



Strengthening Public Libraries in India: Social Awareness, Library Legislation and Government Support

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper Received: 01-07-2026 Accepted: 22-07-2026 Published: 20-08-2026 Keywords: <i>Public Libraries, Social Awareness, Library Legislation, Literacy, Government Policy, India</i>	Public libraries play a crucial role as institutions that offer free access to information, education, knowledge, and cultural resources for all segments of society. They foster reading habits, promote lifelong learning, enhance digital literacy, and encourage social inclusion. In India, public libraries have made notable contributions to both educational and social progress; however, their full potential is not being realized due to a lack of public awareness, insufficient funding, inconsistent application of library laws, and limited governmental support. This paper explores the extent of social awareness regarding public libraries in India, the role of government in establishing and promoting these libraries, the impact of library legislation, and the significance of public libraries in enhancing literacy. The research is based on secondary data sourced from government publications, policy documents, books, and recent studies released between 2016 and 2026. The study finds that although initiatives such as the Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), National Mission on Libraries, and Digital India have strengthened public library development, significant challenges remain in implementation. The paper suggests that stronger government commitment, better funding, modern digital infrastructure, effective library legislation, and active community participation are

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1. Introduction

Public libraries are termed named as the "people's universities" because they provide free and equal access to information for everyone regardless of age, gender, education, religion, or economic status. They are the integral part of the society that support education, literacy, lifelong learning, cultural development, and informed citizenship. In today's information society, public libraries are not merely places where books are stored; they have become community knowledge centres offering digital resources, internet access, career guidance, e-learning opportunities, and information services.

China has the largest number of public libraries in the world. According to an OCLC data updated in 2016, there are 51,311 public libraries in China. Coming at the second place is Russia with 46,000 public libraries, while India stands third with 29,800 libraries spread across the entire country. In India, public library infrastructure and services are unevenly distributed. Some states have developed strong and efficient public library systems, whereas others continue to lag behind due to inadequate infrastructure, funding, and administrative support. However, the development of public libraries varies greatly among different states due to differences in government policies, financial support, infrastructure, and public awareness. States such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, and Maharashtra have relatively stronger public library networks because of effective library legislation and sustained government support. On the other hand, some big states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and some other still lack adequate library infrastructure and professional manpower.

The emergence of digital technologies has changed the role of public libraries significantly. Today, libraries provide online databases, digital books, internet services, digital literacy training, and access to government information.

Despite these developments, public awareness about modern library services remains limited. Many people continue to view libraries only as reading rooms for students preparing for examinations. This misconception prevents society from utilizing the full potential of public libraries. Therefore, there is an urgent need to increase awareness, strengthen government support, and modernize public libraries to meet the changing information needs of society.



2. Objectives of the Study

Despite significant investments in education and digital initiatives, public libraries in India have not received adequate attention in national and state development policies. Factors such as limited public awareness, inadequate infrastructure, and weak implementation of library legislation, Government inattention and insufficient financial support have reduced the ability of public libraries to effectively promote literacy, lifelong learning, and equitable access to information.

There is a lack of comprehensive research examining the relationship between government policies, public awareness, literacy development, and the role of professional library associations. This gap highlights the need for systematic academic studies to better understand the challenges and opportunities for strengthening the public library system in India.

The objectives of this study are:

- To examine the level of social awareness about public libraries in India.
- To analyze the role of government in promoting and establishing public libraries.
- To study the importance of library legislation in India.
- To examine the contribution of public libraries towards literacy development.
- To identify the major challenges faced by public libraries.
- To suggest measures for strengthening public library services.

3. Research Methodology

The present study uses qualitative descriptive research method and it is based on secondary sources of information. Data have been collected from books, peer-reviewed journals, government publications, reports of the Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), OCLC, Ministry of Culture, UNESCO publications, and recent research articles published between 2016 and 2026.

The collected information was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify important issues related to public awareness, government initiatives, library legislation, literacy development, and public library services.

4. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the field of Library and Information Science by examining public library development from social, educational, legal, and administrative perspectives. It offers practical recommendations that can help policymakers, library administrators, researchers, and professional



associations improve public library services. The findings may also support governments in developing effective library policies that promote the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), digital inclusion, and lifelong learning.

5. Review of Literature

Majority of researchers have highlighted the importance of public libraries in promoting literacy, digital inclusion, and lifelong learning. The IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (2022) describes “public libraries as democratic institutions that ensure free access to knowledge and information for all citizens. The manifesto emphasizes that governments should provide adequate financial and legislative support for public libraries.”

The Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (2023) reported that “financial assistance provided to state governments has improved library infrastructure, collection development, and modernization. However, the report also pointed out considerable disparities among different states.”

Kumar and Singh (2018) observed that “many Indian public libraries remain underutilized because people are not aware of the wide range of services offered by libraries. The authors suggested that community outreach programmes and library marketing can significantly improve library usage.

Patra (2019) examined the impact of library legislation in India and “concluded that states with comprehensive library legislation generally possess better public library systems than states without such legislation. However, effective implementation remains a challenge.”

Sharma and Verma (2021) “found that digital transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged many libraries to introduce online reference services, digital resources, and virtual learning support. The study recommended further investment in ICT infrastructure.”

Gupta and Mishra (2022) “emphasized that the National Education Policy (2020) provides new opportunities for public libraries to support reading culture, foundational literacy, and lifelong learning.”

The review indicates that although considerable progress has been made in public library development, issues such as inadequate funding, weak public awareness, shortage of trained librarians, and uneven implementation of government policies continue to limit the effectiveness of public libraries in India.

6. Social Awareness about Public Libraries in India



Social awareness of public libraries refers to the level of understanding people have about the purpose, services, and benefits of these institutions. In India, awareness about public libraries differs considerably between urban and rural areas. People living in cities, particularly those with higher educational backgrounds, are generally more familiar with library services. In contrast, many people in rural areas have limited knowledge of the facilities and opportunities provided by modern public libraries.

Traditionally, public libraries have been regarded mainly as places for reading books or studying for school and competitive examinations. However, the role of public libraries has expanded significantly in recent years. Besides providing books, they now offer internet access, digital learning resources, career and employment information, e-governance services, health information, skill development programmes, and various community-based educational activities.

Public awareness is influenced by several factors, including literacy levels, educational attainment, government support, media promotion, and library outreach initiatives. Libraries that regularly organize book fairs, reading campaigns, storytelling sessions, author talks, digital literacy programmes, exhibitions, and community events generally experience greater public participation than libraries offering only traditional lending services.

The widespread use of smartphones and the internet has also created the misconception that libraries have become less relevant. In reality, public libraries continue to play an important role by providing reliable and authentic information, promoting information and digital literacy, and helping reduce the digital divide. They also provide free access to computers, internet facilities, and online resources for people who may not have these services at home.

7. Government Initiatives for Promotion of Public Libraries

Government support has played a significant role in the development of public libraries in India. Several important initiatives have strengthened library infrastructure and services.

The **Delhi Public Library (DPL) System** is one of India's largest public library networks and operates under the **Ministry of Culture, Government of India**. It was established in **1951** with the support of **UNESCO** as a pilot project to develop modern public library services in India.

The **Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF)**, established in 1972 under the Ministry of Culture, is the apex organization for public library development. It provides financial assistance for library buildings, furniture, books, ICT equipment, mobile libraries, and modernization projects.



The National Mission on Libraries was launched in 2012 to improve infrastructure, digitize library resources, strengthen district libraries, and promote networking among public libraries on the recommendations National Knowledge Commission. Although progress has been slower than expected, the Mission has laid the foundation for library modernization.

The Digital India Mission has also benefited public libraries by expanding internet connectivity, digital literacy, and e-governance services. Many libraries now provide internet access, online learning resources, and digital government services to local communities.

The **National Digital Library of India (NDLI)** provides free access to millions of digital learning resources that can be effectively utilized by public libraries.

Despite these initiatives, challenges remain due to insufficient funding, administrative delays, uneven implementation, and shortage of professional librarians.

