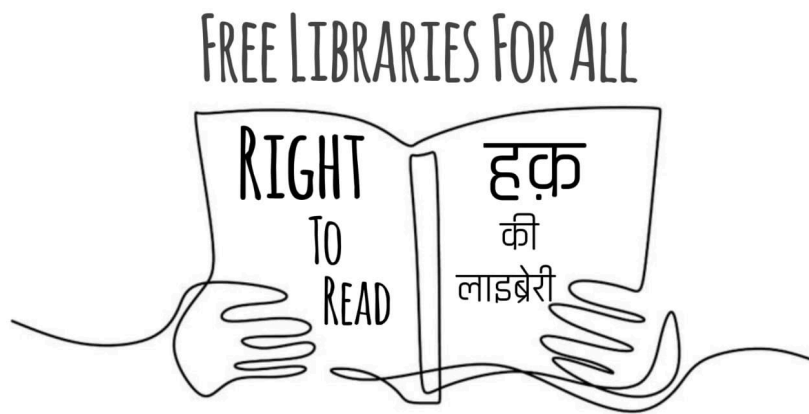# People's
# National Library Policy
# 2024

# Draft Document

# The People's Library Manifesto
## People's National Library Policy-PNLP 2024

**The People's National Library Policy-PNLP recognises**:

*The Right of All Peoples to progress*: progress of self, fraternity & society, through access to knowledge, education and information

*The Right to Self-Determination* as a Reader, Learner, Thinker and Collaborator to gain freedom from oppression, inequality & exclusion

*The Human Potential of all*, in building a peaceful, equitable & sustainable future, deeply rooted in our ties to the planet, its inhabitants and each other

*All People's Struggles* to break the unnatural chains of caste, class, gender, sexual orientation and disability & the Fundamental Rights enshrined within the Indian Constitution according the Right To Life, Right To Equality, Right To Read, Right To Education, Right To Information & Freedom of Expression

**We shall build a Public Library System that upholds**:

- *Free, Anti-Caste, Feminist & Non-Exclusionary* reading, learning & information spaces which work to remove all barriers for All Peoples
- *Excellence in Library Standards & Services* for all members, in line with national & global guidelines
- *People's Ownership & Autonomy* in determining their library's policies, practices & programs
- *The Duty of the State* to build, support & maintain, for posterity, the Public Library of The People

**So that the Public Library system reaches All People with**:

Physical & digital books, knowledge & information resources, *in abundance & diversity, without restriction* and in line with the people's needs & aspirations

Reading Programs, Spaces, Policies & Practices that *serve all, but especially the most vulnerable and historically-excluded peoples* and to invite & include all in reading, education and information access

*Equal Opportunities* to access books & digital tools, to think & express with freedom and celebrate & preserve literatures & cultures

## Jai Bhim. Satrangi Salam. Johar. Zindabad

# जन पुस्तकालय घोषणापत्र
# जन राष्ट्रीय पुस्तकालय नीति-2024

**पीपल्स नॅशनल लाइब्ररी नीति पहचानती हैं:**

हर एक व्यक्ति के आगे बढ़ने के अधिकार कोः खुद की उन्नति का अधिकार, और साथ ही साथ हमारे भाईचारे और समाज को आगे बढ़ाने का अधिकार, शिक्षा, जानकारी और किताबों के माध्यम से।

*हक़, खुद की ताक़त एक पाठक, समाज की समझ बनाने वाला, सोचने की ताक़त बनाने वाला और मिलकर एक जुट होकर सदियों से चले अन्याय, असमानता और बहिशिकर्ण से लड़ने और आज़ादी पाने का।*

*हर एक व्यक्ति की क्षमता एक ऐसा समाज बनाने के लिए जो शांतिपूर्ण, न्यायप्रिय और समानता की विचारधारा पर आधारित हो, और जो ऐसे सतत भविष्य की कल्पना करता हो जो इस पृथ्वी और उस पर रहने वाले लोगों से जुड़ा हुआ हो।*

हर जन संघर्ष को जो इंसानों द्वारा बनाई गई जाति, लिंग, सेक्षुयल ओरियेंटेशन और विकलांगता की जंजीरों को तोड़ने की लड़ाई में शामिल है, और हमारे संविधान द्वारा दिए गए मौलिक अधिकार जैसे जीवन का अधिकार, समानता का अधिकार, पढ़ने का अधिकार, जानकारी का अधिकार और अभिव्यक्ति की आज़ादी।

हम बनाएँगे ऐसा पब्लिक लाइब्ररी ढाँचा जो सुनक्षित करेगा:

- *मुफ़्त,जाती के विरुद्ध ,नारीवादी और गैर-बहिष्कृत जगह जहा सब समानता से पढ़ने और सोचने की ताक़त बनाएँगे।*
- *उत्तम दर्जे की लाइब्रेरी जगह और सेवाए सभी सदासियों के लिए जैसा दुनिया भर के दिशा-निर्देश में लिखा हैं।*
- *सभी तरह की लाइब्ररी नीति,आचरण और योजना लाइब्ररी के पाठको द्वारा लाइब्ररी के पाठको के लिए बनाए जाएँगे।*
- *पब्लिक लाइब्ररी का निर्माण,समर्थन और देखभाल की ज़िम्मेदारी सभी राज्यो की हो।*

ताकि पब्लिक लाइब्ररी ढाँचा सबतक पहुचे :

प्रकाशित और डिजिटल किताबो, सूचना व जानकारी के संसाधानो की भरमार व विभानता हो बिना किसी रोकटोक और लोगो की ज़रूरत व आकांक्षाओं को पूरा करे।

ऐसे रीडिंग प्रोग्राम, नीति और आचरण की जगह बने जहा सबका स्वागत हो और सबको मौका मिले। सबके लिए जगह बनाई जाए पाठन, शिक्षा और जानकारी हासिल करने के लिए ध्यान में रखते हुए समाज में सदियों से चले अलग अलग अन्याय और बहिष्करण का।

सबको बराबर मौका मिले किताबो तक पहुचने का, डिजिटल संसाधानो, सोचने का और आज़ादी से अपनी सोच रखने और अपनी संस्कराती और साहित्या को ज़िंदा रखने का।

<div align="center">जय भीम। सतरंगी सलाम। जोहार। ज़िंदाबाद।</div>

# Support for FLN's People's National Library Policy 2024

*"We strongly commend the efforts of the Free Libraries Network to place the work of public libraries in India on a more solid footing, so that in turn they can realise their potential to drive inclusive and sustainable development. The draft policy provides a great basis for bringing together decision-makers and the wider library community in order to develop both legislation and practical action plans."*

**– Stephen Wyber, Director-Advocacy & Policy, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)**

*"We extend our wholehearted support to the commendable endeavours of the Free Libraries Network aimed at fortifying the role of public libraries in India, thereby unleashing their capacity to foster inclusive and sustainable development. The proposed policy framework offers a promising foundation for fostering collaboration between policymakers and the broader library ecosystem, facilitating the formulation of comprehensive legislative measures and actionable strategies."*

**– Dalit Bahujan Resource Centre (DBRC)**

*"We endorse the People's National Library Policy and support it as we believe that libraries should be free and accessible to all specially the marginalised communities. This proposed policy calls for an inclusive policy and must be implemented at all costs"*

**– Beena Pallical, General Secretary, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights**

*'In a country as demographically diverse as ours, especially economic, with almost invisible state infrastructure, FLN's unrelenting efforts to provide comfortable, safe, and well thought-out curated libraries is incredible. They are bridging an invaluable learning and development gap. This much needed new policy recommendation which promises a solid blue print for the library ecosystem - across public, digital, community and including spaces like prisons - which normally aren't part of public discussions, shows how deeply invested FLN are in placing the role of books and reading as a primary need for development of children, individuals, the community and as a consequence our country. At HarperCollins, we value, cherish and promote the idea of reading for everyone, and are thankful to FLN for taking this lead to change India through a library revolution.'*

**– Ananth Padmanabhan, CEO HarperCollins India**

*"We extend our full support to the Free Libraries Network in their endeavour to establish a public library system in India that champions user rights, including privacy and data security. The Policy's commitment to provide public access to ICT resources is commendable and we hope that it greatly enhances digital literacy across the nation."*

**– Internet Freedom Foundation**

*Libraries embody magical spaces filled with wonder, curiosity, and exploration. They supply the building blocks for social architecture and construction. Unfortunately, in India, we have seen these spaces plagued by exclusion. Designed according to social and educational privileges, they exclude large sections of Indians from accessing a crucial environment for personal growth and introspection. For this reason, I strongly connect on a moral and emotive level with the efforts of the Free Libraries Network. This network actively dismantles the gatekeeping of knowledge. It welcomes everyone—young and old, poor and privileged, and all people regardless of their gender, caste, disability, and sexuality. I believe this inclusion humanizes those different from us through the common bonds of shared space and a love for reading. It builds social trust and practically realises the pluralistic values of our republic. If you ever feel cynical about our democratic future or doubt people's capacity for altruism, I urge you to visit a center.*

**– Apar Gupta, Founder, Internet Freedom Foundation & Digital Rights Activist**

*"Strong public Library system with free access to books is an essential part of Public life. Free Libraries support life long learning,   promote community engagement and social inclusion . They help to break down social barriers. They empower people of all generations and promote knowledge."*

**– Jyoti Mhapsekar, President- Stree Mukti Sanghatana, Mumbai and Former Librarian**

*"PNLP24 sets the stage for the people's collective voice toward building library policy and public libraries through FLN's efforts. More power to FLN's effort"*

**– Preedip Balaji, Academic Librarian and Researcher**

**(For a full list of FLN supporters, please see the list at the end of this document.)**

# The People's National Library Policy 2024:

Reforming the Indian Public Library System

**Table of Contents**

## Executive Summary

A core piece missing from the discourse around India's development trajectory is a strong public library system, which is freely accessible and relevant to all communities. Public libraries empower the people by providing knowledge, information and education resources to support life-long learning, creativity, innovation, research and development, allowing them to satisfy intellectual hunger & desire for self-improvement and to drive the upliftment of entire societies.

Presently, the number of public libraries, which are within the reach of all people, is grossly insufficient in India. Additionally, those that are available aren't uniformly guided by nationally-recognised standards that make for an inclusive, welcoming and excellent library experience. This means that only a small percentage of India's population has easy access to libraries, with socio-economic factors like caste, class, gender and disability proving to be significant impediments for the vast majority. Those who are excluded are glaringly Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasis, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people, religious minorities and persons with disabilities. This glaring gap goes against the ideas of equity & justice enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

A national library policy is essential to define and guarantee equitable access to information & knowledge, empowering all people to contribute to India's societal strength. It will provide a framework for librarians and all stakeholders, including lawmakers, to build a library system that meets the diverse needs of the population, fostering informed communities empowered to steer collective progress.

**The "People's National Library Policy 2024" recognises that a robust public library system, freely accessible to all, is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy.**

By doing away with subscription fees and other entrenched social barriers to entry, public libraries can empower the people to engage in informed decision-making and participate actively in their communities. This universal access acts to undo both historic and present day exclusion of people, specifically Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasis, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people, religious minorities and persons with disabilities. This universal access fosters an environment conducive to achieving the democratic ideals of our society.

The policy envisages a robust anti-caste public library system across the country that not only provides access to books & builds a widespread culture of reading, but also promotes literacy and numeracy among citizens of all age groups & identities, apart

from other learning programmes. All public libraries will also provide universal internet access.

In order to achieve this, the policy focuses on the planks of excellence in public libraries and decentralisation of their governance.

To achieve excellence, the policy suggests minimum standards that all public libraries must adhere to. These are derived from evidence-based international standards, validated by the experience of varied library practitioners, educators & experts across different contexts in India, within the Free Libraries Network and from other grassroots organisations.

These minimum standards include, among other things:

- Free membership and services
- Non-discrimination in access, with specific focus on historic and present day caste, class, gender, ability, religion based exclusion
- Adequate access for persons with disabilities
- Dynamic and member-oriented curriculum
- Privacy of users' data and cyber security of digital library infrastructure
- Safety and inclusion of staff members
- Innovative and active funding and sustainability practices
- Archiving and documentation of library records
- Localised and diverse knowledge and information resources

Additionally, the policy recommends updating the curriculum for courses on librarianship that envisages librarians as community leaders and repositories for delivering constitutional rights, rather than as merely library record keepers.

To decentralise governance of libraries, the policy outlines a collaborative framework for fostering a robust and decentralised national library system in India. It emphasises shared responsibility, local autonomy and effective resource utilisation through distinct roles assigned to various stakeholders:

*The Union Government leads policy and resource allocation -*

- Formulates a national library policy with clear standards and guidelines.
- Allocates dedicated grants and facilitates their convergence with other schemes for library development.
- Leads digitisation initiatives and development of interoperable digital platforms.

- Promotes research in library science and advocates for libraries nationally and internationally.

*State governments adapt and implement -*

- Adapt the national framework to their specific contexts and develop state-level library policies.
- Establish dedicated library departments or designate responsible entities.
- Allocate state funds to supplement central grants and support local government & non-government bodies.
- Invest in infrastructure development, resource sharing, and personnel training.
- Invest in training and hiring, utilising reservation to undo historic and present day caste-discrimination and to ensure adequate representation for all people from margins.
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of library programs and services.

*Local self-governments engage communities -*

- Actively engage local communities in library planning, development, and programming.
- Utilise the mechanism of reservation to undo historic and present day discrimination.
- Ensure efficient operation and accessibility of local libraries.
- Select and acquire resources based on local needs and cultural context.
- Implement library programs and services addressing community needs.
- Collaborate with local organisations, schools, and NGOs for outreach and engagement.
- Explore innovative ways to generate local revenue through partnerships and fundraising initiatives.

*The National Digital Library and RRRLF facilitate and support to -*

- Maintain a central repository for digitised library resources accessible across the country.
- Act as the implementation arm for the national library policy, providing financial and technical support.
- Develop and share digital resources, best practices, and training materials.
- Facilitate collaboration and resource sharing among libraries across regions and levels.

- Support research and development initiatives in digital libraries and related technologies.

This approach fosters a decentralised library system that effectively serves diverse communities and contributes to national development.

In order to implement the policy, it is recommended that the Union government first carry out a qualitative and quantitative survey of all public libraries across India. Secondly, state governments must commission independent audits of their library laws.

Effective implementation of the policy hinges on collaboration, resource allocation and stakeholder engagement. This involves widespread stakeholder consultation, official adoption, establishing dedicated implementation bodies with action plans, capacity building for librarians and staff, monitoring progress and impact, fostering partnerships and raising public awareness. By embracing this comprehensive approach, India can strengthen its public library system, improve access to information, and promote learning for all.

## Introduction

India is a democracy guided by the values of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity we have enshrined in our constitution. Policies are key to framing the intention to live by these values, and policy holds us and our government accountable to our intention. Through policy we create infrastructure and institutions that bring alive the practice of these constitutional values.

A public library system is a critical infrastructure, and libraries are key institutions that provide all people with equal access to information which then allows them to participate in the creation of the society envisioned in our constitution. At present our libraries and library infrastructure function without the guidance of national policy and are effectively unmoored from our constitutional values. This is most evident in the uneven access to libraries afforded the people of India. This uneven access is especially egregious in perpetuating historic and present day exclusion of people from the margins.

National library policy would provide us with the opportunity to articulate the kind of information access that is necessary and important for the people of India to achieve their strength as a society. Without library policy it is not possible for lawmakers and librarians to provide the libraries people need. This has been borne out historically. India has no national library policy and the result is a library landscape that is patched together, and uneven in what it offers people. People in some parts of India enjoy adequate access to vital information but those in other parts lack any access to libraries and information. The vast majority of Indians have **no access** to libraries as a resource for fulfilling their need for information.

Legislation that follows from strong national and local policy can provide adequate support for libraries to fulfil their mission of providing equal access to information for all people, and thereby strengthen people's participation in decision making and society formation. Legislation can secure funds and autonomy for libraries and the people they serve. India already has a broad architecture for provision of such services in other domains such as food, work, education, and even health to some extent at the sub-national level. Public Libraries would add to the existing Rights based architecture of welfare in the country.

"The People's National Library Policy 2024" begins from the premise that a flourishing public library system can support society in maintaining the democratic organisation of political life only if it is free and open to all people. A free library without any subscription or membership fees is the mechanism by which a library can be open to all. Free is also the mechanism that can undo historic and present day exclusion of marginalised

populations from participation in society. And only by being open to all can any library, in any society, aim to help that society achieve its democratic ideals.

The historic exclusion of vast numbers of people in India from equal participation in our society was accomplished though excluding them from knowledge and information. Such exclusion was practised through the caste system, through class and gender and other social divisions. Such exclusion was practised by the colonial government to uphold colonial interests and such exclusion can continue to serve hierarchically organised class and caste based division of society.  Free membership in public libraries  is the key that  opens the gates to knowledge equally for all people. Only once the people have this key, and open this gate, can they actively partake of the constitution's promise of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity.

## History of Public Library System and Policy in India

### Early Beginnings

The history of public libraries in India is marked by both a rich tradition and a lack of central coordination. Critically, it has failed to address generational barriers to access due to casteist exclusion of Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan people.

Early library establishments, like the State Central Library in Kerala (1820), the Asiatic Society Library (1804) and the Assam Library Association (1938), were largely regional initiatives and education was the principal forerunner of modernization.

In 1910, Maharaja of Baroda State, Sayajirao Gaekwad III, inspired by American public libraries, created the Baroda Central Library, whose defining feature was that it was free & open to all. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad was a firm believer of equity in education and would go down in history as one of the earliest allies of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, endowing him with a scholarship to study at Columbia University, USA. However, even as the Maharaja championed free libraries, his efforts remained isolated against the forces of brahmanism. There was no widespread library movement to fight casteist gatekeeping of education and knowledge resources and a vast majority of Indians continued to be kept out of the halls of learning.

Despite this, the idea that free libraries are tools to dismantle oppression, has been shown most powerfully by anti-caste movements. From the 1930's onwards and throughout his life, Dr. Ambedkar undertook the task of establishing & equipping libraries across India, in various organisations which fought for the rights of marginalised people, firmly linking free libraries with the fight for social justice and collective empowerment.

Through the 19th and early 20th centuries, libraries were integrated into the emerging freedom movements. "It was not merely by coincidence that the annual meetings of the All India Public Library Association (AIPL) used to be held in conjunction with sessions of the Indian National Congress." (The Story of Libraries in India by Dwarika N. Banerjee, 1996, MIT Press). In post-independence India, Prof. SR Ranganathan, hailed as the Father of Library Sciences, emerged as a champion for defining library missions and standards in India, and campaigned for creating legislative provisions to institute a free public library system that served all sections of society.

Kerala in particular was able to solve the problem of access by provisioning a large number of public libraries that had deep reach into communities, through the early to mid 1900s. These public libraries had a transformative impact on the state's overall literacy and education and continue to serve as a noteworthy model for the rest of the country to emulate and learn from.

