

Development of Public Libraries through Public-private Partnership in India: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes the concept of public-private partnership (PPP) and examines how it is different from 'privatisation' concept. It examines the present status of public libraries in India and the need for mobilising support for their improvement. The authors stress the need for implementing the National Knowledge Commission recommendation for PPP. The paper highlights the role of the public sector and private firms in developing public libraries through the PPP model. At the end suggestions were made on how to implement the model for the development of public libraries.

Keywords: Public libraries, National Knowledge Commission, public-private-partnership

1. INTRODUCTION

India is one among the fast growing economies witnessing economic growth. The benefits of this growth are unevenly distributed among the general population. Without considering the human needs, economic growth cannot be sustainable in the long-term. A major reason for India's poverty is the government's failure in providing basic services such as education to the poor even 60 years after the Independence. One way to reduce these gaps and inequities is to reinvest in improved public infrastructure, such as education, information, and library services.

With this goal in mind Dr Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister of India has created the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) to facilitate the development of a more equitable knowledge society. The NKC developed 10 recommendations for the improvement of libraries in India.

While public libraries in India have been recognised for their potential to be local information and learning centres for the deprived masses, their neglect is a major point of concern. The key recommendation of the commission is to encourage greater community participation in library management so that libraries become community-based information systems. While earlier committees and commissions have investigated the roles of public libraries in providing community information services, such as the National

Policy on Library and Information System (NAPLIS) in 1986, a new momentum is now growing around this issue.

While the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are focusing on issues like environmental and women's rights; the state and corporate firms' response to the needs of the deprived masses is not enough.

2. STATE OF INDIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The concept of public library in India has its origins in the British period. Libraries existed in India since ancient times, serving as repositories of knowledge in the King's courts, temples, and universities. The development of public libraries in the country started in the post-independence period, with the introduction of Madras Public Library Act in 1948 for providing public library service.

Dr S.R. Ranganathan, father of Library Science, succeeded in the passage of this legislation and he was very keen about the development of effective public library system in India to reach all citizens of the society. Despite his efforts, the objective remains unfulfilled even today. Public libraries are under the jurisdiction of state governments but currently only 19 states in the country have formal library legislation. Management of public libraries is under the State's purview, the Indian government providing funds through the Raja Rammohun Roy

Library Foundation (RRRLF), for the development of public libraries in the rural areas. The RRRLF works in cooperation with state governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to extend public library services in different states of the country. Public libraries are posed with issues such as low-literacy levels, limited-access to technology and sometimes limited-availability of linguistically relevant reading materials.

Low levels of adult literacy, less number of automated systems in well-developed public library systems, and public libraries still are viewed as repositories of books, etc. are some of the major issues faced by public libraries. Only one percent of all Indian public libraries are computerised and there is a dearth of suitable reading material in regional languages like Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam, etc.

The benefits of public library include increase in the volume of printed books, informal education gains, ICT literacy and delivery of information for the development of the society. The need for libraries to transform from collection-oriented to service-oriented has been felt by many library leaders. In spite of the recommendations of several commissions on public libraries development, the challenges and possibilities for Indian public libraries still remain the same. Public libraries are not seen as providers of community information services.

In the 1970s, public libraries in the US coordinated with government, community and social service agencies for providing information and referral services. The citizens are informed about resources and programmes for individual and community empowerment through networking. Public libraries serve as centres for cultural promotion and preservation for a country's rich and diverse cultural heritage. Public libraries include the enhancement of social capital for communities. Public libraries also can serve as intermediaries providing access to government information.

Public libraries act as information kiosks which often provide community information through the use of ICT. They have the potential to 'reach the unreached' by providing relevant information services which can support economic and social development. Developing a wide range of stakeholders in such types of programmes, as well as effective community participation and ownership is important. Public libraries have the potential to take on some of the services of the community technology programmes but mechanisms for change and use of technology is necessary. The transformation of public libraries through information technology is still taking time; much effort is needed to conceive libraries as community technology centres.

The Pondicherry Information Village project that MSSRF conducts with the support of the Canadian

International Development Research Centre (IDRC) focuses on community-based development through information technology. This is focused on community needs based on a pro-poor, pro-women, and pro-environment model of development. The project focuses on delivering information to villages through intranet network. The information is provided by women volunteers through various village knowledge centres (VKCs) located in different parts of the union territory. The information needs are local, specific, government programmes, healthcare, transportation, and weather, etc. Potential exists for similar models of partnership and cooperation in the development of public libraries in India.