8. Library Legislation in India

Library legislation provides the legal framework necessary for establishing, managing, and financing public libraries. It ensures that libraries receive regular financial support, qualified staff, and administrative stability.

The concept of library legislation in India was strongly advocated by **Dr. S. R. Ranganathan**, who believed that public libraries should be considered essential public services similar to schools and hospitals.

The **Madras Public Libraries Act, 1948**, enacted in present-day Tamil Nadu, became the first public library legislation in India. One of its most significant features was the introduction of a library cess, which provided a stable source of financial support for public libraries.

Following Tamil Nadu, several states including Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Manipur, Haryana, Kerala, Mizoram, Goa, Gujarat, Odisha, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Telangana.

Library legislation generally provides for:

- a. Establishment of library authorities
- b. Library committees
- c. Financial provisions
- d. Appointment of professional librarians



- e. Library development programmes
- f. Administrative supervision
- g. Public accountability

As per the data given by **Periodic Labour Force Survey 2024**, the States that have enacted comprehensive public library legislation generally demonstrate higher literacy rates than those without such legal frameworks. For instance, Kerala, governed by the Kerala Public Libraries Act, 1989, records a literacy rate of 95.3%, while Tamil Nadu, operating under the Tamil Nadu Public Libraries Act, 1948, has achieved a literacy rate of 91.5%. In comparison, Uttar Pradesh (77.7%) and Bihar (74.3%), which do not have comprehensive public library legislation, continue to report relatively lower literacy levels. While literacy outcomes are influenced by multiple socio-economic and educational factors, the experiences of Kerala and Tamil Nadu indicate that a strong legislative framework for public libraries, supported by sustained financial investment, qualified library professionals, effective governance, and close integration with the education system, can play a significant role in promoting reading habits, lifelong learning, and overall educational development.

The effectiveness of library legislation depends largely on its proper implementation, adequate financial support, efficient administrative machinery, trained library professionals, public participation, and continuous government commitment. Regular monitoring, sufficient infrastructure, and periodic revision of the legislation also ensure that public libraries provide accessible, equitable, and quality information services to all sections of society.

9. Public Libraries and Literacy Development

Literacy is an important measure of a country's social and economic progress. Today, literacy means more than just reading and writing. It also includes information literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, and lifelong learning. Public libraries help people develop these skills by providing free and equal access to learning resources.

Public libraries promote reading habits among children, young people, adults, and senior citizens. They provide books, newspapers, magazines, reference books, e-books, and online resources that support both formal and informal education. Unlike schools and colleges, public libraries are open to everyone without any discrimination.

Children's sections in public libraries help develop reading habits from an early age. Activities such as storytelling, reading competitions, book clubs, and summer reading programmes make reading enjoyable



and encourage children to become lifelong readers. Libraries also support students by providing textbooks, reference books, and digital learning materials.

Public libraries also play an important role in adult literacy. Many libraries organize literacy classes, reading programmes, and awareness campaigns for women, senior citizens, migrant workers, and economically weaker sections of society. Mobile libraries and village reading centres help provide library services to people living in rural and remote areas.

With the growth of digital technology, public libraries now offer digital literacy training. They teach users how to find reliable information online, use digital resources, apply for government services, prepare resumes, search for jobs, and access online learning platforms. These services help reduce the digital divide, improve digital skills, and increase employment opportunities.

So, the investment in public libraries should be viewed as an investment in human capital and national development rather than merely an expenditure on cultural institutions.

10. Role of Professional Library Associations

Professional library associations play an important role in improving library services, promoting professional standards, conducting research, and advocating better government policies.

The Indian Library Association (ILA), established in 1933, is the oldest and largest professional organization of librarians in India. It organizes national conferences, workshops, seminars, and training programmes that help librarians update their knowledge and skills. The Association also publishes scholarly journals and actively advocates for better library legislation and increased government support.

The Indian Association of Special Libraries and Information Centres (IASLIC) promotes research, professional education, and information management. Although it mainly serves special libraries, its research contributes to the overall development of Library and Information Science in India.