Nevertheless, public libraries in India have never been uniformly free (i.e. free from fees and free from barriers of caste, patriarchy and ableism) since the unresolved question of how, and by whom, public libraries are to be funded and governed has never been decisively addressed through a national library policy in India.

### Early to Mid 1900s: First Attempts at National Policy

The first significant attempt at a national library began with the Imperial Library Act of 1902, which established the Imperial Library in Calcutta (now National Library of India in Kolkata). However, the Act did not address broader issues of public library development or how reading could flourish when access to knowledge resources was denied along caste & gender lines. Subsequent decades saw sporadic efforts at policy formulation, including the Model Public Libraries Bill of 1963 and the National Policy on Education (1968), which recognized public libraries as essential for literacy and education. From the 1930s onward the passionate voice of Dr S R Ranganathan was heard arguing for State level interventions in the library question. He presented numerous Model Library Acts, including the one that became the basis of the Tamil Nadu Public Libraries Act. The Act, while progressive, unfortunately disavows Ranganathan's First Law of Library Science and restricts membership to paid users. In the *The Five Laws of Library Science* S R Ranganathan's begins, in the first law, from the premise that books are for use and in order to be used that they must be made free through free library membership.

### 1980's-1990s: Draft Library Bills, State Legislations, and the Rise of Advocacy

In the 1980s and 1990s, several drafts for a national library policy were proposed, but none were officially adopted. This period also witnessed the rise of advocacy groups,

like the Indian Library Association, pushing for stronger library legislation and resource allocation. In 1986, the Chattopadhyay Committee gave us a draft 'National Policy on Library and Information System' which defined the task of the government, "to establish, maintain and strengthen the free public libraries in the country" (Chapter III). It made two essential declarations: (1) public libraries are free, and (2) it is the government's responsibility to build and empower them for the people.

Currently libraries are listed as a state subject in the Indian Constitution. 19 Indian states have public library legislation, although only 1 state (Haryana) defines the public library as free from subscription fees. In the absence of a definitive demand for libraries that are free, excellent, and open to all, the Indian public library system has failed to become a relevant and accessible resource for the people. Rather than a focus on people's empowerment and social democracy, there is a danger of public libraries defaulting to the narrow emphasis on libraries as a means to create disempowered workers that serve the interests of the powerful elite, further deepening their marginalisation.

## 2014: National Mission on Libraries and Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation

In 2014, public libraries came into focus once more with the launch of the National Mission on Libraries (NML) by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. The NML aimed to strengthen and revitalise public libraries across India by providing grants, promoting digital initiatives, and improving infrastructure. Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), as the executive arm of NML, was responsible for implementing the Mission's objectives and managing grants. It was charged with (1) Upgradation of existing public libraries, in line with the recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission, largely focussing on digitisation and ICT interventions. (2) Development of the National Virtual Library of India. (3) Setting up model NML libraries through collaboration with state governments. (4) Conducting surveys on the existing library scenario and (5) Building librarianship skills and capacities for more sensitised and digitally-empowered library services.

## Present Scenario and Challenges

While the NML and RRRLF have made strides in creating the National Virtual Library of India, it has failed to bring about upgradation in the national public library system that extends from central libraries to state, district and village/neighbourhood libraries. It has also failed to address the fundamental issue of access by not responding to the need for free, inclusive, and excellent libraries. Its disproportionate focus on ICT (including disproportionate resource allocation to digitising libraries in the name of modernisation), fails to account for glaring digital inequities such as the lack of high quality internet and

smart devices in India. Most critically, without a national library policy the NML and RRRFL fail to respond to the needs of all people, especially underserved and marginalised communities and be accountable to them.

The existence of a clear and comprehensive policy will add weight to the NML and RRRLF by directing them to make themselves known to, and serve, existing libraries. It will also hold them to their mandate of aiding the creation of libraries that are missing from the Indian library landscape.

## Looking Ahead

In order for India's public library system to foster an ethos of free learning & empowerment through books & other knowledge resources, it must centre the needs of the vast majority of Indians who remain outside the threshold of library institutions, due to their caste & gender identities. The public library must create mechanisms to serve the needs of these teeming millions from Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities. It must cater to the economically disadvantaged and the working classes and it must invite into reading all those who have been excluded for thousands of years.

Most recently, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism, and Culture in its 310th Report (dated February 2022) on, "Functioning of Central Libraries in the country" has drawn attention to the dismal state of public libraries in India. In its wide-ranging observations the committee noted that, "many public libraries are in a state of despair and remain largely underdeveloped" (para 32). It further said that, "The Committee is of the view that public libraries have been neglected for a long time now and any change would need substantial time and effort from all directions—state, community, private sector, and non-governmental organisations" (para 33). The committee noted several problems with the functioning of the public library system which include the lack of a comprehensive legislative framework and a national policy for libraries (para 40). Crucially, it observed that one of the primary constraints in the development of libraries has been the paucity of financial resources. It notes that, "finance remains the main hurdle for the development of public libraries in India" (para 44). The committee pointed out that, "public libraries are not being attended with adequate funds either by the State government or by the Union Government" (para 41), and that funds collected for libraries are not being spent on library development.

The lack of adequate financing for public libraries is reflected in the figures. India spends a meagre 7 paise per person on libraries, as compared with 35 USD and 44

AUD in the United States and Australia respectively. India has just 1 rural library for every 11,500 people and 1 urban library for every 80,000 people, as against the global norms of 1 library for every 3000 people. Of these, the vast majority are underfunded and inadequately resourced. Most libraries do not follow minimum standards in terms of book collections, trained personnel, access to digital resources, accessibility for persons with disabilities, and facilities such as well-lit reading rooms, internet connectivity, and a safe welcoming environment for all. The public library system must also relook at key processes including admission, outreach, curation, staff recruitment, capacity-building and funding to incorporate reservations for Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people, religious minorities and persons with disabilities.

Public library reform is thus an urgent demand of India's people, who deserve free and equal access to excellent knowledge and information resources as a matter of right, enshrined in the Indian constitution. This must be delivered through a national library policy that dedicates itself to creating access for all, while addressing the barriers to reading, thinking, and learning freely, and recognises the public library as an institution that guarantees justice by addressing knowledge gaps in society.

In the absence of such a guiding policy framework to scaffold legislation, we run the danger of public libraries becoming a mere tool to enact narrow, exclusionary agendas that serve only the elite, further disenfranchising oppressed people by gatekeeping knowledge, policing information, and denying fundamental freedoms.

## 1. Need for Public Libraries

*"The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making, and cultural development of the individual and social groups. It underpins healthy knowledge societies through providing access to and enabling the creation and sharing of knowledge of all sorts, including scientific and local knowledge without commercial, technological or legal barriers."* ~ IFLA-UNESCO Manifesto - 2022.

Public libraries are critical to democracy, delivering the right to read by providing access to quality knowledge, education, and information through books and other reading resources, library programs, curriculum, and policies that foster inclusion. A public library responds to its community's demand for individual growth and collective empowerment and is a community-led institution that evolves dynamically with the changing needs of the people it serves.

The public library occupies a central place in the intellectual, cultural, economic and creative life of any society. It must, by definition, be a space that delivers programs and resources in a just, and therefore, free and inclusive manner to all. Public libraries that foster and protect the freedom to read, think, share, and learn, lead to the creation of a society that is driven by humanistic values and is unafraid to seek and secure for itself an equitable world.

Free public libraries are essential public goods. They not only contribute to the improvement of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by supporting universal literacy and enabling access to information, public libraries generate positive outcomes which have multiplier effects across sectors, including but not limited to contributing to higher R&D, GDP, and more importantly higher HDI.

The case for free and excellent public libraries in India is compelling:

1) <u>Community spaces that facilitate reading, learning, and free thinking</u>: The public library is a place for people to collect, commune over, and debate ideas, which serve to further their needs, hopes, aspirations, and imaginations. It is a space where knowledge and information resources are meant to be shared by the collective to drive progress of a society.

2) <u>Access to foundational literacies and education resources</u>: Public libraries provide resources, curriculum, and programs to access foundational literacies (reading, numeracy, and digital literacy) to all. Libraries do not replace, rather they compliment and enhance, school-based and life-long learning. This access is essential for improving educational attainment, particularly in underserved and generationally-excluded communities.

3) <u>Bridging the digital divide</u>: Public libraries can overcome digital inequities by providing high quality internet connectivity, computer access, digital literacy, and safety for all. This empowers individuals to access information freely and safely, engage in online learning, and participate in the digital economy. In a rapidly digitising world, public libraries are crucial for ensuring digital rights reach all with the goal to empower and enrich them.

4) <u>Promoting social inclusion and community engagement</u>: Public libraries are inclusive spaces that welcome people from all walks of life, fostering social cohesion and community engagement. They provide a neutral ground for dialogue, exchange of ideas, and cross-cultural understanding, promoting social harmony and a sense of belonging. They acknowledge historical & current systemic exclusions and create mechanisms for representation of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi

communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities.

5) Building social and cultural capital: Public libraries perform a democratising function by helping build social and cultural capital among historically marginalised and disadvantaged communities, as well as people from underserved regions and communities. Libraries create access to information, literature, and educational and cultural resources, as well as diverse groups of people and ideas, creating more equalising opportunities for people who are otherwise deprived of those.

6) <u>Nurturing creativity and innovation</u>: Public libraries provide spaces for people to explore their creativity, engage in intellectual and artistic pursuits, self-improvement, and collective-growth. They do this by creating opportunities for reflection, new learning, and skill development. They host workshops, seminars, and other events that promote creativity and innovation, fostering a vibrant social and cultural scene and contributing to the development of a well-rounded society. There is a growing discussion on the lack of fund allocation on R&D in India at the level of GDP when compared to other countries. Part of the problem stems from a culture where creativity and innovation are not incentivized from a young age. Public Libraries would complement existing efforts, such as Tinkering Labs and start up promotion funds, in cultivating society level creativity and innovation cultures throughout the country.

7) <u>Supporting lifelong learning and personal development</u>: Public libraries serve as lifelong learning centres, providing access to resources and opportunities for continuous growth. They offer a wide range of adult education programs, language classes, and vocational training courses, empowering individuals to upskill and re-skill throughout their lives. A library that is free, anti-caste & feminist can serve a vital role in delivering equitable opportunities for growth by designing programs to serve Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities.

8) <u>Preserving cultural and literary heritage, growing new literatures, and knowledge hubs</u>: Public libraries act as repositories of literary and cultural heritage, preserving and disseminating valuable historical documents, manuscripts, and artworks. They play a vital role in safeguarding India's rich cultural heritage, especially in preserving languages and literatures, and passing it on to future generations. They do not just preserve heritage but also create spaces for new cultures, literatures, and languages to thrive. In particular, free libraries, which are owned by the

people, can serve to address the erasure of histories, narratives and languages of caste-oppressed, tribal and other marginalised communities. For eg: programmatic interventions for 'Dalit History Month' can be powerful in bringing lost stories back to life.

9) <u>Strengthening democracy and civic engagement</u>: Public libraries provide access to information and resources that promote informed participation by people  in their society and civic engagement. They host discussions, workshops, and forums on current affairs, encouraging people to participate in the democratic process and make informed decisions. Above all, public libraries promote equality of access to the information people are seeking and thereby empower people's participation in society. They are a great force for an equalising and non-hierarchical organisation of society, and can act as a balance against forces that drive toward hierarchical organisation of society. For this, public libraries must create reservation-based representation of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities.

Public libraries are essential pillars of a thriving society, providing access to knowledge, fostering lifelong learning, and promoting social inclusion. India needs robust public libraries to empower its populace, bridge social divides, and contribute to the nation's overall development. Investing in public libraries is an investment in the future of India.

## 2.    Defining Library Policy

India, with its vast population, diverse communities, and historical exclusions along lines of caste, class, gender, sexuality, religion, disability amongst others, faces unique challenges in ensuring equitable access to information and knowledge. Public libraries can play a crucial role in bridging the gap. A strong and comprehensive public library policy, with an emphasis on libraries being free, excellent, and inclusive, is essential for this goal. A public library policy should be a people-led vision that:

1) <u>Ensures accessibility and inclusion</u>: The policy should prioritise making libraries accessible to everyone, which necessitates not just serving the needs of those who have access to education, knowledge & information resources but building social-inclusion bridges for those who don't i.e. people from Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities. To achieve this goal, special attention is to be given to pedagogical approaches, programmatic

interventions, admission & staffing processes, curation and library best practices that reinforce anti-caste, anti-hate, feminist and disability-inclusive values.

2) <u>Addresses the needs of diverse communities and acknowledges barriers to access</u>: A public library policy should define the institution as fundamentally free, anti-caste, feminist and disability-inclusive. It must recognize that different communities have specific needs and preferences when it comes to library services. It should take special cognisance of the most vulnerable and excluded sections of society, for whom quality knowledge, information, and education resources remain inaccessible till date. The policy must create specific curriculum & programmatic bridges by which those who have been and continue to be socially excluded - Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities - are invited into the library, into reading and into digital literacies. It should empower communities to engage as stakeholders, promoting flexibility and adaptability, allowing libraries to tailor their collections, programs, and outreach initiatives to cater to the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic realities of their communities.

3) <u>Codifies standards of excellence and guidelines for all public libraries</u>: National library policy must lay out the framework for best practices, infrastructure, curriculum and programs that are enacted across the public library system in order to ensure minimum standards of excellence in all services delivered to the people, free from fees and systemic socio-economic barriers. All standards and guidelines must be founded in the universal, humanistic, and constitutional values of equality, liberty and justice. They must be anti-caste, anti-hate, feminist and disability-inclusive in all respects.

4) <u>Strengthens local governance, community ownership, and partnerships</u>: A public library policy should emphasise the importance of local involvement in library governance. This could include community representation in library boards, participatory planning processes, and collaboration with local organisations to develop and deliver relevant programs, services, and resources. Accounting for historic & contemporary barriers like caste & gender, community-ownership must also be fostered through reservations in recruitment & funding libraries for Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities. Special efforts must be made to extend the library network to those communities that have never had access to library services & resources before.

5) <u>Promotes sustainability and resource mobilization</u>: The policy should address the chronic underfunding of public libraries in India. Funding for a public library system must be sustainable and this can only be ensured through allocation of public funds through legislative provisions for assured funding such as through library cess and/or budgetary allocation, in addition to needs and project based grants. This allocation should account for per capita expenditure that meets per capita need for excellent library services, that are in turn tied to standards and guidelines as outlined in this policy. The policy can encourage innovative funding mechanisms like public-private partnerships, community fundraising initiatives, and resource sharing models for additional funding for library operations. When funding new libraries or extending the existing library network, special focus & resource allocation should be on libraries that serve Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities.

6) <u>Fosters digital access, innovation, and technology integration</u>: The policy must address the urgent need to make the Internet, ICT resources, and digital literacies available to all and should acknowledge all current barriers to this i.e. unequal distribution of such resources in rural & remote India, as well as in working class, Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi communities and gender minorities. Besides infrastructure, the policy must address the lack of digital literacies in these same marginalised & underserved communities. It must safeguard the rights of all people to access digital resources freely, without censorship or surveillance, and without fear of losing ownership over their data and privacy. The policy should encourage libraries to integrate technology into their services, offering digital resources, e-learning platforms, and innovative literacy programs that cater to the needs of a digitally connected population.

The policy must address:

1) <u>Community engagement and leadership</u>: Mechanisms for community involvement and leadership in library governance, planning, and program development.

2) <u>Resource allocation</u>: Strategies for ensuring adequate funding and resource allocation for libraries, including exploring innovative funding models.

3) <u>Collection development</u>: Guidelines for building diverse and culturally relevant collections that cater to the specific needs of local communities.

4) <u>Services and programs</u>: Framework for providing essential library services and developing innovative programs tailored to community needs.

5) <u>Technology integration</u>: Strategies for promoting technology adoption in libraries, including digital resource acquisition, e-learning platforms, and technology-based literacy programs.

6) <u>Accessibility and inclusion</u>: Measures to ensure access to library services for people with disabilities, marginalised communities, and those living in remote areas.

7) <u>Staffing and training</u>: Guidelines for adequate staffing levels, professional qualifications, and training opportunities for library personnel.

8) <u>Monitoring and Evaluation</u>: Mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of the policy and evaluating its effectiveness in meeting community needs.

By addressing these critical areas, a robust public library policy can empower libraries to become vibrant hubs of learning, knowledge sharing, and community engagement, contributing significantly to India's social and intellectual development.

## 3. Goals and Objectives

The primary goal of the public library is to be an open & barrier-free space for lifelong learning, reflection & collective engagement for all, regardless of caste, class, age, religion, gender, disability, ethnicity, educational qualifications or nationality[1].

1) **Equitable access to knowledge & information**: Public libraries must provide resources and services, across a variety of media, to meet knowledge, education, information and personal development needs, including recreation and leisure. They have an important role in the development and maintenance of a democratic society by giving the access to a wide and varied range of knowledge, ideas and opinions and by providing the collective safe & welcoming spaces to meet in a world of ideas.

   It must be a key mission of the Indian public library system to narrow the gap between information-rich & information-poor communities. The public library must be the nodal point for accurate, relevant & timely information for their well-being, safety & development, in a format & language that is accessible to everyone in the community.

2) **Supporting education & lifelong learning:** The public library should support formal and informal learning processes. It must do this through services that assist people to make use of learning resources effectively, as well as by providing

---

[1] IFLA Public Library Service Guidelines:
https://repository.ifla.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/38972f05-5a77-46ce-a67f-aaa7c7e3eb42/content

facilities for people to study. The public library should also actively support literacy and information literacy campaigns and programs, as literacy is the key to education and knowledge and to the use of libraries and information services. Newly literate people need easy access to appropriate information materials and services to maintain and develop their skills.

The library supports the well-being of its community by facilitating workshops for gender-minorities & persons with disability in sexual health & awareness, mental, physical & reproductive health etc.

3) **A public space owned by the people**: The public library must be a dynamic institution, which is in constant consultation with the people to design & upgrade its services. It is the responsibility of the public library to address any historical & ongoing socio-economic barriers in a manner that ensures equitable opportunities for all people. To that end the motto of 'free is equal' applies to all public libraries, which do not levy any fees and guarantee fundamental freedoms.

The public library acts as a 'drawing room of the community'[2] by bringing people into informal contact and providing a positive social experience. Library facilities should be designed and built to foster social and cultural activities which support community interests. It also has a special responsibility to meet the needs of children & young adults, to ignite excitement of knowledge and imagination at an early age. It has a significant impact on library engagement as children also encourage parents and other adults to make use of the library. It is also important that young people who experience difficulty in learning to read should have access to a library to provide them with appropriate material.

To build community ownership, local members must be hired for key library posts, with a focus on their skill development and continued professional development. Staffing & governing policies must have reservations for historically excluded & marginalised groups including Dalits, Adivasis & Bahujan people, women, queer & trans people and people with disabilities.

