practices inclusivity to allow all sections of society to access the library.
- ● You maintain a relationship of trust with guardians of minors, local community leaders and others.
- ● You involve library members in key programs & policy decisions related to the library.
- ● You conduct regular community outreach & relation-building exercises in your community.

10. **Policies & Safeguards for All**
- ● Admission Policy & Orientation for New Members
- ● Inclusivity Policy (safeguarding vulnerable members of the community)
- ● Code of Conduct for members, staff & volunteers
- ● Safety Policy
- ● Digital Safety & Responsibility
- ● ETC.

11. **Advocacy & Conversations about Free-Libraries**
- ● You create awareness about what free libraries are in your community
- ● You participate in or initiate conversations about the importance of free libraries
- ● You contribute your time, knowhow or resources to the free library movement through FLN or other platforms.

What is a library curriculum?

Library curriculum is a structured approach with a clear pedagogical foundation to deliver key services in Reading, Arts & Crafts, Digital Literacy, Adult Education, Games and anything else the community needs. They could include read alouds, reading fluency, book talks, book clubs, arts workshops, health & wellness programs and more. *It is advisable to ground all curriculum in the missions & values of the free-library and ensure that it is accessible to everyone in the community, especially the most under-served populations.*

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Does FLN help in funding the libraries and projects?
No, FLN does not directly fund libraries and their projects. But it can direct libraries towards funding opportunities from non-FLN avenues as and when they come about.

How can FLN help in running free libraries?
FLN does not directly help in running free-libraries or any particular free-library program. It is purely an advisory & support organisation that provides:

a. **Hand Holding Free-Library Practitioners**: FLN extends mentorship to all those who are running or intend to create a free library in India and South Asia by guiding them on key aspects of librarianship including reading programs, book curation & purchase, community engagement, library standards and more.

b. **Capacity Building**: All FLN members are entitled to free training and workshops in librarianship, which include annual read-aloud training, inclusivity training, social-media workshops, book curation & collection building, community engagement and more. FLN members are also invited to offer their expertise through mentoring or workshops to other members.

c. **Solidarity & Resource Sharing**: FLN members are connected to each other via social media platforms like Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram & Twitter. These platforms offer members the space to share their everyday experiences and grassroots knowledge about running a free library. These platforms also allow librarians to seek or offer help to one-another or amplify calls-to-action, resources or job-opportunities, workshop & event alerts and more.

d. **Books-For-All Program**: The Books For All (BFA) program entitles FLN member-libraries to a free set of excellent quality books, curated to meet their needs. Books are made available as per availability & stocks. The BFA program also allows FLN members to avail of publisher-discounts, which are exclusively for free-libraries. For more information please write to booksforallfln@gmail.com

e. **Advocating for public support and funding for free libraries**: FLN provides library practitioners and activists the opportunity to engage key stakeholders like the government, general public, publishers, writers and others who contribute to creation of literature and information in the question of access. This builds the possibility of increased support in the form of legislation, policy and revenue for free libraries.

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Section 4: How can I support FLN?

FLN MEMBERS:

a. Run a free-library, which welcomes all and is committed to providing excellent services as described in Section 2 of the FAQs.
b. Contribute your knowledge and resources to support other free-library practitioners and members of FLN.
c. Contribute to research & advocacy actions undertaken by the FLN.
d. Offer & attend training, workshops
e. Participate in FLN elections & general body meetings.
f. Continue conversations about the free library movement within your community & circles of influence.

NON-FLN MEMBERS:

a. Offer free training & workshops about librarianship (or related interests) to FLN members.
b. Offer your special skills (education, technology, legal, accounting etc.) to FLN pro bono
c. Extend your organisations programs, benefits, resources to FLN member-libraries pro bono
d. Directly fund FLN activities or any FLN member-library's activities.
e. Advocate for the free library movement in your circles of influence

For more you can reach us at freelibrariesnetworkfln@gmail.com

Follow us on: Instagram, Facebook & Twitter