Organizations such as DELNET, MANLIBNET, and various state library associations have strengthened resource sharing, library networking, automation, and professional collaboration. They encourage libraries to adopt modern technologies, improve digital services, and share information resources efficiently.

In addition, these associations represent the interests of library professionals before governments by recommending improvements in recruitment policies, professional qualifications, salary structures, and library legislation.



Although their contributions are significant, stronger collaboration between governments and professional associations is necessary to formulate effective national library policies and strengthen public library systems.

11. Impact of Public Libraries on Modern Society

Public libraries have become multi-functional institutions that contribute to education, digital inclusion, social development, cultural preservation, and democratic participation.

Educational Development

Public libraries provide free educational resources that support students, teachers, researchers, and lifelong learners. They reduce educational inequality by ensuring that everyone has access to quality learning materials regardless of financial background.

Digital Inclusion

Modern libraries provide computers, internet connectivity, digital databases, online journals, e-books, and digital literacy training. These services are particularly valuable for people who cannot afford personal computers or broadband connections.

Social Inclusion

Libraries provide safe and inclusive public spaces where people from different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds can interact freely. They support women, senior citizens, children, persons with disabilities, and marginalized communities by offering accessible information services.

Economic Development

Libraries contribute indirectly to economic growth by providing career guidance, employment information, entrepreneurship resources, skill development programmes, financial literacy workshops, and government welfare information. These services improve employability and support local economic development.

Preservation of Culture

Public libraries preserve local history, regional literature, manuscripts, folklore, and indigenous knowledge. Digitization projects further protect valuable cultural heritage for future generations.



Strengthening Democracy

Access to authentic information enables citizens to make informed decisions and participate effectively in democratic processes. Libraries promote freedom of expression, informed citizenship, transparency, and civic responsibility.

Thus, modern public libraries are not merely educational institutions but essential centres for sustainable social and economic development.

12. Governments Attention to Public Libraries

Despite the vital role of Public Libraries in education, information dissemination, and community development, public libraries in India often receive less attention than other public sectors. Although libraries contribute significantly to literacy, lifelong learning, and digital inclusion, they continue to face several challenges that affect their growth and effectiveness.

Inadequate financial support

One of the biggest challenges is inadequate financial support. Public libraries generally receive a small share of government budgets compared to sectors such as education, healthcare, transportation, and infrastructure. Limited funding makes it difficult to maintain library buildings, purchase new books and digital resources, upgrade information and communication technology (ICT) facilities, and recruit qualified staff. As a result, many libraries struggle to provide modern and high-quality services.

Libraries are on Least Priority

Another important reason is the low priority given to libraries in public policy. Governments often focus on projects that produce quick and visible results, such as roads, hospitals, and public buildings. In contrast, the benefits of public libraries, such as improved literacy, knowledge, social inclusion, and lifelong learning, develop gradually over time. Because these benefits are long-term and less visible, libraries often receive less attention in planning and budget allocation.

Many public libraries also suffer from outdated infrastructure and limited technological facilities. Poorly maintained buildings, inadequate seating, limited internet connectivity, outdated computer systems, and insufficient digital collections reduce the quality of library services. These problems discourage users, especially young people, from visiting libraries regularly.



National Public Library Policy

A major concern is the absence of a comprehensive National Public Library Policy. While several states have enacted public library legislation, India still lacks a uniform national policy that defines common standards for library infrastructure, staffing, services, technology, and funding. This results in significant differences in the quality and availability of library services across different states and regions.

Administrative fragmentation further weakens the public library system. Responsibility for library development is shared among central ministries, state governments, local authorities, autonomous bodies, and educational institutions. The involvement of multiple agencies often leads to poor coordination, duplication of efforts, delays in decision-making, and uneven implementation of library programmes.