Physical infrastructure must also facilitate ease of movement & usage for all, especially through universal access design, accessible knowledge & information materials, gender-neutral restrooms etc.

4) **Cultural preservation & development**: The library's contribution should reflect the variety of cultures represented in the community. It should provide materials in

---

[2] Pg 9:
https://repository.ifla.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/38972f05-5a77-46ce-a67f-aaa7c7e3eb42/content

the languages spoken and read in the local community, and support cultural traditions through workshops, weekly art & performance based sessions and working with other organisations in these spaces. Libraries should strive to employ staff who speak the languages of the community served. The public library also serves as a repository of culture for the community, archiving its languages, literatures, art forms and traditions.

5) **Universal Digital access**: The library's purpose is to recognize that universal digital access for all guarantees a human-centric & community-based understanding of a digital society which actively benefits all human-beings.

The public library must recognise that, just like books & physical infrastructure, digital access to the Internet, digital devices and literacies, must be made available to all. In India, digital access is not equitable, with large groups remaining internet-poor due to socio-economic barriers (caste, class, gender), disabilities or remoteness of location. Public libraries must act as a bridge to narrow the gap, not just providing digital devices but also advocating for & providing free, safe & excellent Internet for all. This must be scaffolded with digital literacy programs & information kiosks that assist first-generation Internet & digital users to employ these technologies for their own individual and collective growth.

Universal digital access in the public library must ensure the privacy of all member data, providing proper awareness to users so that they can make informed choices before submitting their data to the library. The library must also provide safety mechanisms for people - especially minors and other socio-economically vulnerable groups - to freely use the Internet without facing cyber bullying, theft or harassment of any kind.

Universal digital access must also weave intuitive technologies, best practices & sensitivities that integrate people with disabilities into its fabric, as part of the larger membership.

6) **Climate Justice**[3]: Climate change is the single biggest threat facing mankind in the current age, with our most vulnerable groups being on the frontlines of its devastating impact. The public library, as a source of knowledge & information and as a place for the local to connect to the global, has an immense responsibility when it comes to climate action. Libraries serve as catalysts and conveners, connecting the people with the resources they need - through curating collections,

---

[3] National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries, ALA:
https://www.sustainablelibrariesinitiative.org/media/document/614

programs, and experiences to help our patrons make sense of what they are confronted with in life and to empower them to work together - politically, socially & economically - to mitigate the impact of climate change.

7) **Universal and responsible internet access:** Public libraries recognise that the Internet, like books, is a means by which the people can access information & knowledge in a way that empowers them. Libraries are designed to guarantee intellectual freedoms and to that end, they are opposed to censorship[4] of any form, including the use of filtering software or imposition of internet-bans, while acknowledging the need to operate within the limits of local and national legal frameworks. This policy draws inspiration from IFLA's Guidelines on Public Internet Access in Libraries drafted by its advisory committee on 'Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression- FAIFE'

Public libraries in India should provide universal internet access (internet terminals and Wi-Fi) for the following reasons:

a) Bridging the digital divide: In India there is a significant gap between those who have access to the internet and those who do not. These divides are caused by geographical remoteness & hostile environment, lack of economic or social capital, lack of adapted digital resources for people with disabilities and internet bans imposed by the government. Universal, high quality and safe Internet is a basic human right in the 21st century. It is the library's mandate to close the gaps.

b) Equity in online information: Knowledge is power and timely, on-demand information is particularly crucial when the people have historically faced institutionalised barriers to access. The Internet - like free libraries - allow the people to come as close to curating their own information-gathering experience as possible. In particular, the Internet holds great potential in democracies, where multiple perspectives, ideas & narratives allow for making informed & empowered choices. Digital spaces facilitate access to information and services. When provisions for adaptations to digital information are made possible, it not only ensures access to people with vulnerabilities including caste, gender and disabilities but also ensures universal accessibility.

c) Building a digitally literate population in an increasingly digitised democracy: The idea of 'Digital India' where digital programs & schemes are designed to make the 'last-mile' delivery of essential services seamless & non-exclusionary

---

[4] Pg 4 'IFLA Guidelines on Public Internet Access in Libraries' : https://repository.ifla.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/bd0e94d1-a707-461a-b7dd-d4b944625dfb/content

is incomplete unless the most marginalised & under-served are empowered through public libraries that don't just provide technologies like the Internet, but also programs for digital literacy and safety. Thus, public libraries must act as nodes for digital schemes to reach all people.

Responsibility of the Public Library when providing digital technologies:

a) <u>Protection of member data</u>: Libraries must safeguard 'Personally Identifiable Information-PIN' such as name, age, address, gender, caste etc. starting from data collection, to storage, data decay & deletion. There must be transparent processes that disclose duration of data storage, kinds of anonymisation & encryption processes etc. Library members have the right to know how their PIN will be used, shared and safeguarded.

b) <u>Free & open browsing</u>: Public libraries must provide free & open browsing facilities and must refrain from using filtering or blocking software, although certain controls (eg: parental controls, or controls which prevent access to illegal content etc.) can be built into Internet terminals.

c) <u>Internet Use/ Acceptable Use Policy, in particular for minors & vulnerable groups</u>: Libraries must have a clear, up-to-date and well promoted Internet Use Policy, which is prominently displayed at all terminals and entry points. In particular, the interests of vulnerable groups & minors must be safeguarded by this policy.

d) <u>Privacy of use & protection from surveillance</u>: The rights of users to personal privacy should be respected. Wherever possible, guest access to public Internet access without identifiable login should be available to permit freedom of inquiry without interference. In addition, wherever feasible, libraries should install privacy screens such that users can take advantage of services such as Internet banking, without inappropriate viewing by other users. No library or internet user must be the victim of surveillance without their knowledge. No private data must be shared without their prior consent (in the case of non-minors) or consent of their guardians (in the case of minors).

e) <u>Provisions for people with disabilities</u>: Assistive technologies that serve a diversity of disabilities must be installed in the library, so that they can achieve independence & freedom in accessing digital resources. The functional needs of people with disabilities must be considered in accordance with rights recognized by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

f) <u>Digital literacies & user education</u>: In India, even though virtually every resident is documented digitally and vulnerable to digital scrutiny & exploitation, a vast majority does not have any awareness or education on how they are impacted or how they can empower themselves through digital technologies. User education (including social-media literacy) is key to all people learning how to navigate various digital resources & platforms in a safe and responsible way.

g) <u>Staff sensitisation, training & decision-making</u>: All staff interacting with users should be trained regularly to understand the basic legal, ethical, societal and political implications of Internet use and restrictions to use. This applies to library leaders, managers, service delivery staff and volunteer helpers. It is recognised that local considerations and community norms do play a part in determining praxis in a specific setting. All specialized library staff have a role in shaping digital programming, policy & practices in collaboration with the people they serve.

## 4. Minimum Standards for Libraries

### 4.1. What are library standards and guidelines?

Minimum standards and guidelines for libraries are a set of established criteria that outline the essential requirements for a library to function effectively and provide adequate services to its community. These standards cover various aspects of library operations, including:

#### 4.1.1. *An adequate ratio of libraries per capita:*
IFLA recommends a ratio of one library per 10,000 capita, which would translate to 140,000+ public libraries in India. The website of the RRRLF states they are uncertain of how many libraries there are in India, and speculates that there are fewer than 54,856, perhaps even fewer than 50% of that number. Even the National Mission on Libraries concluded that they could not determine how many public libraries there are in India. What is key in this policy is that India needs to make provisions for an adequate number of libraries according to IFLA standards and we are far from doing so; we must survey and understand the gap to make provisions to fill that gap.

#### 4.1.2. *Physical Facilities and Accessibility:*
Standards may specify requirements for building size, layout, accessibility for people with disabilities, safety and security measures, and environmental conditions (lighting, ventilation, etc.).

### 4.1.3. *Resources and Collections:*

This may include minimum requirements for the size and diversity of the collection (books, periodicals, multimedia materials, etc.), selection and development policies, preservation and conservation practices, and resource sharing arrangements.

### 4.1.4. *Services and Programs:*

1) Standards may define the minimum range of services offered, such as reference services, circulation, interlibrary loan, user education, literacy programs, community outreach programs, and technology access.

2) It may also recommend curricular interventions to strengthen reading for critical thinking so that those who for any reason have not had access to such curriculum in a school setting can then find access to it in their library

### 4.1.5. *Staffing and Personnel:*

Qualification levels for librarians and other staff, staffing ratios, professional development opportunities, and training requirements may be outlined in the standards. Proportionate representation of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities in the recruitment process and hiring of staff.

### 4.1.6. *Governance and Management:*

Standards may address aspects of library governance, such as legal framework, funding mechanisms, planning and budgeting processes, and performance evaluation measures.

### 4.1.7. *Free Membership:*

Standards must maintain and assert the need for all public libraries to provide library services free of cost and without charging any subscription fee or security deposit. Libraries, as a public good, must be available for public utilisation without any barriers. When waived off all charges for the public, the library system truly becomes a public resource serving the democratic needs of the people.

## 4.2. Why do we need standardisation of various library models?

Standardisation of library models in India is vital for the reasons listed below. It is, however, important to note that minimum standards are not meant to be restrictive but rather serve as a foundation for building strong and effective libraries. Libraries can

exceed these minimum requirements and tailor their services to the specific needs of their communities.

1) <u>Improved efficiency and effectiveness</u>: Standardisation would lead to more efficient and effective use of resources, both financial and human. By establishing common standards and procedures, libraries would streamline their operations, reduce duplication of effort, and improve service delivery. This would free up resources to be used for more innovative and impactful programs and services. This would also help ensure a minimum level of quality and excellence in services.

2) <u>Enhanced user experience</u>: Standardisation would improve the user experience by making it easier for users to find what they need and access services across different libraries. By adopting common standards for cataloguing, classification, and signage, libraries would make their collections and resources more discoverable and accessible. This would lead to increased library usage and satisfaction among users.

3) <u>Promote resource sharing and collaboration</u>: Standardisation could also promote resource sharing and collaboration among libraries. By adopting common standards, libraries would make it easier to share resources, such as books, periodicals, and electronic databases. This could help to improve access to information and services for all users, regardless of their location or socioeconomic status, and create user access to a larger and more diverse library collection.

4) <u>Support the development of digital libraries</u>: Standardisation is also essential for the development of digital libraries in India. By adopting common standards for metadata, digital libraries would make their collections more interoperable and accessible. This would lead to the creation of a national network of digital libraries that could provide access to a vast collection of resources to all users.

5) <u>Facilitate the professional development of library staff</u>: Standardisation would also facilitate the professional development of library staff. By establishing common standards and guidelines, libraries would provide their staff with the training and resources they need to provide high-quality services to users.

6) <u>Framework for evaluating and improving library services</u>: Standards and guidelines provide benchmarks against which libraries can evaluate their work and services. These guidelines are not intended to set targets, but are suggested goals for libraries to aspire towards with the aim to provide excellent service to the library users. This would also help enhance accountability and transparency in the library operations.

Overall, standardisation of library models would help to improve the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of library services in India. It would also promote resource sharing, collaboration, and the development of digital libraries. By investing in standardisation, India can create a world-class library system that provides access to information and services for all people in India.

## 5.    Free membership (all services are free)

Providing free membership to public libraries in India is a non-negotiable requirement for the following reasons:

1) <u>Promoting literacy and education</u>: Free membership ensures that everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic background, has equal access to the library's resources. This is particularly important in India, where a significant portion of the population lives below the poverty line and may not be able to afford to pay for library membership. By removing the financial barrier, libraries can play a pivotal role in promoting literacy and education across all social strata.

2) <u>Enhancing social Inclusion and equity</u>: Free membership fosters a sense of inclusivity and promotes social equity by ensuring that library services are accessible to everyone. This helps to break down social barriers and creates a level playing field for individuals from all backgrounds to access information, knowledge, and opportunities for personal growth.

3) <u>Empowering marginalised communities</u>: Free membership establishes that the library is not a favour to be doled out and withdrawn but is a basic right, intrinsic to people's identity as human beings and participants in their society. Free membership empowers underprivileged & historically oppressed communities by providing them with access to essential resources for learning, skill development, and personal advancement. Libraries can serve as hubs for information, training, and support, enabling individuals from marginalised groups Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities to improve their lives and contribute to their communities.

4) <u>Promoting civic engagement</u>: Free membership encourages civic engagement and informed participation by providing access to information and resources related to current affairs, public policy, and social issues. Libraries can serve as platforms for dialogue and debate, fostering a well-informed and engaged people capable of participating actively in the democratic process.

5) <u>Nurturing a culture of reading and lifelong learning</u>: Free membership cultivates a culture of reading and lifelong learning by making books and other learning materials easily accessible to everyone. This can lead to increased literacy rates, improved educational outcomes, and a more intellectually stimulated society.

6) <u>Promoting community development and social cohesion</u>: Free membership strengthens communities by providing shared spaces for interaction, learning, and cultural exchange. Libraries can serve as catalysts for community development, bringing people together to address common challenges and promote social cohesion.

7) <u>Fulfilling the public service mandate</u>: Free membership aligns with the public service mandate of libraries, recognising their role as essential institutions for democratic societies. By providing free access, libraries fulfil their responsibility to serve the public good and promote the well-being of all people.

8) <u>Optimising resource utilisation and return on investment</u>: Free membership allows for more efficient resource utilisation and a greater return on investment in public libraries. By eliminating membership fees, libraries can focus their resources on acquiring and maintaining a diverse and comprehensive collection of resources, providing high-quality services, and expanding their outreach to underserved communities.

9) <u>Demonstrating commitment to equity and social justice</u>: Free membership reflects a commitment to equity and social justice by ensuring that access to knowledge and information is not limited by financial constraints. This aligns with India's efforts to promote inclusive development and create a more equitable society for all. Universal provision of services will make it accessible to the large number of households, including those who have no documentation, who would benefit immensely from public libraries.

10) <u>Enhancing India's global competitiveness</u>: Free membership contributes to India's global competitiveness by fostering a well-educated, informed, and engaged citizenry. By providing access to knowledge and opportunities for lifelong learning, libraries empower individuals to contribute to the nation's economic, social, and cultural development.

Providing free membership to public libraries in India is essential for promoting literacy, education, social inclusion, and civic engagement. It aligns with the constitutional principles of equity and social justice, and it contributes to the overall development and

competitiveness of the nation. By making libraries accessible to all, India can foster a more informed, empowered, and engaged society.

## 6.    Non-discrimination on the basis of any identity marker

One of the most important roles of public libraries is to promote social inclusion. It follows from Article 14 of the Indian Constitution that libraries should be a welcoming place for everyone, regardless of their caste, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, or socioeconomic status. In India, however, there is a long history of discrimination against marginalised groups, and this discrimination has also been present in the provision of library services. There are examples past and present, of libraries not being accessible, if not outrightly denied to Dalits, women and other minority communities. When libraries discriminate against any group of people, they fail to fulfil their mission and do a disservice to their communities. Practices like free membership, and programmatic and curricular interventions are thus necessary to end discrimination and create inclusive libraries.

Given below are some arguments for why libraries in India need to be free and non-discriminate in the provision of their services:

1) <u>People have a right to library services and a non-discriminatory free library system as a means to exercise their right to information</u>: There is a rights-based argument for people's access to information and library services. Previously, we have determined in India that people have a right to Information. In 2005 the RTI Act was passed in India. For this Act to be realised, people need libraries in which to find the information that they have a right to access.

2) <u>People have a right to library services and a non-discriminatory free library system as a means to exercise their right to education</u>: In 2009, Parliament passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act. The goals of the Act cannot be fully realised unless libraries, which the National Education Policy 2020 sees as a component of the education system, are empowered by policy to provide non discriminatory library services to all who are covered by the Act.

3) <u>Ensuring equal access to information</u>: Libraries are repositories of knowledge and information, and they should be accessible to all people, regardless of their background or circumstances. The right to access information is a fundamental human right, and libraries have a responsibility to uphold this right. When libraries discriminate against certain groups of people, they are denying them the opportunity to learn and grow, and violating their human rights.

4) <u>Promoting social inclusion</u>: Libraries can play a powerful role in promoting social inclusion by creating welcoming and inclusive spaces for people from all walks of life. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016, ensures full and effective participation and inclusion of individuals with disabilities, within all public spaces including libraries. When libraries discriminate, they reinforce existing social divisions and make it more difficult for people to come together and build a more just and equitable society.

5) <u>Fostering a love of learning</u>: Libraries can help to instil a love of learning in people of all ages. When libraries discriminate, they are sending the message that some people are not worthy of learning, which can have a negative impact on their education and future opportunities.

In addition to these reasons, the libraries too benefit from being non-discriminately free and open to all. For example, when libraries are open to all people, they are more likely to have a diverse and engaged user base. This can lead to a more vibrant and dynamic library community, with a wider range of perspectives and ideas.

Today, there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that all Indians have access to the information and services that libraries can provide. One of the main challenges is the weight of historic discrimination which has left many people with a bitter sense that there will be no inclusion. The continuing practice of charging membership fees or the excessive formalities required of people when enrolling for membership, including excessive requirement of documentation/proof of identification, is not only prohibitory to their participation in the public library system as it is formulated at present, it also acts as a deterrent and makes people cautious of trusting in change and the possibility of inclusion.

Alongside, many people are unaware of library services. This is especially true among marginalised groups, but is often true of other groups as well who lack generational familiarity with the concept of a library. Many people in both these groups are simply not aware that they could be welcome to use libraries Another challenge is the lack of resources in libraries that are specifically designed to meet the needs of marginalised groups. For example, there may be a shortage of books in languages that are spoken by minority groups, or there may not be enough computers with internet access, or lack of programs to provide digital literacy to those who require it.

It is important for libraries in India to take steps to address these challenges, and to ensure that they are providing equitable access to all potential members. Once libraries are free and open to all, they can undertake affirmative action toward non-discrimination through:

### Addressing specific challenges faced by marginalised groups

1) <u>Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes</u>: Implement targeted outreach programs to increase library usage among these communities, addressing historical and ongoing discrimination.

2) <u>People with Disabilities:</u> Offer a range of services and programs to provide equal opportunities and ensure effective and full participation of people with disabilities by removing physical and social barriers.

3) <u>Religious Minorities</u>: Ensure collections and programming respect diverse religious beliefs and practices, avoiding any form of religious bias.

4) <u>Gender and Sexual Minorities</u>: Create safe and welcoming spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals, offering relevant resources and support services.

5) <u>Other marginalised groups</u>: Identify and address the specific needs of other marginalised groups, such as the elderly, children, and people living in poverty.

### Fostering a culture of inclusion

1) <u>Hiring</u>: Incorporate affirmative action and reservation in the hiring process.

2) <u>Staff Training</u>: Conduct regular training for library staff on diversity, inclusion, and sensitivity to address implicit biases.

3) <u>Overcoming Language Barriers</u>: Provide materials and services in local languages and dialects to cater to diverse linguistic backgrounds. Provide materials in alternative formats such as large print, accessible web resources etc.

4) <u>Community Partnerships</u>: Collaborate with marginalised communities to co-create library services and programs.

5) <u>Relevant Resources</u>: Ensure the library collection includes materials that reflect the history, culture, and struggles of marginalised communities.

6) <u>Grievance Redressal</u>: Establish clear grievance mechanisms to address complaints of discrimination.

7) <u>Data Collection</u>: Collect data on library usage to identify disparities and inform targeted interventions.

By implementing these strategies, public libraries can become powerful tools for social change, promoting equality and inclusivity for all.

## 6.1. Non-discrimination on the basis of Caste

Egregious historic and present day discriminatory exclusion of specific marginalised groups, including SC, ST, women and non-binary people, trans-people, persons with disabilities and religious minorities has to be recognised for the creation of anti-caste

inclusive libraries. In so far as the public library system in India has not provided free of cost membership, it has practised discrimination, including discrimination against those who were previously marginalised; thus the public library system has continued to perpetuate such marginalisation and has participated in discrimination of various kinds including casteism. Affirmative action for inclusion of Dalit, Tribal, Backward, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Bahujan people must include socialisation strategy in the library to enable access. Such a strategy will begin with individual library level requirements to have policies to welcome all people, especially Dalit, Tribal, Backward, Scheduled Caste, Schedule Tribe and Bahujan people. Such a policy will make provision for non-discrimination of members. Such policy will also provide for interventions to ensure socialisation of library members to a culture of equal participation through the stipulation that collections and curriculum affirmatively welcome Dalit, Tribal, Backward, Scheduled Caste, Schedule Tribe and Bahujan people. An annual assessment of participation, access and representation of Dalit, Tribal and deprived communities can ensure affirmative action to include all communities.

## 6.2. Provisions for Persons with Disabilities

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities offers the potential to eliminate numerous barriers that prevent people with disabilities from fully and equally enjoying all human rights and fundamental freedoms. In India, the dominant perspective on disability has evolved significantly—from viewing people with disabilities as a curse or objects of pity and charity, to seeing disability as an individual problem, and now to adopting a human rights-based approach.

Today, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 not only protects people with disabilities (PWDs) from discrimination but also ensures they can live a full life with dignity and respect, with the right to preserve their identities. This includes the right to access education, vocational training, and career advancement, as well as the right to participate in cultural, recreational, and social activities. Despite these changes in mindset and legal frameworks, ableism remains widespread in many aspects of society. Only 1-7% of books are available in accessible formats (according to data from the Marrakesh Treaty). Additionally, it is crucial to consider various intersections such as geographical location, gender, caste, and class.

Libraries in India should strive to become inclusive towards persons with disabilities (PWDs) for the following reasons:

1) Promoting equal access to information and knowledge: PWDs have the same fundamental right to access information and knowledge as any other person. By

becoming inclusive, libraries can ensure that PWDs are not excluded from the vast resources and opportunities they offer.

2) <u>Fulfilling constitutional responsibility and human rights</u>: Making libraries inclusive aligns with India's constitutional commitment to social responsibility and the principles of human rights. By providing accessible services and environments, libraries can uphold the dignity and rights of PWDs.

3) <u>Enhancing literacy and educational attainment</u>: Inclusive libraries can play a crucial role in improving literacy rates and educational attainment among PWDs. By providing accessible materials, assistive technologies, and specialised services, libraries can empower PWDs to learn, grow, and achieve their full potential.

4) <u>Promoting social inclusion and community engagement</u>: Inclusive libraries foster social inclusion by creating welcoming and accessible spaces for PWDs to participate in community life. By breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of belonging, libraries can promote social cohesion and integration.

5) <u>Contributing to economic empowerment and livelihood opportunities</u>: Inclusive libraries can empower PWDs to participate in the workforce and pursue meaningful livelihoods. By providing access to information, training resources, and career guidance, libraries can help PWDs achieve economic independence and contribute to society.

To achieve inclusivity, libraries in India should implement several strategies:

1) <u>Physical accessibility</u>: Ensure that library buildings and facilities are designed and maintained to be accessible to PWDs, including ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and signage in Braille and large print.

2) <u>Accessible materials and technologies</u>: Provide a diverse range of accessible materials in various formats, including Braille books, audiobooks, and large print materials. Implement assistive technologies such as screen readers, magnifiers, and text-to-speech software.

3) <u>Specialised services and staff training</u>: Offer specialised services tailored to the needs of PWDs, such as sign language interpretation, audio description, and tactile signage. Train library staff to provide empathetic and knowledgeable assistance to PWDs.

4) <u>Outreach and community engagement</u>: Actively reach out to PWD communities to understand their needs and preferences. Collaborate with organisations serving PWDs to promote library services and organise inclusive events and programs. Maintain and access local and national census or other tools that inform library

leadership and staff of the presence of PWD in the area served by the library, and set goals for their inclusion in the library

5) <u>Policies and procedures</u>: Develop and implement clear policies and procedures that promote inclusivity and address accessibility concerns. Regularly review and update these policies to ensure they remain effective.

By implementing these strategies, libraries in India can create inclusive environments where PWDs can access information, learn, grow, and participate fully in society. This commitment to inclusivity will not only benefit PWDs but also contribute to a more just, equitable, and prosperous India.

## 6.3. Non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation

The policy recognises the public library as a welcoming, non-exclusionary and feminist space for LGBTQIA+ people & cis women, with programs and services that create a sense of ownership and belonging, while creating physical, mental, psychological and emotional well-being for all.

Public libraries acknowledge the historical and ongoing systemic violence, micro-aggressions, prejudicial biases in education & livelihood that queer, non-binary & trans people as well as cis women are subjected to, and create responsive curriculum & best practices that follow the spirit & framework of the United Nations' SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics).

1) <u>Integrated Feminist Approach</u>: Library curriculum & best practices (like curation of book collections, admission & orientation processes, circulation, reading programs, special programs such as art & performance, health & wellness, book clubs etc.) must incorporate the 'infusion method', which introduces SOGIESC-related information into all programs & services, for all members, rather than suggesting separate SOGIESC or LGBTIQ+ sessions. E.g. Code of Conduct, safety policies and ICCs to ensure safe & equitable physical & online library spaces, mainstreaming the use of diverse pronouns, not assuming the gender of any member or forcing new members to choose from 2 genders in the admission form, curating to include books & other resources for and about LGBTQIA+ persons, identities, experiences and themes  and infrastructure such as gender-neutral toilets etc.

*The public library allows all people to identify themselves within the SOGIESC framework rather than in the restrictive binary framework of gender and sexuality, normalising diverse SOGIESC issues as part of the mainstream feminist discourse.*

2) <u>Rights-Based Awareness, Health & Wellness Support & More</u>: The public library must act as the space where people with diverse SOGIESC[5] as well as cis women learn about fundamental and constitutional rights, with an intersectional perspective of caste, class, religion & disability, including but not restricted to right to life, freedom of expression, right to education & information etc. It is also a community space that offers workshops & learning opportunities for health & wellness, including sexual health, from a gender-rights perspective. These programs can be offered not just to LGBTQIA+ people and cis women & girls but also guardians, teachers and allies who support them.

3) <u>Affirmative Action in Hiring & Sensitization Training for all Library Workers & Members</u>: Librarian and other staff hiring must have reservations for trans people, non-trans queer people and cis women. There must be strict policy to protect against prejudicial biases during hiring processes. The library must also focus on skill-development of cis women, trans & queer people, in order to develop them as qualified librarians. Training and sensitization workshops are essential for all library staff with regular refreshers for the same, to be responsive to persons with diverse SOGIESC identities and experiences and support them in navigating physical, mental, emotional & sexual health issues, prevention of bullying and celebration of identity etc.

**6.4. Non-discrimination on the basis of other identities: religion, ethnicity, citizenship-status etc.**

## 7. Knowledge Resources: Books, audio-video and other digital resources, periodicals etc.

A national library policy addressing knowledge resources should lay out the following:

**7.1. Collection Development**

1) <u>Guidelines for building relevant collections in terms of size and diversity</u>: This includes curation of books, audio-visual materials, and digital resources in various languages, formats, and subject areas, reflecting the needs and interests of the communities served. Regarding collection size, we can consider IFLA's Public Library Service Guidelines (2nd edition, 2010, page 84) - *"Collection size is determined by many factors, including space, financial resources, catchment population of the library, proximity to other libraries, regional role of the collections,*

---

[5] PEOPLE WITH DIVERSE SOGIESC - Umbrella term for all people whose sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and/or sex characteristics place them outside culturally mainstream categories.

*and access to electronic resources, assessment of local needs, acquisition and discard rates, and policy of stock exchanges with other libraries."* Regular need-assessment and frequency of acquisition must ensure the regular update of collections to reflect current contexts, latest publications, and current use. It must replace outdated or worn out materials periodically.

2) <u>Emphasis on local content and languages</u>: The policy should encourage libraries to acquire and preserve materials specific to their communities, including local history, language, and socio-cultural traditions, trends, and aspirations.

3) <u>Accessibility and inclusion</u>: The policy should promote measures to ensure all knowledge resources are accessible to people with disabilities, including providing alternative formats and assistive technologies. It should also take cognisance of the needs of people who have been denied access to knowledge, information, and education resources due to socio-economic barriers, and create collections and repositories to acknowledge their needs and aspirations.

## 7.2. Book Procurement

The responsibility and decision making for selection of books and other resources must rest with the library professional staff with contributions and recommendations from library patrons. To ensure a collection which is diverse, inclusive, current and caters to the changing needs of the library community, book procurement and weeding out must be carried out periodically and systematically. At the same time, the books must be from a wide range of themes and subjects, of different genres, published in different regions and by different publishing houses.

## 7.3. Resource Sharing and Collaboration

1) <u>Interlibrary loan programs</u>: The policy should encourage collaboration among libraries to share resources and ensure wider access to knowledge and information resources.

2) <u>Digital resource sharing platforms</u>: The policy should promote the development of centralised platforms for sharing digital resources among libraries, facilitating resource discovery, and access.

## 7.4. Digital Literacy and Technology Integration

1) <u>Public access to ICT resources</u>: Public libraries should provide free access to computers, internet and digital tools, supporting digital literacy development in the community. This access should be provided in a manner that ensures the safety and privacy of library members, especially protecting the most vulnerable sections of society.

2) <u>Digital literacy</u>: Public libraries should have library programs and curriculum that guides and instructs people to use digital resources in an empowering, responsible, and safe manner.

3) <u>Digital safety and privacy</u>: Public libraries must, through programs and policies, ensure that all members' rights to privacy and safety are protected, including data-privacy, protection from data-theft, and freedom from surveillance.

4) <u>Librarian skill development</u>: The policy should emphasize the importance of training librarians and library staff in digital literacy skills and technology integration.

5) <u>Developing digital collections</u>: The policy should encourage libraries to digitize their own collections and acquire digital licences for relevant online resources.

## 7.5. Preservation and Conservation

1) <u>Developing preservation policies</u>: The policy should outline best practices for preserving physical and digital knowledge resources, ensuring their longevity and accessibility for future generations.

2) <u>Disaster preparedness</u>: The policy should address disaster preparedness measures to protect libraries and their valuable collections from natural disasters and other threats.

## 7.6. Funding and Resource Allocation

1) <u>Dedicated funding mechanisms</u>: The policy should advocate for dedicated funding mechanisms to ensure adequate resources for purchasing and maintaining knowledge resources.

2) <u>Sustainable resource acquisition</u>: The policy should encourage libraries to explore alternative resource acquisition models, such as partnerships with publishers, community fundraising, and resource sharing initiatives.

By focusing on these critical areas, a national library policy can ensure that libraries in India have access to diverse and relevant knowledge resources.

## 8. Information resources and services

Public libraries perform the critical role of being information hubs for the people. They play a crucial role in bridging the information gap by providing timely, relevant, and accurate information (local, national, and global) as per the needs and aspirations of the people. By becoming a node for accessing free, reliable, and up-to-date information, public libraries play a vital part in democracy, in ensuring the delivery of rights to all.

Public libraries must ensure that information is provided freely, accurately, and without restrictions. However, with diverse communities and limited resources, effective management of information resources and services is crucial for their success. Coordinated management across public libraries strengthens their impact and offers several benefits:

## 8.1. Information Resources - Curation and Optimization:

1) Public libraries must provide the people with the latest newspapers, periodicals, and reference materials which are in line with the latest trends, innovations, and local, national and global realities. The collection should reflect the diversity of the community and should include all sections of society.

2) Public libraries must provide facilities like: information desks, free-browsing internet programs, workshops, seminars, and outreach programs to connect the right information to its seekers.

3) Libraries must take care to remove outdated or inaccurate sources of information or any resources that perpetuates bias of one interest group over the other.

4) Coordinated resource-sharing allows libraries to avoid duplication of efforts, maximizing the impact of available resources. Shared databases and acquisition strategies can optimize collection development, ensuring access to a wider range of materials for all users.

## 8.2. Librarians As Information Workers:

As per the preamble of the IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers: *"The core mission of librarians and other information workers is to ensure access to information for all for personal development, education, cultural enrichment, leisure, economic activity, and informed participation in and enhancement of democracy."* Their role as information workers and specialists includes:

1) Creating access to vital, relevant, and up-to-date information free of cost and free of restrictions and censorship.

2) Resolving barriers to access and enact practical solutions so that socially disadvantaged people are not excluded.

3) Building awareness about library collections and information services through robust community outreach efforts.

4) Ensuring that information materials are made accessible to all. For instance by ensuring that the websites of information institutions comply with international standards for accessibility and access to them is not subject to barriers.

5) Responding to the immediate information needs of the people, especially during times of crises.

## 9. Dynamic and Member-Oriented Library Curriculum

In an increasingly information centric society and economy, anyone who is unable to access information stands at a disadvantage on the personal, educational, professional, social, and political front. Libraries serve this deep-rooted need and desire for information, and librarians have the significant task of enabling access to vital information. Towards this end, libraries need a systematically designed curriculum for the users and potential users of the library, particularly aimed at supporting those who have been marginalised and thus excluded from reading and educational pursuits. Such curriculum must be informed by a pedagogical approach that takes into account historic to present day oppression of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasis, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities. A well-designed curriculum aims at equipping users to utilise the library and its resources for information and other interests libraries serve, for example for learning to read, reading for leisure, research, academics, exploring literature, building relationships with books, and so on. The curriculum should be dynamic, so it is able to respond to changing social, political, and environmental needs, and it must be member-orientated, so it serves the needs, aspirations, and expectations of library members and potential members of all ages. The curriculum should include detailed plans responding to the specific requirements based on the nature of the library, its context, purpose, and membership.

## 10. Documentation and library records

To ensure efficient operations and optimal service delivery, proper documentation and maintenance of library records are essential. Systematic documentation serves several critical functions.

1) Accountability and transparency: Accurate records document library activities, resource utilization, and budget allocation. This fosters transparency and accountability towards stakeholders, including funders, government agencies, and the community.

2) Efficient management: Proper record-keeping facilitates resource tracking, staff performance evaluation, and service optimization. This allows libraries to identify areas for improvement and allocate resources effectively.

3) <u>User satisfaction and engagement</u>: Well-maintained records enable efficient user assistance, resource retrieval, and program participation. This enhances user satisfaction, promotes engagement, and builds trust in the library.

4) <u>Legal compliance</u>: Many libraries operate under specific regulations and need to maintain records for legal compliance purposes, such as financial audits and resource copyright documentation.

5) <u>Preservation of history</u>: Library records document the library's evolution, community needs, and resource utilisation over time. This serves as a valuable historical resource for future generations.

*How:*

1) <u>Develop a documentation system</u>: Implement a clear and consistent system for documenting all library activities, including resource acquisition, service delivery, program execution, financial transactions, and user interactions.

2) <u>Standardize record formats</u>: Define standard formats for recording information, ensuring consistency, and ease of retrieval. This could involve templates for resource cataloguing, user registration forms, financial records, and program reports.

3) <u>Utilize technology</u>: Leverage digital tools like library management software and online databases for efficient record-keeping, data analysis, and reporting. This improves accessibility, security, and searchability of records.

4) <u>Regular training</u>: Train library staff on the documentation system, data entry procedures, and record management best practices. This ensures accuracy, consistency, and adherence to established guidelines.

5) <u>Regular backup and archiving</u>: Implement a regular backup and archiving system to safeguard records from loss or damage. This ensures data security and historical preservation.

6) <u>Conduct audits and reviews</u>: Regularly audit and review library records to identify errors, inconsistencies, or areas for improvement in the documentation system. This ensures the system's effectiveness and data integrity.

*Additional Considerations:*

1) Adapt the documentation system to the specific needs and resources of each library.

2) Ensure data privacy and user confidentiality by implementing appropriate security measures.

3) Utilise records for data-driven decision making to improve library services and resource allocation.

4) Advocate for resources and infrastructure to support efficient documentation and record maintenance.

By prioritising documentation and record maintenance, public libraries in India can operate efficiently, deliver high-quality services, build trust with their communities, and contribute significantly to education, development, and knowledge sharing across the nation.

## 11.   Archiving

Public libraries in India play a vital role in preserving and sharing local history, culture, literatures, and knowledge. Archiving serves as a powerful tool for libraries to fulfil this mission and contribute to the nation's rich and diverse heritage.

Archiving, in particular, must endeavour to preserve and share histories, voices, and narratives of historically marginalised and oppressed people so that they do not face the danger of extinction. Here is why and how community libraries in India should conduct archiving:

*Why:*

1) Preserves cultural heritage: Local communities often possess unique stories, traditions, and experiences that deserve preservation. Archiving documents, artefacts, scripts, and oral histories ensures their survival for future generations, fostering cultural identity and understanding.

2) Supports research and education: Researchers, students, and historians rely on archived materials to conduct research, write local histories, and gain insights into the past. Well-maintained community archives are invaluable resources for academic pursuits and educational initiatives.

3) Empowers local communities: Archiving empowers communities to document their own narratives, reclaim their histories, and celebrate their unique contributions to the nation's cultural tapestry. This fosters a sense of ownership and pride in local heritage.

4) Promotes learning and engagement: Archived materials can be used to develop engaging exhibits, educational programs, and community events. This fosters a deeper understanding of local history, traditions, and cultural practices, promoting lifelong learning, and community engagement.

5) <u>Enhances the library's institutional value in society</u>: Strong archiving efforts can enhance the reputation of public libraries as valuable repositories of knowledge and cultural resources. This attracts wider user engagement and strengthens the library's role within the community.

***How:***

1) <u>Develop an inclusive archiving policy</u>: Establish a clear policy outlining the types of materials to be archived, selection criteria, preservation practices, access restrictions, and protocols for user interaction. Special care must be taken to ensure the inclusion of those literatures, narratives, and manuscripts that are under threat of extinction.