A National Public Library Policy should comprehensively address all key aspects required for the sustainable development of public libraries in India. The policy should include clear provisions for adequate and dedicated financial support, modern physical and digital infrastructure, and a well-defined role of the Central, State, and local governments in library governance and administration. It should recognize the social, educational, cultural, and economic impact of public libraries and ensure their integration into national development goals. The policy should also introduce a Library Cess or other dedicated funding mechanisms to provide stable financial resources for library development. Furthermore, it should emphasize the recruitment of qualified and skilled library professionals, establish transparent recruitment and career advancement policies, and promote continuous professional development. To increase library usage, the policy should incorporate public awareness and advocacy programmes highlighting the importance of public libraries. Finally, it should create a strong institutional linkage between district public libraries, colleges, universities, and other educational institutions, promoting resource sharing, digital networking, collaborative learning, and community outreach through an integrated library system.

Government Neglect Due to the Non-Profit Nature of Public Libraries

Public libraries are often neglected because they are non-profit institutions and do not generate direct financial returns. Governments tend to prioritize sectors and projects that contribute immediately to economic growth, revenue generation, or visible infrastructure development. Since the benefits of public libraries—such as improved literacy, education, informed citizenship, social inclusion, and lifelong learning—are long-term and largely intangible, they are often overlooked in policy decisions and budget allocations. As a result, public libraries receive inadequate financial support, limited investment in infrastructure, and less attention compared to sectors that produce measurable economic outcomes.



However, despite not being profit-making institutions, public libraries create significant social, educational, and cultural value by promoting equal access to knowledge and supporting sustainable human development.

Impact of Digital Revolution

Another challenge is the misconception that the internet has replaced libraries. Many people believe that easy access to online information has reduced the need for public libraries. However, libraries continue to play an essential role by providing reliable and authentic information, promoting digital and information literacy, offering access to computers and the internet, supporting research, and helping people who cannot afford digital resources. Libraries also serve as safe community spaces for learning, cultural activities, and social interaction.

Low Public Awareness

Another major challenge is low public awareness and limited community participation. Many citizens are unaware of the wide range of services offered by modern public libraries beyond book lending. Insufficient promotional activities, outreach programmes, and community engagement reduce library membership and usage. Without strong public demand and support, governments often allocate fewer resources to library development.

To overcome these challenges, India needs strong political commitment, increased and sustainable financial investment, effective policy reforms, better coordination among government agencies, modernization of library infrastructure, continuous professional development for librarians, and greater public awareness. Recognizing public libraries as essential institutions for education, digital inclusion, lifelong learning, and social development will help strengthen the library system and ensure equitable access to knowledge for all citizens.

12. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

- a. Formulate a comprehensive National Public Library Policy.
- b. Increase government funding for library infrastructure and modernization.
- c. Enact library legislation in all states and strengthen implementation where legislation already exists.
- d. Recruit professionally qualified librarians and provide continuous professional training.
- e. Expand digital library services, automation, and internet connectivity.
- f. Strengthen partnerships among libraries, schools, colleges, NGOs, and local governments.



- g. Organize reading campaigns, book fairs, literacy programmes, and digital awareness workshops.
- h. Promote library services through social media and community outreach activities.
- i. Encourage Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) support for library development.
- j. Introduce regular evaluation of public library performance based on measurable indicators.

13. Conclusion

Public libraries remain one of the most valuable public institutions for promoting education, literacy, social equality, and democratic development. Although India has made considerable progress through initiatives such as the Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation, Delhi Public Library, National Mission on Libraries, and Digital India, many public libraries continue to face financial, administrative, and technological challenges.

The study shows that library legislation, government support, professional leadership, and public awareness together determine the success of public library systems. States with effective legislation and sustained financial commitment generally possess stronger library infrastructure and better public services.

Public libraries have successfully transformed themselves from traditional book repositories into community knowledge centres providing digital literacy, lifelong learning, career guidance, e-governance services, and cultural preservation. Their contribution has become even more significant in the digital era, where access to reliable information and digital skills is essential for social and economic development.

To realize the objectives of the National Education Policy (2020) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), governments must recognize public libraries as essential institutions for national development. A comprehensive national policy, improved funding, modern technology, qualified professionals, and active community participation will help public libraries become vibrant centres of learning and innovation.

Strengthening public libraries is not merely an investment in books or buildings; it is an investment in informed citizens, inclusive education, digital empowerment, and sustainable national development.

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