2) <u>Train staff and professional archivists</u>: Train library staff on proper archiving techniques, including document handling, digitization procedures, metadata creation, and security measures. Archiving is a specialised domain of knowledge and archivists are knowledge professionals specifically trained to handle and organise historical materials. History departments across the country can introduce special courses to train archivists. A robust public library system can thus provide employment opportunities for history graduates.

3) <u>Identify and collect materials</u>: Collaborate with community members to identify valuable materials for archiving, such as historical documents, photographs, oral histories, traditional artefacts, and local publications.

4) <u>Catalog and organize</u>: Organize archived materials with clear labelling, cataloguing systems, and metadata creation for easy retrieval and access.

5) <u>Preserve and digitize</u>: Implement appropriate preservation techniques to protect materials from damage and deterioration. Consider digitizing valuable documents and artefacts for wider accessibility and long-term preservation.

6) <u>Promote access and engagement</u>: Make archived materials accessible to the community through exhibits, online platforms, educational programs, and research initiatives. Encourage community engagement in the archiving process through volunteer opportunities and collaborative projects.

***Additional Considerations:***

1) Address language diversity and cultural sensitivities when selecting and interpreting materials.

2) Involve and take the lead from communities that have a direct stake in the preservation of particular archives.

3) Foster partnerships with local historical societies, universities, and archives to share expertise, resources, and best practices.

4) Advocate for funding and resources to support ongoing archiving efforts and infrastructure development.

5) Regularly evaluate and update archiving policies and procedures to ensure effectiveness and adaptability.

By actively engaging in archiving, community libraries in India can become vital custodians of local heritage, empower communities, and contribute significantly to the people's collective memory and cultural richness.

## 12.    Privacy of users' data and cybersecurity of digital public library infrastructure

Public libraries collect vast amounts of data pertaining to their users, which includes personal information, reading histories, and other vital information. It is the responsibility of all libraries to safeguard the privacy of library users, in line with constitutional provisions, where individuals have a fundamental right to privacy and protection of their personal information. A strong cybersecurity infrastructure to protect inadvertent breaches of citizen privacy would also act as a bulwark against malicious third-party attacks from local and international threat actors.

**Why is user privacy important in libraries?**

1) Protecting personal information: Libraries collect various kinds of personal information about their users, including names, addresses, contact details, and borrowing histories. This information must be protected from unauthorized access, misuse, or disclosure.

2) Upholding user trust: Maintaining user privacy is essential for building and maintaining trust between libraries and their users. Users must feel confident that their personal information is safe with the library in order to fully engage with its services and resources.

3) Complying with data protection laws: The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 mandates the responsible handling of personal data. Libraries must comply with these laws to avoid legal consequences.

Libraries in India can adopt various measures to protect user privacy, ensuring that their data is handled responsibly and securely.

**How can libraries in India safeguard user privacy?**

1) <u>Data minimisation</u>: Collect only the minimum amount of personal information necessary for library operations. Avoid collecting sensitive data unless strictly required.

2) <u>Data security</u>: Protect against unauthorised access, data breaches, and cyberattacks.

3) <u>Privacy policy</u>: Develop a clear and comprehensive privacy policy that informs users about how their personal information is collected, used, and shared. Obtain user consent before collecting or using their data.

4) <u>Data retention and disposal</u>: Establish clear data retention policies and dispose of personal data securely when no longer needed.

5) <u>Staff training</u>: Train library staff on privacy principles, data handling procedures, and the importance of protecting user information.

6) <u>Third-Party services</u>: When using third-party services for library operations, carefully vet these providers and ensure they have adequate privacy safeguards in place.

7) <u>User awareness</u>: Educate users about their privacy rights and how they can protect their information when using library services.

8) <u>Continuous improvement</u>: Regularly review and update privacy practices to adapt to changing technologies and legal requirements.

By implementing these measures, libraries demonstrate their commitment to protecting user privacy and fostering a culture of trust and transparency. Safeguarding user data is not just a legal obligation but a fundamental responsibility.

## 13. Safety and inclusion of staff and members

Equity & social justice is at the heart of all libraries. It follows that social inclusion must be at the core of the Indian public library system. This can only happen by dismantling barriers to access and affirmative action. By making the public library free, anti-caste, anti-discriminatory and feminist, we can remove major obstacles to entry. By infusing all curriculum, practices, programs & policies with these fundamentals, we can ensure a warm, safe, and welcoming environment. By creating mechanisms for equitable representation (through reservations etc.) of all excluded groups, we can make the library truly free in every way and for everyone.

In order to be a safe, inviting and trustworthy space of reading and thinking for all, public libraries must create policies that welcome all and focus in particular on those groups that have been systematically excluded from learning and education.

**Therefore it is the mandate of all public libraries to:**

1) <u>Focus on services and curriculum that cater to vulnerable and underserved groups</u>: People from marginalised castes, classes, genders, and religious backgrounds face a greater risk of discrimination, harassment, and violence. Libraries need to address these vulnerabilities to ensure their safety and access to services.

2) <u>Create integrated safe spaces for reading and thinking through inclusion policies</u>: Libraries can act as bridges for marginalised groups, providing access to information, resources, and opportunities that can help overcome social and economic barriers. Public libraries must create policies in line with constitutional rights including affirmative action, anti-discrimination policies, caste reservations, child safety policies, gender-inclusion policies, and policies in line with laws like POCSO and the Vishakha guidelines.

3) <u>Create opportunities through reservations, diversity hiring, library leadership, and consultation programs</u>: Only when all sections of society are represented in library leadership and decision-making, will public libraries truly be able to overcome historical obstacles and imagine equitable and inclusive spaces for all. Public libraries should take affirmative actions to do this through their hiring policies, library leadership, and community-consultation programs to ensure there is equal and proportionate representation from all socio-economic groups that comprise the population within the library's radius.

By creating a safe and inclusive space for all, libraries can challenge discriminatory social norms and contribute to broader efforts for social change. When excluded and oppressed socio-economic groups are welcomed into the library and empowered to feel ownership in its programs, resources, and policies, it promotes the idea of an equitable and just society and creates a space to address structural imbalances that hinder access to knowledge and information.

**Specific measures for inclusivity and integration of all people:**

1) <u>Representation</u>: Ensure library staff, local library leadership structures, and the library's collection reflect the diversity of the community in which the library is located. Staff, leadership, materials, and programs should affirmatively cater to the specific needs and interests of marginalised groups. Reservations for Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities should be

integrated into all recruitment processes. An annual assessment of hiring and retention can provide an updated picture of hiring from Dalit, tribal and deprived communities.

2) <u>Community engagement</u>: Integrate the library with the community in which it is located through active engagement with community leaders and representatives of marginalised groups in order to understand their concerns and tailor library services accordingly.

3) <u>Accessibility measures</u>: Implement accessibility features like tactile markings, stairs and steps in high contrast colours, ramps, pictograms and signs, gender-neutral and accessible restrooms, and assistive technologies to ensure physical and informational access for people with disabilities or specific cultural needs.

4) <u>Trainings</u>: Conduct sensitivity training for library staff on supporting people with disabilities, caste, gender, and religious discrimination to ensure respectful and inclusive interactions with marginalised groups.

5) <u>Safe spaces</u>: Create designated safe spaces within the library where individuals from marginalised groups can feel comfortable seeking support or reporting incidents.

6) <u>Code of conduct</u>: Implement a clear code of conduct that prohibits discrimination and harassment based on caste, gender, religion, or any other marginalised identity.

7) <u>Grievance procedures</u>: Establish clear and accessible grievance procedures for reporting incidents of discrimination or harassment. Ensure prompt and effective investigation and resolution of complaints.

8) <u>Zero tolerance policy</u>: Adopt a zero-tolerance policy for any discriminatory or offensive behaviour within the library.

9) <u>Partnerships</u>: Partner with NGOs and other organisations working with marginalised communities to offer support services and resources within the library.

10) <u>Data collection and monitoring</u>: Track data on library usage and incidents of discrimination or exclusion to identify areas for improvement and ensure equitable access for all.

*Additional considerations:*

1) Put up clearly visible, audible, and tangible policy-statements of inclusion, welcome, and safety in key areas and platforms of the public library, including library entrances, websites, and in outreach materials.

2) Encourage open communication and dialogue within the library community about issues of safety and inclusion.

3) Regularly review and update policies and practices to ensure their relevance and effectiveness in addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by marginalised groups.

4) Advocate for broader social change through educational programs, community outreach, and partnerships with advocacy organisations.

By implementing these strategies, public libraries in India can create truly inclusive spaces where everyone feels safe, respected, and empowered to access information and opportunities regardless of their background. This can contribute significantly to building a more just and equitable society for all.

We must remember that ensuring safety and inclusion is an ongoing process that requires consistent commitment and effort. By actively working towards creating a welcoming and inclusive library environment, we can empower marginalised groups and contribute to a more inclusive and vibrant future for communities across India.

## 14. Compliance with intellectual property rights of creators and publishers

Ensuring compliance with the intellectual property rights of book publishers is crucial for libraries in India. Intellectual property (IP) rights protect the creations of authors and publishers, and libraries must respect these rights to avoid legal repercussions and maintain ethical practices.

**Why is IP compliance important for libraries?**

1) <u>Respecting authorship and creativity</u>: IP protection recognises and rewards the creative efforts of authors and publishers. Libraries have a responsibility to uphold this principle by respecting IP rights.

2) <u>Avoiding copyright infringement</u>: Unauthorised copying or distribution of copyrighted material, such as books, could lead to copyright infringement lawsuits, damaging the reputation of libraries and potentially incurring significant financial penalties.

3) <u>Supporting the publishing industry</u>: A healthy publishing industry relies on the protection of IP rights. By adhering to IP regulations, libraries contribute to the sustainability of the book industry and the continued production of new works.

4) <u>Ethical conduct and legal obligations</u>: IP compliance is an ethical imperative for libraries, ensuring that they operate within the bounds of the law and maintain a high standard of professional conduct.

5) <u>Marrakesh Treaty</u>: The Marrakesh Treaty, administered by WIPO, was adopted in 2013 to remove barriers to accessing books and other reading materials for individuals with blindness, low vision, and other print disabilities, such as dyslexia. India was the first country to sign and comply with the treaty. The treaty permits the creation and distribution of accessible format copies of text-based works (including books, e-books, audiobooks, newspapers, journals, musical scores, related illustrations and images, and digital repositories) for individuals with print disabilities and allows for the cross-border sharing of accessible books.

**How can libraries in India ensure IP compliance?**

1) <u>Acquiring authorised materials</u>: Libraries should only acquire books and other materials from authorised sources, such as publishers, distributors, or reputable bookstores. Avoid obtaining materials from unofficial or unauthorised channels.

2) <u>Understanding copyright laws</u>: Familiarise themselves with India's copyright laws and regulations governing the use of copyrighted materials. This includes understanding the limitations of fair use and the restrictions on copying or distributing copyrighted works.

3) <u>Implementing copyright policies</u>: Develop clear and comprehensive copyright policies that outline the library's procedures for handling copyrighted materials and educate staff on these policies.

4) <u>Seeking permission for reproductions</u>: When necessary to reproduce copyrighted material for specific purposes, such as educational or research needs, obtain permission from the copyright holders.

5) <u>Educating users</u>: Inform users about copyright laws and the importance of respecting IP rights. Encourage them to use library materials responsibly and avoid unauthorised copying or distribution.

6) <u>Staying updated on IP developments</u>: Keep abreast of changes and developments in IP laws and regulations to ensure compliance remains consistent.

7) <u>Maintaining records</u>: Maintain accurate records of acquisitions, usage, and permissions related to copyrighted materials for transparency and accountability.

By following these guidelines, libraries in India can effectively manage their use of copyrighted materials, safeguard the intellectual property rights of book publishers, and maintain their reputation as responsible and ethical institutions.

IP compliance is not just a legal requirement but also a reflection of the library's commitment to supporting the creative industry and promoting responsible access to information.

## 15. Funding and Sustainability

The effectiveness of public libraries hinges on adequate and sustainable funding. Libraries are expenditure inclined and are growing entities/institutions, with recurring financial requirements. As libraries are not major sources of direct revenue generation but have other direct and indirect socioeconomic and educational cultural gains for communities, they are an important responsibility of the state. Libraries are critical public infrastructures for any country trying to attain a frontier role in the age of Artificial Intelligence and thus the state must make provisions for the financing of public libraries. Here's why securing funding is crucial and how libraries can achieve it.

**Why funding matters:**

1) Resource acquisition: Libraries rely on funding to acquire books, periodicals, digital resources, and other materials essential for their services.

2) Infrastructure development: Maintaining and upgrading library facilities, technology, and accessibility features requires consistent financial support.

3) Staffing and training: Skilled library staff are vital for effective service delivery, but adequate funding is necessary for salaries, training, and professional development.

4) Program development: Engaging and impactful programs require resources for materials, equipment, and personnel. Secure funding ensures the sustainability of such initiatives.

5) Community outreach: Building partnerships and engaging with the community requires resources, such as staff time, transportation, and program expenses.

6) Funding to drive Inclusivity: At all levels – Central, State, District, Gram Panchayat, funding can drive inclusivity through allocation of funds for creation of libraries with specific focus on inclusivity, be it through membership drive to increase proportionate representation of membership or through hiring or training of librarians from marginalised backgrounds, or for creations of collections or programs addressing diversity, equity and inclusivity. An example of this might be funds made available in a Gram Panchayat for the creation of a library celebrating

Adivasi writing and culture or for the creation of a City Library with a focus on outreach and training of Dalit Bahujan Youth for Leadership and Librarianship.

**Strategies for sustainable funding:**

*Government Support:*

1) <u>Increased government allocations</u>: Depending on what is most appropriate for the demands of local communities, the state government may choose statutory or non-statutory based financing mechanisms. In the case of the statutory approach, state governments may enact Public Libraries Act/s and put in place adequate financing mechanisms, such as a library cess, Value Added Tax or other forms of financial support from taxes, with the provision to adjust the rates as per inflation and need for expansion and modernization of infrastructure and services from time to time. For non-statutory approaches, state governments would still need to put in place budgetary provisions for the permanent funding of libraries. Where the Acts and financial instruments for funding public libraries already exist, states must earmark larger budget allocations for public libraries at national and state levels. Where applicable, state governments may put in place an enabling policy environment for local bodies to utilise FC grants/funds and other Own Source Revenue for public library development and maintenance. The Union government should provide additional funds to state governments to meet gaps in funding as appropriate, to account for regional imbalances in meeting the needs of local communities by the respective local bodies and state governments.

2) <u>Comprehensive government grant programs</u>: In addition to adequately funding public libraries, the union and state governments must provide relevant public grants designed to support library development and initiatives of various community organisations so that they may apply for them.

3) <u>Convergence across existing Government programmes</u>: Funds from across the spectrum of government schemes should be possible to be made available for supporting public libraries. For example the use of MNREGA works for construction where appropriate; provisions for skill programming.

*Community-Driven Funding:*

1) <u>Fundraising events</u>: Organise fundraising events like book sales, charity auctions, or community talent shows to generate income.

2) <u>Resource sharing and partnerships</u>: Collaborate with other libraries for bulk discounts on resource acquisition, sharing staff expertise, and joint fundraising initiatives.

3) <u>Public-private partnerships</u>: Explore partnerships with private companies or NGOs for sponsorship, resource provision, or joint programs.

***Innovative Funding Models:***

1) <u>Social entrepreneurship</u>: Develop income-generating activities within the library, such as cafes, bookstores, or rental spaces, to generate revenue and diversify funding sources.These activities may be tied to existing programmes such as NRLM and other SHG promotion programs and schemes, as well as entrepreneurship promotion activities

2) <u>Crowdfunding</u>: Utilise online crowdfunding platforms to raise funds for specific library projects or initiatives.

3) <u>In-kind donations</u>: Encourage donations of books, equipment, or furniture to reduce costs and support library operations.

**Sustainability Strategies:**

1) <u>Financial planning and budgeting</u>: Develop a comprehensive financial plan that outlines income sources, expenses, and resource allocation strategies.

2) <u>Cost-effective management</u>: Implement cost-saving measures like energy efficiency practices, resource sharing, and volunteer engagement.

3) <u>Data-driven decision making</u>: Track library usage, program impact, and funding sources to make informed decisions about resource allocation and service development.

4) <u>Transparency and accountability</u>: Regularly communicate with stakeholders about the library's financial health, resource utilization, and funding efforts.

By diversifying their funding sources, implementing innovative approaches, and prioritising sustainability, public libraries in India can secure the resources necessary to thrive and serve their communities effectively. This will ensure the long-term impact of these vital institutions in promoting literacy, knowledge, and social development across the nation.

Securing sustainable funding is an ongoing process. Public libraries must continuously adapt, innovate, and demonstrate their value to stakeholders to ensure their financial health and long-term success.

## 16.   Types of Libraries

Based on the purpose that a library serves, the services it renders, the audience it caters to and the resources it curates for the use of its members, libraries can be classified into several categories. A good library system would have these various types

of libraries to serve the diverse needs of a population as diverse as India has. Some types of libraries that this policy envisions for India's library system to have are as follows:

## 16.1. Public Libraries

Public libraries are intended to serve the information, educational and recreational needs of the general public of the area or region the public library is located in. They thus have a wide range of collections and services to cater to a diverse membership of all ages. Public libraries thus respond to the different needs of the people in the area or region it is located in. In India, public libraries must design services and programs that expand access of libraries to children, women, people of all caste and tribal communities, and other minorities for whom access to libraries has either been very limited or none at all.

*The policy document has been drafted centering public libraries, thus this section on Public Libraries has not been elaborated further.*

## 16.2. School Libraries

School libraries, located inside schools, are essential for the overall education of the students and the teaching-learning process. Necessary for both students, and teaching and non-teaching staff, libraries serve their educational needs, but also other informational, learning and cultural needs by providing equitable access to opportunities, resources and space for critical thinking and discussions to all students, staff and parents. School libraries are uniquely positioned vis-a-vis other forms of libraries because they are part of a structured educational experience where the school schedule ensures that students have at least one planned library session every week. This means that the librarian gets to interact with the students as a group in a structured and regular way throughout the academic year, with opportunities to collaborate with the teachers to better understand the needs of the individual students as well as groups of students. When children are first generation readers or school-goers, or have limited educational support at home, libraries have a particularly important role to play in helping children develop as critical readers, and build the social capital necessary to gain opportunities for higher education and future employment.

It has been widely recognised that over reliance on textbooks for school education limits the holistic growth of a child, and it is instead encouraged to provide an all round learning experience for every child. Libraries form a key component of such a holistic education for children. For this, there should be a separate library budget allocated within the school budget, taken care of by the relevant government departments or authorities.

*Purpose:*

1) To support academic and curricular learning for students by providing appropriate guidance and book recommendations.

2) To encourage critical thinking among all students, and support engagement with information as well as information creation.

3) To support first generation readers and students to become active library users through guidance and support to build critical literacy.

4) To help students to be responsible and active citizens, and kind and critical human beings.

5) To encourage students to become independent and life-long readers who enjoy reading for leisure.

6) To provide resources and programs to cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

7) To provide opportunities for students to engage with, explore and think about non-curricular books and resources.

8) To create space for discussions, and to build a community of readers and learners that learn to engage in collective thinking.

9) To provide programs and opportunities for students to explore interests outside of the prescribed curriculum, or further their interest in any subject area or topic by finding additional resources.

10) To provide resources for teachers to explore innovative pedagogical and curricular resources.

11) To provide support for teachers for continued professional development, learning and exploring new knowledge.

12) To provide resources for parents.

*Programs and practices:*

School libraries should conduct programs that support curricular learning. These should include programs like read-alouds, book talks, book reports, writing workshops, story-writing, sessions with artists and authors, quizzes and debates to increase student participation, make libraries more accessible and the experience more profound for the students. Such programs would also encourage critical reading and introduce students to different tools for thinking while reading. School libraries should create opportunities and space for students to engage in collective reading. School libraries should have practices like circulation of books so students can issue and take books home, book displays and book recommendations to introduce students to diverse ideas and

literature, open shelves and free choice for selection. To encourage reading outside of schools, school libraries should work collaboratively with the children's section at the local public libraries.

To facilitate a holistic library experience as outlined above, it is essential to build a collection of books and other resources which includes a diverse variety of books on a spectrum of themes and topics, and from different publishers. The books should be representative of the local community as well as the Indian social structure and cultures, while also including books that represent global literature. It should also be free of censorship based on political, religious or ideological inclinations. The library should have books in all the languages spoken by the students and the local community, as well the languages that the students aspire to learn. The library should be kept up-to-date, with periodic weeding out of old, worn out books and adding new books to the collection.

## 16.3. Academic and Research Libraries

According to the University Grants Commission, India has 1,164 universities and colleges (UGC, 2024). This includes central, state, deemed to be and private universities; colleges under section 2 (f) & 12(B) of the UGC Act 1956 and autonomous colleges; and institutions of national importance and institutes of eminence. The gross enrolment ratio for the age group of 18-23 years is at 28.4 for 2021-22, which has improved from 24.6 for 2017-18 (AISHE, 2022, p. 25) while 98% of universities, 99% colleges and 98% stand-alone institutions have library facility (AISHE, 2022, p. 33).

Higher education and research institutions have been growing, but it is essential to assess the impact of academic libraries on enhancing student learning outcomes. Even with rising government spending on education, it's important to determine whether academic libraries have also seen increased funding to develop inclusive and sustainable services for students in need of support. Addressing this issue involves closing gaps in equity and accessibility, particularly in a diverse country like India, where language barriers and insufficient infrastructure still hinder access to higher education for many students, especially those from underrepresented, Dalit, and marginalised communities.

With the extensive network of academic, research, and special libraries in place, there is a significant opportunity to integrate public libraries at regional, state, and national levels. This integration could enhance interlibrary lending, resource sharing, and the formation of consortia and networks among libraries. Such collaboration would allow all types of libraries to optimize costs, access current research and scholarly content, and support diverse learning pathways. Although government-funded academic and

research libraries are supported by public funds, they are not open to the public. Thus, such initiatives should be taken that would bring all libraries into a network to ensure wider and easier access to scientific and research information for all. Integrating public libraries with academic, research, and special libraries in India can greatly advance social justice and inclusion, and in the long-term would benefit all the libraries in terms of capacity building, bringing excellence in library practices and professional development. To enhance government information access for citizens, there is an opportunity to expand the national deposit of publications under the Delivery of Books and Newspapers Act, 1954, to include academic library systems. This extension could facilitate the preservation and digitisation of government publications, making them more accessible to the public.

## 16.4. Community Libraries

Community Libraries exist in locations typically underserved by public libraries and are otherwise an addition or stop gap measure in the public library system. In present day India, the reality of the lack of a public library system means the majority of India remains underserved and an enormous gap in the people's need and services made available to them are being met by small informal and registered non profit efforts, which meet the definition of community libraries.

While they may receive funding from various sources including government or CSR or non profit foundations, what is definitional about them is a measure of independence from these funding sources achieved through high level of community participation in library creation, operation and sustenance. That is, a community library is a library owned and operated by a community and even when divested of funds, infrastructure or other external support, the library has life in it that is vested in the community within which it operates. The investment and ownership of the community in the library may take the form of infrastructure contribution to the creation of the library, such as donation of land and building, or may take the form of physical labour to construct the library. But above all, it takes the form of ongoing and cooperative efforts by the community to acquire, utilise, share and disseminate knowledge about the operation of the library within the community. Community libraries are truly community owned and operated when librarian roles and skills reside in the community and decision making resides with these librarians and other elected councils of library leaders who contribute time, energy and effort to the operation of the library. The sustainability of this model is most evident when community libraries structure the sharing of these roles within the community so librarians and library leaders serve in these roles on a rotating basis whether through election or appointment. Finally, community libraries are by definition those libraries which are populated by the full diversity of the community and serve the diverse needs

of the community through diversity in collection and program offerings as well as diversity in membership and diversity in participation in the circulation and other programs of the library. Community libraries model inclusive practices on a scale that can push public and other library systems to increase community participation within those systems as well. Community libraries through their member ownership and skill sharing model can also be fertile ground for developing librarians who may continue serving in their community and may also migrate to other library systems such as public library system, taking with them their vision of libraries at their most inclusive.

### *Standards & Guidelines*

Community Libraries are by definition libraries located in communities which are themselves located in the library. It follows that such libraries will have as standard features:

1)  Autonomy of selection of the greater part of the library collection

2)  A Collection Curation/Selection Committee composed of a majority of members of the community and representative of the diversity of the community.

3)  A collection of titles composed of books reflecting language and themes and needs representative of the diversity of the community in which the library is located, with specific and affirmative selection of books to meet the needs of the most underserved members of the community.

4)  A Leadership Body/ Council/ Board composed of majority members of the community and representative of the diversity of the community.

5)  Decision making about direction of the library and needs of the library, i.e. the vision and mission of the library to be determined by the Leadership Body.

6)  Periodic turnover of the Leadership Body through election or appointment to continuously reflect the changing nature of any community.

7)  Staff composed of members of the community.

### *Curriculum for Community Libraries*

Central to the concept of a community library is a community, its ownership over and participation in the library. The curriculum for a community library should be designed with the aim to facilitate the ownership of the community over the library and to maximise community participation in running and using the library. For this, it is essential to ensure that the community plays a key role in the creation and implementation of such a curriculum. This curriculum should be designed in response to the needs and aspirations of the community, to respond to the socio-historical, cultural and political contexts of its people and their changing environments. By remaining

sufficiently dynamic and flexible, it should also create space for the people to bring in and practise their culture, and explore and create their histories and knowledge.

## 16.5. Digital Libraries

Digital Libraries consist of repositories of objects that are stored through digital technologies, the supporting services and programs for people to access and engage with the repositories, and the infrastructures that make it all possible. These objects can be e-books, texts, films, videos, e-magazines, journals, music, podcasts, art and illustrations, and various other emerging forms of multimedia material and archives. The scope of digital libraries is growing rapidly. At this crucial time, digital libraries must anchor themselves in the core argument of free libraries for all to realise the right to education, the right to read, and the right to participate in one's knowledge society and community.

The development of digital libraries must take into consideration the reality of how access to the internet and digital technologies is highly restricted and limited in the country. Digital libraries are no replacement for the physical spaces of community and interaction but rather must be seen as an important tool to help broaden and strengthen access to information, knowledge resources, and participation in a democratic society. As a component of the network of libraries as 'information hubs', digital libraries must ensure that information is provided freely, accurately and without restrictions. The work of digital library creation must bring people together to support the creation, dissemination, use and preservation of information, knowledge, and media - all free of censorship and apart from commercial and political interests. Digital libraries must work towards interoperability and adhere to recognized international standards that aim to make access to knowledge equitable and just.

Digital Libraries can be categorised in different ways- digitised collections linked to 'physical' libraries, standalone digital platforms run by government or non-government actors, specialised digital libraries for people with disabilities, institutional repositories and more.

### *Standards & Guidelines*

While digital libraries are vast and constantly shifting in scope, certain standards and guidelines are as follows:

1) Digital libraries must be accessible:
   a) Across various devices, including phones, computers, tablets, and digital accessibility devices.

b) Comply with leading international accessibility guidelines and standards to be accessible for people with disabilities.

c) Accessible for users with low bandwidth connections and limited data.

d) Available in multiple languages

2) Model excellent data and privacy practices by not requesting or storing user data, with minimal storage of user data only if necessary, and no selling or sharing of user data. The browsing history of users must be confidential. All parties involved in providing, maintaining, or updating material online must be held responsible for the user's privacy.

3) Create digital libraries that are for all, the leadership of such initiatives and platforms must comprise people from diverse experiences and identities, particularly those who have been excluded from equitable access to technology and presence in digital spaces such as women, non-binary, and transgender people, Dalit and Adivasi people, people with disabilities, and other historically excluded or marginalised groups.

Digital community libraries can encourage community-made media and platforms, alongside the preservation of local and community-based knowledge and histories. The local community must take an active role in identifying materials and narratives to be documented, shared, and engaged with through the leadership of diverse people from within the community. Libraries must, as significant stakeholders, participate in local and national dialogue on internet access, online freedom, and privacy. As libraries grow as spaces of free access to the internet and digital technologies, librarians and library practitioners must also play a part in holding accountable and conversing with governments, corporations, and other actors to safeguard the digital rights of patrons.

### *Curriculum for Building Digital Literacies for All*

Libraries need programs and curricula that support all people to access, navigate and co-create digital spaces in an informed and critical way, with freedom. This curriculum must respond not only to the lack of access to the internet and digital technologies but also to how the socio-historical and political contexts of people play a part in how they experience and navigate digital spaces. A digital curriculum in libraries must aim to build a space without fear and discrimination where people can engage with the internet and technology independently and as a community, with continuous opportunities for peer learning and dialogue.

Libraries must hold regular workshops, talks, and peer learning circles with users of all age groups to facilitate the development of media literacy and digital literacy skills as a

step towards a more democratic society. Printed and digital resources on digital literacies must be made available at all times in multiple languages for users to access in various multimedia formats. Libraries must also be spaces where there is an atmosphere of critical inquiry as well as creation when it comes to digital technologies, where projects are encouraged amongst the patrons - such as the digital publication of local news, the creation of digital learning content, community-made digital media, digital tools, and applications, which could, in turn, be hosted on the digital library platform.

Libraries must not place unjustified restrictions on library members' access to digital technologies, whether through withholding access when it is technically possible or through the use of excessive blocking and censorship of content. Libraries may exercise only reasonable rules for internet use, or else will compromise public access to the internet and take away from the agency of the users. Rather, libraries must be spaces of collective and continuous learning and dialogue about internet safety, autonomy, expression, and creation on and through digital platforms, including social media platforms.

## 16.6. Prison Libraries

*"The prison library space abounds with possibilities, all of which lend themselves to constructive ways of spending what all inmates have: time."[6]*

Prison libraries are a kind of specialised library located inside prisons, detention and juvenile homes, which are designed to assist in literacy & continued education, build access to legal-aid resources and provide tools for rehabilitation[7] including social-emotional & mental health support. These libraries support incarcerated individuals in continuing or pursuing educational opportunities and preparing them for reintegration into society and/or the workforce. Prison libraries, by providing opportunities to access information and learning beyond the confines of prisons, have been proven around the world to reduce possibilities of recidivism[8]. Such libraries also provide resources for incarcerated individuals to study, understand & participate in legal proceedings pertaining to their case. To facilitate these crucial services in prison libraries, they must be equipped with a range of reading and learning resources and programs, as well as digital resources. It is significant to note that the International

---

[6] Books beyond bars: the transformative potential of prison libraries
[7] Books beyond bars: the transformative potential of prison libraries

[8] (PDF) The Role of the Prison Library.

Federation of Library Associations & Institutions-IFLA includes prison libraries in their Section for Library Services to People with Special Needs (LSN).

This policy recognises libraries as spaces at the very heart of rehabilitative efforts within the Indian prison system.

*"Security rules dominate life in prison and, naturally, also the conditions in the prison library. A prison library – in contrast to any other library – is not an open venue into which patrons can enter freely and decide how long they will stay. But, in most other aspects, prison libraries do not differ from other libraries: in standards, in function or in the fact that they should be welcoming places where people can pursue their personal or topical interests and expand their knowledge; in short, a place for lifelong learning. It is important that the prison library is a special space, separate from the rest of the prison, where inmates can experience an inspiring, creative atmosphere different to their everyday cell life."*

- **Books Beyond Bars**, Lisa Krolak (2019), published by UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning

Indian prisons are a State subject under List-II of the Seventh Schedule in the Constitution. The management and administration of prisons falls exclusively in the domain of the state Governments, and is governed by the Prisons Act, 1894 and the Prison Manuals of the respective State Governments. Thus, States have the primary role, responsibility and power to change the current prison laws, rules and regulations. In 2016, the Indian Home Ministry approved the new Model Prison Manual. It aims at bringing in basic uniformity in laws, rules and regulations governing the administration of prisons and the management of prisoners all over the country and is designed to direct states when they are formulating and updating their respective prison manuals.

It is recommended that key provisions of the Model Prison Manual's (2016) be followed in the following ways:

*Section 13.24 (pg 184):*

1) Books in the library should cater to the needs of different educational standards, satisfaction of intellectual needs, and development of knowledge of the inmates.

2) The prison library shall be properly equipped with books, magazines, and newspapers. These shall be issued to the prisoners. Prisoners should be encouraged to develop reading habits.

3) A librarian should be employed for the management of books and other reading material. Help of educated prisoners could also be obtained, under the supervision of the librarian, to run the library. The librarian shall arrange for and make available

books on various subjects for satisfying the needs of prisoners. The librarian should keep details of books and periodicals available in the library subject/title wise for use by prisoners and for the information of the Superintendent of Prison.

4) Donation of books by N.G.Os. should be encouraged and welcomed. Public and Government schools should be encouraged to adopt the educational programmes being run inside the prison for prisoners.

In addition to India's Model Prison Manual (2016), prison libraries may also take heed of the United Nations' 'Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners' (also called the Nelson Mandela Rules)[9], which draws from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948).

## *Policy Recommendations:*

1) <u>Addressing literacy needs of inmates</u>: A significant majority of prison populations are composed of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, Muslim and other historically excluded/ marginalised communities, who have not had access to education or library resources. Many inmates are recognised as 'functionally illiterate' or have 'non-native language needs'. They lack skills that would enable them to access knowledge & information resources from the library. The library must focus on adult literacy & reading programs that introduce reading to 'first-generation' and Second-Language learners.

2) <u>Curation of Book Collections</u>: Prison library collections are subject to oversight & review by prison officials including Superintendents, who must be guided by basic curation principles to ensure diversity of language, age-groups, themes & needs of prisoners, while adhering to the security & socio-emotional-mental well-being of all. We recommend the following categories: (a) Books/ digital resources for foundational learning (literacy & numeracy) (b) Books/ digital resources for continued learning to support inmates' educational pursuits (c) Books/ digital resources that support reading for pleasure, relaxation, imagination etc. (d) Books/ digital resources for legal-aid (e) Books/ digital resources for social-emotional-spiritual & mental well being and rehabilitation (f) Newspapers, magazines and other resources to meet the information needs of inmates.

It is recommended that curation (book selection, acquisition & display) happen with the consultation of trained library professionals and does not remain restricted to choices made solely by prison officials. The library can also seek suggestions from inmates on the types of books they would like to read.

---

[9] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000369835/PDF/369835eng.pdf.multi

3) <u>Circulation</u>: Prison libraries must facilitate making books available for circulation, whereby inmates and prison staff can borrow books for a stipulated period of time. Adequate security measures can be taken to ensure the seamless & safe check-in & check-out of issued books. Practices such as book carts travelling to barracks/ cells allow for inmates to browse and pick books of their choice have proven to be efficient.

4) <u>Reading Spaces & Programs</u>: We recommend designated library spaces, which have provision for common reading & studying spaces, open shelving for browsing and a digital corner. Programs such as reading circles, read alouds etc. may be encouraged, in cooperation & consultation with prison officials.

5) <u>Librarians & Library Assistants</u>: Prison libraries must have a professional librarian who can curate, run library programs, maintain records and ensure easy & secure access for all prisoners & prison staff. Please also refer to IFLA Guidelines For Library Prisoners[10] for the same. Professional head librarians may work with prison officials to identify those inmates who can assist or run specific programs (eg: literacy/ teaching support in barracks, reading circle leaders, maintenance of books etc.).

6) <u>Working with state & central public library networks & other organisations</u>: Prison libraries must maintain a degree of cooperation with external organisations, notably district, state & central public libraries. This may range from the full provision of library services to prisons, material assistance in terms of books, furniture, shelves etc., supplementing the prison library services via an interlibrary lending scheme, to cooperation in the training of the staff and organised exchange of information.

The prison library may also be seen as a branch of the local district or state public library. Prison-approved non-government library organisations & practitioners may also be allowed to train or run programs (similar to legal-aid organisations that work within prisons)

7) <u>Remission by reading</u>: Countries like Brazil & the Philippines[11] have implemented laws & programs by which inmates might add library or study hours to their appeals for remission of sentence. Such initiatives may be explored within the context of rehabilitation programs for incarcerated individuals in India.

8) <u>Library Services for Children born in Prisons</u>: It must also be noted that womens' prisons & detention centers also house children from ages 0-7 years, who require

---

[10] https://repository.ifla.org/bitstream/123456789/2538/1/ifla-guidelines-for-library-services-to-prisoners_4th_ed-en.pdf
[11] https://thelifelonglearningblog.uil.unesco.org/2023/04/23/read-your-way-out-how-reading-can-reduce-a-prison-sentence/

early learning resources and should have access to all reading & educational tools & programs. Any library program within the prison system must therefore also cater to their specific needs and integrate library programs into their childcare facilities.

## 17. Library Education

By reforming library science and education to focus on community engagement, inclusivity, and innovation, we can unlock the tremendous potential of libraries to empower individuals, strengthen communities, and drive positive change in India. This requires a collaborative effort from educators, librarians, policymakers, and community members to create a future where libraries are not just places to borrow books, but thriving hubs of knowledge, connection, and possibility for all.

The future of libraries lies not just in stacks of books, but in the connections they foster, the opportunities they provide, and the communities they empower.

**Some Key Areas for Reform**

*Curriculum*

1) Shift focus: Move beyond traditional book-centric learning to emphasise the library's role as a community hub and information centre. Integrate modules on community engagement, social development, program planning, and outreach strategies for diverse populations, as well as creating wider access to information of different kinds and from different sources.

2) Skill development: Teach practical skills like project management, budgeting, fundraising, communication, conflict resolution and collaboration to equip librarians to effectively lead and manage community initiatives.

3) Technology integration: Train librarians on using technology to create inclusive digital spaces, manage online communities, and develop interactive programs.

4) Critical thinking and advocacy: Equip librarians with critical thinking skills to analyse social issues, identify community needs, and advocate for policies that promote equitable access to information and resources.

5) Curricular and pedagogical approach: Librarians should learn about developing a curricular and pedagogical approach to librarianship to be able to develop programs and initiatives to support library users, in particular, first-generation library users.

6) Developing socio-cultural perspectives: Courses on librarianship should include modules on socio-cultural perspectives to help the librarians learn more about the diverse social structures and cultures within which public and other libraries operate.

*Pedagogy*

1) <u>Active learning</u>: Replace passive lectures with interactive workshops, simulation, field visits, and community based projects that connect students with real-world challenges and opportunities.

2) <u>Community partnerships</u>: Integrate community engagement into coursework through collaborations with local organisations, non-profit organisations, and marginalised groups to create inclusive library programs and services. A pedagogical approach must be adopted that emphasises socialisation strategies to enable Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi communities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, women, non-binary & trans people and persons with disabilities to access the library .

3) <u>Interdisciplinary learning</u>: Encourage collaboration with other university departments like social work, public policy, and education to learn from diverse perspectives and develop holistic perspectives to community development.

4) <u>Mentorship</u>: Connect students with experienced librarians and community leaders working in inclusive spaces to provide practical guidance and inspire them to become changemakers.

5) <u>Anti-caste and feminist pedagogies</u>: The pedagogical approach should help the librarians-in-training critically engage with the various socio-political identities and experiences that influence library practices in the country. They would also learn about feminist and anti-caste perspectives and how they intersect to shape the library experience of individuals and whole communities, and how as librarians they should respond to it.

*Outside the classroom*

1) <u>Library design and space planning</u>: Integrate modules on accessible design principles, diverse needs of communities, and creating flexible spaces that can adapt to different activities and programs.

2) <u>Networking and collaboration</u>: Facilitate networking opportunities for students with librarians, community organisations, local political leaders, and potential donors to build partnerships and foster knowledge exchange.

3) <u>Research and innovation</u>: Encourage research on community engagement models, inclusive library practices, and innovative solutions to address specific challenges faced by marginalised groups.

4) <u>Advocacy and policy development</u>: Equip librarians with advocacy skills to influence policy changes at local, state, and national levels that promote inclusive library development.

### *Changing mindsets*

1) <u>Librarians as community leaders</u>: Reframe the librarian's role from bookkeeper to community catalyst, emphasising their ability to connect people, resources, and opportunities to empower communities.

2) <u>Libraries as community hubs</u>: Promote the library as a platform for social cohesion, cultural exchange, and knowledge sharing, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

3) <u>Lifelong learning and development</u>: Position libraries as centers for lifelong learning, offering diverse programs and resources that cater to the evolving needs of individuals and communities.

## 18.    National Education Policy and National Library Policy

***(this section needs further input from individuals and organisations with expertise and a stake in the matter).***

## 19.    Governance

The following framework proposes a collaborative approach where each level of government plays a distinct role, while the National Digital Library and RRRLF act as facilitators and resource providers.

While the State has to take responsibility for supporting a rigorous public library system, libraries themselves must be autonomous and locally governed and managed to protect them from political interference by the government of the day. Only if the autonomy of libraries is protected can they be spaces for critical and free thinking. Kerala is a model library policy in this regard.

By respecting autonomy, promoting community engagement, and fostering collaboration, this system can pave the way for a vibrant and decentralised library system in India.

### 19.1.  Union Government:

1) <u>Policy and framework</u>: Work with various State governments and facilitate the development of a national library policy which lays out an overall vision, standards, and guidelines for library development.

2) <u>Resource allocation</u>: Allocate grants and funding to states and local bodies for library infrastructure development, resource acquisition, and staff training. In addition to dedicated funds, the Union government may develop guidelines for enabling the use of funds in various centrally sponsored schemes such that they can be used in convergence with other available finance.

3) <u>Technology integration</u>: Lead initiatives for facilitating the digitization of library resources and development by the State level Departments/Directorates of Public Libraries for ensuring interoperability across digital platforms

4) <u>Research and development</u>: Promote research in library science, best practices, and innovation for efficient library services.

5) <u>Advocacy</u>: Advocate for libraries at national and international levels.

### 19.2. State Governments:

1) <u>Policy implementation</u>: Adapt the national policy to their specific contexts and needs, formulating state-level library policies.

2) <u>Enabling Governance mechanisms</u>: State Governments may develop locally appropriate instruments of implementing the library legislation. In some states, a dedicated Public Libraries Department or Directorate may be appropriate, whereas in others the Culture Department would have to work in convergence with the Rural Development Department. Provision of enabling administrative environments for implementation is key.

3) <u>Financial support</u>: Allocate funds to local bodies for library development and supplement the central government grants.

4) <u>Infrastructure development</u>: Support construction, renovation, and maintenance of library buildings across the state.

5) <u>Resource sharing and collaboration</u>: Foster resource sharing and collaboration among libraries within the state and with other states.

6) <u>Personnel training and development</u>: Provide training and capacity building programs for library staff at all levels.

7) <u>Monitoring and evaluation</u>: Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of library programs and services at the state level.

### 19.3. Local Self-Governments (Panchayats and Municipalities):

1) <u>Community engagement</u>: Identify local needs and preferences, actively engage the community in library planning and development.

2) <u>Library management</u>: Establish and manage local libraries, ensuring their efficient operation and accessibility.

3) <u>Resource acquisition</u>: Select and acquire resources based on local needs and cultural context.

4) <u>Program development</u>: Develop and implement library programs and services catering to the specific needs of their communities.

5) <u>Outreach and partnerships</u>: Collaborate with local organisations, schools, and NGOs to promote library services and engage the community.

6) <u>Financial resource mobilisation</u>: Explore innovative ways to generate revenue locally, such as partnerships and fundraising initiatives.

**19.4. National Digital Library and Raja Ram Mohan Roy Library Foundation:**

1) <u>National Digital Library</u>: Serve as a central repository for digitized library resources, providing access to information from across the country.

2) <u>RRRLF</u>: Act as the implementation arm for the national library policy, providing financial and technical support to libraries at all levels.

3) <u>Resource development</u>: Develop and share digital resources, best practices, and training materials for library personnel.

4) <u>Collaboration and partnerships</u>: Facilitate collaboration and resource sharing among libraries across different regions and levels of government.

5) <u>Innovation and research</u>: Support research and development initiatives in digital libraries and related technologies.

By adopting this multi-level governance framework, India can promote the autonomous and decentralised development of libraries, enabling them to serve diverse communities effectively and contribute significantly to the nation's social, educational, and cultural growth.

## 20.    Recommendations for action

**20.1. Quantitative and qualitative survey of public libraries across India**

Conducting a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative survey of all public libraries across India is crucial for several reasons:

1) <u>Understanding the current landscape of public libraries</u>: A comprehensive survey would provide a detailed overview of the current state of public libraries in India, including their infrastructure, resources, staffing, and services. This data would be

useful for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the library system and identifying areas for improvement.

2) <u>Gathering data on library usage and user needs</u>: The survey would collect data on library usage patterns, user demographics, and user satisfaction levels. This information would help libraries better understand their user base and tailor their services to meet their needs.

3) <u>Identifying best practices and benchmarking performance</u>: The survey would identify libraries that are excelling in various areas, such as resource management, community engagement, and program delivery. This information could be used to benchmark performance and inform best practices across the entire library system.

4) <u>Informing policy decisions and resource allocation</u>: The findings of the survey would provide the state with a solid evidence base for making informed decisions about the allocation of resources to public libraries. This would lead to more effective and efficient use of funding.

5) <u>Promoting accountability and transparency</u>: A comprehensive survey would promote accountability and transparency within the public library system. Libraries would be able to track their progress over time and identify areas where they need to improve.

6) <u>Building a strong foundation for future planning</u>: The data gathered from the survey would provide a strong foundation for future planning and strategic decision-making within the public library system. Libraries could use this information to develop long-term plans and initiatives that align with their users' needs and the overall goals of the library system.

To conduct an effective quantitative and qualitative survey of all public libraries across India, the following steps should be taken:

1) <u>Develop a comprehensive survey instrument</u>: A comprehensive survey instrument should be developed that includes both quantitative and qualitative questions. The quantitative questions should gather data on library infrastructure, resources, staffing, services, usage patterns, and user demographics. The qualitative questions should gather in-depth information about user experiences, satisfaction levels, and suggestions for improvement.

2) <u>Establish a robust data collection methodology</u>: A robust data collection methodology should be established to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data. This could involve a combination of online surveys, in-person interviews, and focus groups.

3) <u>Engage with relevant stakeholders</u>: Relevant stakeholders such as library administrators, librarians, library staff, and library users, should be engaged throughout the survey process to ensure that their perspectives are considered.

4) <u>Analyse and interpret data</u>: The collected data should be carefully analysed and interpreted to identify trends, patterns, and key findings. This analysis should be guided by clear objectives and research questions.

5) <u>Disseminate findings and recommendations</u>: The findings and recommendations of the survey should be disseminated to policymakers, library administrators, and library staff in a clear and accessible format. This will ensure that the results of the survey are used to inform decision-making and improve the quality of public library services across India.

By conducting a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative survey of all public libraries across India, the government and library stakeholders can gain valuable insights into the current state of the library system, identify areas for improvement, and make informed decisions about resource allocation and strategic planning. This will ultimately contribute to the development of a robust and effective public library system that meets the needs of all people.

## 20.2. Audit of implementation of state library laws

Conducting regular audits of the implementation of library laws in different states in India is crucial for ensuring that these laws are being effectively implemented, and in understanding how effective these laws are in meeting the needs of their respective states' communities.

Here are some of the key reasons why such audits are necessary:

1) <u>Assessing compliance with legal requirements</u>: Auditing the implementation of library laws helps to assess whether states and library administrators are adhering to the provisions of the law. This includes ensuring that libraries are providing adequate resources, staffing, and services to their users.

2) <u>Identifying gaps and discrepancies</u>: Audits can identify gaps and discrepancies between the legal requirements and the actual practices of libraries. This information can be used to address any shortcomings in different states' laws and improve the overall quality of library services.

3) <u>Promoting transparency and accountability</u>: Auditing fosters transparency and accountability within the library system. It helps to ensure that libraries are using their resources effectively and providing services that are responsive to the needs of their communities.

4) <u>Informing policy reviews and updates</u>: The findings of audits can inform policy reviews and updates, ensuring that library laws remain relevant and effective in addressing the changing needs of society.

5) <u>Promoting continuous improvement</u>: Regular audits encourage a culture of continuous improvement within the library system. States can use the findings of audits to identify areas for improvement and implement changes in their laws to enhance their libraries' services.

To effectively conduct an audit of the implementation of library laws in different states in India, the following steps should be taken:

1) <u>Establish a clear audit framework</u>: Develop a clear audit framework that outlines the scope of the audit, the criteria to be evaluated, and the methodology to be used.

2) <u>Form an audit team</u>: Assemble an audit team with expertise in library laws, library administration, and auditing methodologies.

3) <u>Gather relevant data</u>: Collect relevant data from various sources, including state library reports, library websites, and interviews with library administrators and staff.

4) <u>Analyse and evaluate data</u>: Analyse and evaluate the collected data against the established criteria to identify areas of compliance and non-compliance.

5) <u>Prepare audit report</u>: Prepare a comprehensive audit report that outlines the findings, recommendations, and action plans for addressing any identified shortcomings.

6) <u>Publish audit report</u>: Publish the entire report online, and disseminate its findings to relevant stakeholders, including state governments, library administrators, library associations, and the public.

7) <u>Monitor implementation of recommendations</u>: Establish a mechanism to monitor the implementation of the recommendations outlined in the audit report.

Regular audits of the implementation of library laws in different states in India can play a pivotal role in ensuring that these laws are effectively implemented, that public libraries are meeting the needs of their communities, and that the library system continues to evolve and adapt to the changing needs of society. By promoting transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement, audits can contribute to a stronger and more effective public library system in India.

## 20.3. Implementation of policy

Implementing this draft library policy requires a comprehensive approach that involves collaboration, coordination, and resource allocation. Here is a step-by-step guide to effectively implementing a draft library the policy:

### 20.3.1. *Wide-Ranging Consultation and Review:*
1) Engage in extensive consultation with stakeholders, including librarians, library administrators, policymakers, educators, and community representatives.
2) Gather feedback and suggestions on the draft policy to ensure it is inclusive and addresses the diverse needs of the library community.
3) Conduct thorough reviews of the draft policy to identify areas for improvement and refinement.

### 20.3.2. *Policy Approval and Official Adoption:*
1) Present the revised draft policy to the Union government for review and approval.
2) Once approved, the Union government may formally adopt the policy as the official guiding framework for library development in India.
3) Disseminate the policy widely among relevant stakeholders, ensuring clear understanding and adherence to its provisions.

### 20.3.3. *Establishment of Implementation Mechanisms:*
1) The Union government must create a dedicated implementation committee or task force to oversee the implementation of the library policy. This body must contain representatives from all regions of India, as well as relevant domain experts.
2) Develop clear action plans and timelines for implementing the policy's objectives and recommendations.
3) Allocate necessary resources, including financial and human capital, to support the implementation process.

### 20.3.4. *Capacity Building and Training:*
1) Provide training and capacity-building opportunities for librarians, library staff, and relevant stakeholders to enhance their understanding of the policy's provisions and their role in its effective implementation.

2) Empower them with the skills and knowledge to adapt their practices and programs to align with the policy's goals.

### 20.3.5. *Monitoring and Evaluation:*
1) Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework to track the progress of policy implementation.

2) Regularly assess the impact of the policy on library services, user satisfaction, and overall library development.

3) Use evaluation findings to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments to the policy or implementation strategies.

### 20.3.6. *Collaboration and Partnerships:*
1) Foster collaboration and partnerships among libraries, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and community groups.

2) Leverage resources and expertise from partners to enhance the implementation of the library policy.

3) Create a supportive and collaborative ecosystem for library development and service delivery.

### 20.3.7. *Advocacy and Public Awareness:*
1) Raise awareness about the library policy and its significance among the public, policymakers, and the  media.

2) Advocate for increased funding and support for library initiatives aligned with the policy's objectives.

3) Promote libraries as essential institutions for education, literacy, and community development.

Implementing the draft library policy would require a sustained commitment from all stakeholders, including government agencies, library professionals, and community members. By following these steps, India can effectively implement a comprehensive library policy that will strengthen the library system, enhance access to information and resources, and promote a culture of learning and lifelong development across the nation.

## 21.    Library Networks, Associations, and Federations

Library associations and federations are key to promoting a uniformly free, excellent, and autonomous public library network. This is especially critical in India with a 1.4 billion population that does not have equal access to knowledge and information

resources. The history of public libraries in India presents many examples of library associations and networks bringing people together to mobilise for libraries that are accessible to the public. Assam's Rural Library Movement in the 1930s, for instance, was driven through the Assam Library Association formed by Kumudeswar Borthakur's efforts to bring together people of the public and engage with them in conversations around the value of libraries. Many other national and state level library associations have similarly played important roles in the growth of public libraries in India. Networks and associations of libraries at national, state, and regional levels must be encouraged and supported to promote public libraries. These associations and federations must support state-run public and non-government libraries to:

1) Deliver standardised best practices, curriculum, and policies that ensure free and accessible delivery of excellent library services to all.

2) Promote literacy, reading, and lifelong learning.

3) Uphold freedoms and rights to information, education, and knowledge, and represent librarians in the demand for the same.

4) Represent libraries in the technological marketplace and in the development of a socially responsible, digitally-forward country.

5) Develop library professionals and promote resource-sharing.

6) Participate in dialogues regarding intellectual property by balancing the needs of library users and IP creators.

7) Preserve intellectual and cultural heritage.

## Jai Bhim. Satrangi Salam. Johar. Zindabad!

The People's National Library Policy is a result of the collective efforts of the many grassroots librarians and library activists, and the lakhs of library users, who have all together created libraries in regions/locations where the Indian public library system has failed to reach. The PNLP represents their demands as well as their hopes for the future of libraries in India. This document is the articulation of our collective imagination and expectations, resistance and resilience, and the grassroots struggles to build equitable ad democratic spaces for social justice.

PNLP was drafted by the Research and Action Team of the Free Libraries Network. It then went through a series of consultations with the more than 250 FLN-affiliated libraries and library activists. FLN's Research and Action Team would like to acknowledge their contributions and express appreciation for the same. We would also like to extend our deep gratitude to the following people for their detailed reviews and feedback and/or for writing part of the PNLP:

Amit Gautam
Preedip Balaji
Nadika Nadja
Meenakshi Balasubramanian
Lawrence Liang

With hope and resilience,
**FLN's Research and Action Team**
Vineet Bhalla
Prachi Grover
Mridula Koshy
Purnima Rao
Osheen
Kamakshi Saptarishi

# Appendix A: Supporters of Free Libraries Network

(Publishers, writers and illustrators who have extended solidarity with FLN's mission and are collaborating to drive the free library movement)

Zubaan Books ♦ Pratham Book ♦ Tulika Books ♦ Harper Collins India ♦ DK Books India ♦ Penguin Random House ♦ Panthers Paw Publications ♦ Navayana ♦ Ektara Trust ♦ Navarun Publications ♦ Vishw Books ♦ A&A Publishers ♦ Eklavya ♦ Juggernaut Books ♦ Pratilipi Westland ♦ Kalpavriksh (Hindi) ♦ Jyotsna Prakashan (Marathi) ♦ Kalachuvadu (Tamil) ♦ Seagull ♦ Speaking Tiger ♦ Anwesha (Assamese) ♦ Pickle Yolk ♦ DC Books/Ravi DC ♦ Scholastic India ♦ Rajpal & Sons ♦ Katha Books ♦ Tara Books ♦ Vani Prakashan ♦ Adidev press ♦ Tarshi ♦ Sangat ♦ Nirantar ♦ Left Word ♦ Adivani ♦ Karadi (Tamil, Hindi, English) ♦ Rajkamal Prakashan (Hindi) ♦ Rupa ♦ Roli ♦ Simon & Schuster ♦ Bloomsbury ♦ Hachette ♦ Pan MacMillan ♦ Manjul Publishing House (multi lang) ♦ Jaico ♦ Yatra Books ♦ Muskaan ♦ Lokvangmay ♦ ACK Group/Pai Group ♦ Indian Cultural Forum ♦ Githa Hariharan ♦ Arundhati Roy ♦ Varun Grover ♦ Anjum Hasan ♦ Sarnath Banerjee ♦ Sharanya Mannivannan ♦ Priya Kuriyan ♦ Rajiv Eipe ♦ Deepanjana Pal ♦ Bijal Vaccharajani ♦ Nisha Susan ♦ Annie Zaidi ♦ Anita Roy ♦ Sowmya Rajendran ♦ Aparna Vaidik ♦ Siddesh Gautam (Bakery Prasad) ♦ Amrita Tripathi ♦ Arun Sagar ♦ Maaz bin Bilal ♦ Meena Kandasamy ♦ Raghu Karnad ♦ Samit Basu ♦ Manju Kapur ♦ Meenakshi Madhavan ♦ Janice Pariat ♦ Keki Daruwala ♦ Sudeep Chakravartii ♦ Aruni Kashyap ♦ Kaushik Baruah ♦ Tishani Doshi ♦ Aman Sethi ♦ Tejaswini Niranjana ♦ Preethi Nagaraj ♦ Harini Nagendra ♦ Vivek Narayanan ♦ Parvati Sharma ♦ Shahnaz Habib ♦ Kala Ramesh ♦ CK Meena ♦ Sunetra Chowdhury ♦ Juri Borah Borgohain ♦ Sushil Shukla ♦ Sridala Swami ♦ Zai Whitaker ♦ Amruta Patil ♦ Jeet Thayil ♦ Tabish Khair ♦ Tarana Khan ♦ Taran Khan ♦ Arunava Sinha ♦ Paul Zacharia ♦ Aneela Zeb Babar ♦ Pavithra Sankaran ♦ Shrayana Bhattacharya ♦ Manu Pillai ♦ M. Rajshekhar ♦ Karthika Nair ♦ Vasudha Dalmia ♦ Nidheesh MK ♦ S Anand ♦ Rahul Soni ♦ Sabitha Satchi ♦ Tony Joseph ♦ Rana Safvi ♦ Amlanjyoti Goswami ♦ Anirudh Kanisetti ♦ Vikram Chandra ♦ Amitava Kumar ♦ Ashish Kothari ♦ Manish Purohit ♦ Paranjoy Guha Thakurta ♦ Romila Thapar ♦ Tanuj Solanki ♦ Akshaya Mukul ♦ Gillian Wright ♦ Mark Tully ♦ Omair Ahmad ♦ Srividya Natarajan ♦ Benyamin Danial ♦ Abdullah Khan ♦ Arshia Sattar ♦ Deepak Shenoy ♦ Anita Mani ♦ Moupia Basu ♦ John Zubrzycki ♦ Anuja Chandramouli ♦ Tashan Mehta ♦ Maya Dalal ♦ Nivedita Menon ♦ Anu Gupta ♦ Sankat Karkare ♦ Karen Haydock ♦ Joeanna Rebello Fernandez ♦ Ashok Gopal ♦ Amita Kalenkar ♦ Ashwin Desai ♦ Bhanwar Meghavanshi ♦ Douglas Ober ♦ Divya Cherian ♦ Dilip ♦ Amita Kanekar ♦ Imran Kureshi ♦ Goolam Vahed ♦ Gita Ramaswamy ♦ Gogu Shyamala ♦ Laura Brueck ♦ Madhu Singh ♦ Tenzin Dickyi ♦ Shailaja Paik (Pakisa) ♦ Anushka Ravishankar ♦ Adithi Rao ♦ Chatura Rao ♦ Vandana Singh ♦ Orijit Sen ♦ Asha Nemiah ♦ Aishwarya AV Raj (Shourya) ♦ P Sainath ♦ Krish Ashok ♦ Varun Mathew ♦ Raviraj Shetty ♦ Sam Miller ♦ Arefa Tehsin ♦ Likla Lal ♦ Ashok Rajagopalan ♦ Samarth ♦ Geetanjali Shree

Stree Mukti Sanghatana, Mumbai & Navi Mumbai ♦ Avani, Kolhapur ♦ Kagad Kach Patra Kamgar Sanghatana, Aurangabad ♦ Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat, Ahmadnagar ♦ Shramjivi Mahila Samajik Sanstha, Nashik ♦ CARPE, Aurangabad ♦ Centre for Sustainable Development, Nagpur ♦ Aakar, Mumbai ♦ Social Action for Literacy And Health (SALAH), Kalyan

**Appendix B: PNLP 2024 in Media**

**Indian Express, 28 July 2024**

Access Here

# The free libraries of India telling stories of hope

Run without government aid, libraries are popping up in under-resourced places around India to help people read, write and learn their rights

Written by **Udbhav Seth** , **Sukhmani Malik**
Updated: July 28, 2024 08:01 IST

**The Wire, 12 May 2024**

Access Here

## Fire in Nalanda: The Urgent Need to Reform India's Public Libraries

Purnima Rao
12/May/2024 • 5 min read

*A growing grassroots movement of independent libraries is rising to meet the people's hunger to read, learn and think.*

# Libraries can force the case for liberty, justice

When Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III visited the United States (US), he may have encountered the phrase "palaces for the people," a term often used to describe US public libraries. He was certainly convinced of the importance of the public libraries system he encountered there; he appointed an American to create one in Baroda in 1910 — and thus, William Alanson Borden, created a system of free libraries in modern India.

A publisher recently told me this about Kerala, which has close to 10,000 libraries: "*Wahan ki baat hi alag hai*" (Kerala stands out from the rest of the country). She reasoned that the state's near-total literacy came first, and then came the books and the culture of reading. So, if we could just hurtle ourselves forward the Kerala way, then, only a century after Gaekwad and his love of free libraries, we could set about establishing the public library system that India needs.

The publisher is right. Kerala is different from the rest of the country which has an abysmal ratio of one urban library for every 80,000 people and one rural library for every 11,500 people. But she is also wrong because people don't acquire literacy first and then books. They acquire books first and literacy follows. Kerala's literacy movement was preceded by a century-long library movement.

And even Kerala may no longer be able to exercise the autonomy of the Kerala way. R Bindu, Kerala's minister of higher education, at the Union ministry of culture's Festival of Libraries, voiced her state's objection to the Centre's plan to move the library question from the state to the concurrent list. Kerala is worried that if they lose control over their libraries, they will no longer be able to maintain the quality of their system, which provides libraries at a ratio of one per 3,500 people.

The library movement in India has mostly not been led by *maharajas* or government officials. It has been a people's movement, led by those who undoubtedly understand that people have a right to places where they can meet, talk, read and think together. Leaders in the movement have come from various places and times in India: Motibhai Amin in Baroda, Sir Iyyanki Venkata Ramanayya in Andhra Pradesh, PN Panicker in Kerala, Monindra Dev Rai Mahashaya in Bengal, Master Motilal in Rajasthan, Sant Ram Bhatia in Punjab, Kumudeshar Barthakur in Assam, among others. SR Ranganathan, who conceived of the movement on a national scale, understood the importance of the connection between free libraries and the nation. Ranganathan is responsible not only for the Madras Public Libraries Act, the first library legislation adopted in India, but also for a Model Library Act, which alas was never adopted nationally.

The present library movement in India is also a people's movement. It is led by over 300 library practitioners and leaders from around the country and operates over 200 free library organisations. Nearly none of the libraries in the Free Libraries Network have access to the resources that would allow them to do what they do, which is to welcome all people and bar none from free membership in libraries in which literature and community thrive. The seemingly miraculous has less to do with miracles and more to do with a commitment to meet the urgency of people's need for access to information.

**Mridula Koshy**

The free library movement describes itself as an anti-caste movement because it recognises the role caste has played in keeping people outside libraries. It recognises the role of libraries in annihilating caste. It begins with the assertion that libraries must be free to be anti-caste.

These are combative words in India, where active exclusion of people from a reading environment occurs when a child in Rajasthan is beaten by his teacher for reaching for the 'wrong' container of water.

The People's National Library Policy 2024 (PNLP24) of the Free Library Network begins with the premise that libraries should be free of cost to all people, of all castes, religions, genders, classes, ethnicities, abilities, and should bar no one whatsoever, and further that people should be free to choose from the ideas curated within the library. The importance of freedom to choose what to read necessarily begins with adequate public funding and adequate ratio of libraries per capita and books per capita, and most importantly with local autonomy over libraries.

We can trust autonomy to create the libraries people need and good national policy, on the lines of PNLP24, to ensure a baseline rooted in the Constitution's promise of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. The Constitution could as easily have been describing the best public library system as it described the nation we are trying to become.

*Mridula Koshy, a writer, is a board member of Free Libraries Network. The views expressed are personal*

**The Indian Express, 14 April 2024**

# 'Free libraries for all': Here's policy memo on how it is done

The memo seeks to establish a standard for what qualifies as a decent library and establish a curriculum for librarians so they can become 'repositories for delivering constitutional rights' instead of being 'merely record keepers'.

Written by Udbhav Seth
New Delhi | Updated: April 14, 2024 12:26 IST

**NewsGuard**



Members of Free Library Network during a press conference at Press Club in Delhi on Saturday. (Express Photo by Praveen Khanna)

Braving a rainswept city, children and teens from all around the country – some virtually, some physically – gathered at Delhi's Press Club Saturday evening to advocate for the right to read, to information, and to a library. The Free Libraries Network (FLN), a collective of more than 250 libraries around South Asia, released a policy memo 'The People's National Library Policy 2024', drawn from years of coordination and activism at the grassroots level, to bolster a movement they believe to be the foundation of the Indian Constitution's ideals of equity and justice – on the eve of Dr BR Ambedkar's birth anniversary. All their libraries are fiercely anti-caste, feminist and disability-friendly, and above all, free.

www.fln.org.in
freelibrariesnetworkfln@gmail.com

Why? Won't people steal expensive books? Mustn't there be some entry barriers to maintain security? "The mindset has to change that, oh, there is an excellent library in the centre of the city some of us can access, so why are we caring? There is an anxiety that if we involve and welcome everybody, there will be some kind of downgrading (of quality). That doesn't happen. Yes, when you break caste or gender barriers, issues crop up… but you work with it because that's the world you live in," said Purnima Rao, director, FLN.

The memo seeks to establish a standard for what qualifies as a decent library and establish a curriculum for librarians so they can become 'repositories for delivering constitutional rights' instead of being 'merely record keepers'. It also seeks to decentralise control so individual communities can decide how to start and run their local libraries, with help from union and state governments as well as bodies like the National Digital Library and Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF). It also advocates for robust data collection –according to the union government, of a total of 27,671 government-run libraries in India, only 7,836 exist outside southern states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

"When I went to these libraries, it's not just a place for books. It's a place where we can share our thoughts. A library makes me feel safe and confident. When I first joined as a member, I only went to listen to stories. But over time, I developed a new way of thinking wherein I could see how so much injustice is done to people with my identity," said Rajni, a member of The Community Library Project (TCLP), part of FLN.

**The Indian Express, 15 April 2024**

# To fulfil Ambedkar's vision of inclusivity, every child must have access to a library

India needs a national policy on public libraries which recognises that access to knowledge is not a privilege but a fundamental right

April 15, 2024 18:48 IST

Fireworks of 'Jay Bhim' during celebration of B R Ambedkar's birth anniversary in Latur. (PTI)

**Abhishek Vyas and Jatin Lalit**

When Julie, a spirited 8-year-old girl from Bansa village in Hardoi, Uttar Pradesh, first stepped into her village's community library, her curiosity was boundless. The library — the first of its kind in the entire district — had opened amidst the Covid-19 turmoil. It was a modest but colourful building with books, computers, posters, and games. And the best part: It was all free! Julie would frequently visit the library and pick up storybooks, participate in read-aloud activities, and make new friends. She also became intrigued by the Preamble to the Constitution, which was painted in large letters on the library wall, and wondered what it meant. The library became her sanctuary.

However, when her father decided to migrate to Ludhiana for work, post-lockdown, Julie was left without her beloved library. In a phone call to the librarian soon after, she spoke about how much she missed it. She wondered why the big and bustling city did not have its own version of the Bansa Community Library.

Julie's story is not unique; she represents many learners and readers across India who are profoundly impacted by lack of access to free public libraries. The Indian public library system has a rich history and some pockets of success; however, it largely remains underdeveloped, underfunded, and unequal. The lack of a comprehensive national library policy has left many communities — especially the marginalised — without access to these essential public goods.

Historically, public libraries have been spaces of resistance, empowerment, and cultural assertion. They have provided access to knowledge and ideas that challenged colonial oppression and ignited the spirit of Independence. The Assam rural library movement of the 1930s, spearheaded by Kumudeswar Borthakur, is one such example. The movement mobilised the masses and engaged them in conversations about the value of knowledge. This laid the foundation for a network of libraries that continue to thrive today. Kerala Grandhasala Sangham and the Andhra Pradesh Library Association are other such initiatives which have been important in democratising access to reading and learning.

After Independence, public libraries have continued to be significant for advancing literacy, fostering critical thinking, and nurturing informed civic engagement. In 1959, the Sinha Committee recognised the transformative potential of libraries, and advocated for a nationwide network of free public libraries. Institutions like the

Delhi Public Library and the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation have carried forward this vision and promoted the library movement across the country.

The library movement has also been shaped by the vision of leaders like S R Ranganathan, who advocated for a people-centric approach to library services. In his "Five Laws of Library Science", he emphasised the role of libraries in serving the needs of all users, regardless of their background or social status. His philosophy laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and responsive library system.

However, despite the efforts of library pioneers and the enactment of state-level library legislation, India's public library system remains fragmented and underfunded. The lack of a comprehensive national policy framework has hindered the development of a cohesive and equitable network of libraries across the country. Disparities in infrastructure, resources, and services still persist. These disparities disproportionately impact those who are already historically excluded from equal participation in our society on the basis of caste, class, gender, disability and other barriers.

India urgently needs a comprehensive national library policy that addresses these challenges and reimagines India's library system as a catalyst for social change and democratic empowerment. Such a policy must recognise that access to knowledge is not a privilege but a fundamental right. It is essential for the full realisation of a community's potential and the collective progress of the nation.

By enshrining the principles of free and universal access, the policy should aim to break down barriers that have long excluded marginalised communities from the world of learning and democratic participation. It must envision libraries as inclusive spaces that celebrate diversity, promote social cohesion, and provide a

platform for civic discourse. Through equitable distribution of quality knowledge resources and services, the policy should also seek to support digital inclusion and ensure that no individual is left behind in the knowledge revolution.

Julie's story highlights the transformative impact of free public libraries. By enacting a comprehensive national library policy, we can ensure that every child, like Julie, has access to knowledge and the opportunity to shape India's democratic future. In the spirit of B R Ambedkar's vision of an inclusive and enlightened India, let us make the right to knowledge a reality through a robust public library system that empowers every citizen to read, think, and speak up freely.

*Vyas is the co-founder and academic coordinator of the Bansa Community Library and a doctoral researcher in Education at Brunel University London. Lalit is the advocate and founder of Bansa Community Library and general secretary of Free Libraries Network*

## People's National Library Policy 2024: Exploring the future of India's library ecosystem

21 April,2024 06:29 AM IST | Mumbai | Neerja Deodhar (https://www.mid-day.com/author-detail/neerja-deodhar-452)

Fragmented and undernourished, India's library ecosystem is the subject of a new draft policy which imagines a future where caste and gender are not barriers and librarians are community leaders



Mere hours before she can sit down with mid-day to talk about India's library ecosystem, Purnima Rao has been in a meeting with prison officials. The subject of this interaction? Prison inmates' right to read. Though it has been proven that reading books can assist in their rehabilitation, inmates and undertrials have been woefully ignored and excluded. It may seem like an unusual, if unlikely cause, for people to rally behind, and yet state organisations are working hard to make prison libraries a reality.

The People's National Library Policy 2024, drafted by the Free Libraries Network (FLN), wants to enable causes like it. A 200+ grassroots libraries-strong network, led by Rao and other library activists across India, it has produced a 65-page document that it aims to place on the desks of a variety of stakeholders, bringing to their notice alarming statistics. Our country has one urban library for every 80,000 people, and one rural library for 11,500 people. This is a world apart from the accepted global norm of one library for 3,000 readers. What can change the dismal ground reality in India? Rao says there's no magic bullet. "There has to be a people-led movement to demand changes to the ecosystem. A transformation is also needed in the very perception of libraries, which are still seen as study halls where aspirants prepare for entrance tests," Rao explains.

The draft policy is singular in the way it addresses issues of equitable access, as discrimination on the basis of gender, caste and disability continue to remain barriers. "We've been witness to movements in the past - in states such as Assam and Kerala - and comparisons to institutions overseas, but a fundamental question remains unanswered: how do libraries aim to serve those who are left out?" says Rao, "The existential purpose of a library is to build bridges of access for those to whom books, education and knowledge remain inaccessible." It is through access that issues of growing readership and encouraging critical thinking are addressed, she adds.

For Delhi-based advocate Jatin Lalit, building a library in his native Bansa was a personal, nurtured dream. It is the only free, community-oriented institution of its kind in Uttar Pradesh's Hardoi district, welcoming 120 readers per day into its premises and boasting of a membership of 1800. But you could walk into the three-year-old library without a membership card too; such is its ethos. "Volunteering at Delhi's The Community Library Project for three years when I was in college had a huge impact on me. It motivated me to begin a library in my own village, when I had enough resources," says Jatin, who is FLN's general secretary.

The draft policy devotes much space to the need for funding and sustainability; after all, without financial support, the acquisition of books and upgradation of facilities is an uphill battle. Aside from government allocations and grants, it highlights strategies like fundraising or even social entrepreneurship - running cafes or bookstores from within library premises.

The institution in Bansa, for example, has been built - brick by brick - on land lent by a local temple where Jatin's great-grandfather was a sweeper. Its construction, on the other hand, was crowdfunded. "We've tried to keep costs low and ensure sustainability… A monthly patron support system, with payments as small as R250, helps take care of recurring expenses. These payments go towards staff salaries and stationery," says Jatin. An Amazon wish list of books desired by readers is frequently circulated on social media, and orders placed by kind strangers allow new titles to reach the library's doorstep.

Libraries like the one in Bansa, which caters to 36 villages, are the result of "ad hoc initiatives" by individuals with access and social capital, Jatin admits. Rao is of the opinion that the sprouting of grassroots community libraries is itself a symptom of the breakdown of the public library system. While individual efforts are commendable, they don't ensure longevity - a factor that the draft policy addresses. "If we don't devise a framework whereby the establishment and running of libraries is standardised, then such initiatives die out with the people who founded them," says Rao.

With its eyes to the future, the draft policy envisages an evolved library that moves forward with the times - where readers can use the Internet, and librarians aren't merely record keepers, but rather community leaders. The authors of the document emphasise that only trained professionals should be put in charge, because the librarian is a make-or-break force. Their role involves engaging with the community, ical skills like cataloguing and maintaining databases, and pedagogical knowledge about curriculum and reading strategies.

"Very often we see that the librarian's place in the system is bypassed and subverted," says Rao, "On the surface, it can seem like no one wants to pay a librarian's wages, but at a deeper level, there seems to be fear about libraries becoming a place for movements, of people's voices coming together - which a librarian can facilitate."