3. DEFINITION

Public-private partnership (PPP) provides an opportunity for private sector participation in financing, designing, construction and operation and maintenance of public sector programmes and projects. The time has come to forge a greater interface between the public and the private sector in a wide range of activities in the country.

The Government of Gujarat succeeded in constructing community school buildings, private health centres and private housing more cost-effectively through PPP. In this regard, India's Ninth Five Year Plan explicitly recognised the role of NGO's and Voluntary Organisations for social development.

Involvement of community, family neighborhoods and voluntary organisations under PPP is observed to have led to empowerment of citizens. The non-profit agencies in the US today combine the service role with political activism.

4. CONCEPT OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The PPP is a mode of implementing government programmes and schemes in partnership with the private sector. The term private in PPP encompasses all non-government agencies such as the corporate sector, voluntary organizations, self-help groups, partnership firms, individuals and community-based organisations. The PPP, moreover, subsumes all the objectives of the service being provided earlier by the government, and is not intended to compromise on them.

Essentially, the shift in emphasis is from delivering services directly, to service management and coordination. The roles and responsibilities of the partners may vary from sector to sector.

5. PRIVATISATION AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The key differences between PPP and privatisation may be summarised as follows:

Responsibility: Under privatisation the responsibility for delivery and funding a particular service rests

with the private sector. The PPP, on the other hand, involves full retention of responsibility by the government for providing the service.

Ownership: While ownership rights under privatisation are sold to the private sector along with associated benefits and costs, PPP may continue to retain the legal ownership of assets by the public sector.

Nature of Service: While nature and scope of service under privatisation is determined by the private provider, under PPP the nature and scope of service is contractually determined between the two parties.

Risk and Reward: Under privatisation all the risks inherent in the business rest with the private sector. Under PPP, risks and rewards are shared between the government (public) and the private sector.

The use of partnership exploded in the 1980's - operation of public schools, Adopt-a-Park programme in Dallas, USA did the same with libraries.

6. NATIONAL KNOWLEDGE COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Knowledge Commission's recommendations are meant to encourage PPP in the development of library and information services. It describes the benefits and roles of libraries, "Libraries have a recognised social function in making knowledge publicly available to all. They serve as local centres of information and learning, and are local gateways to national and global knowledge." Libraries as information and learning centres are main focus of the report.

7. ROLE OF PPP IN PUBLIC LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT

A national census of libraries is needed to assess the present condition of libraries and the precise support needed by them.

Financial, technical, and infrastructural support is needed from organisations and private agencies for establishing and modernising libraries, information centres, knowledge centres and such other activities those are essential for the development of a knowledge society in the country.

There is a need for the establishment of a National Commission on Libraries to promote a healthy library scenario in the country and remove all types of barriers that exist today in the proper functioning of libraries. Established in 1892, the JN Tata endowment scheme helps for education and other projects in the society by spending Rs 1.50 billion so far. Tata's started projects for the development of society, and came forward to establish public and rural libraries under the PPP model with the concerned state governments. It will be a big boost to the public libraries. The PPP projects have been implemented in other sectors like power, construction and airports, etc. Similarly,

it can be extended for the establishment of public libraries and the concerned Governments have to take initiative in this direction.

The Infosys software company, Bangalore undertakes the largest rural education programmes in the country by donating books in Orissa and southern states under its 'Library for Every Rural School' project. The Foundation has set up more than 10,150 libraries in rural government schools providing various subject books to the students of all age groups. It has set up libraries in Hubli and Bangalore, which can be accessed by under-privileged students in medicine and engineering for their study.

Few organisations succeeded and yet they have to work for the development of public libraries through PPP. Most of the Public sector organisations and private firms have to come forward and initiate action for the development of public libraries in the country through PPP model. The public sector organisations like Visakha Steel Plant, SAIL, Visakhapatnam Port Trust, HPCL, NTPC, IOCL, MMTC, and private organisations like Infosys, Wipro, TCS, GMR and BHPV should come forward to implement PPP models for the development of public libraries in India. The type of agreements between public libraries and the coordinated organisations will be finalised as per the bidding or other type of mutually agreed terms and conditions. These are not meant for profit motto type and hence the library projects must be considered to develop knowledge society, to increase literacy rates of the citizens and GDP of the nation.

8. SUGGESTIONS

Basic library infrastructure exists in many parts of India but libraries are not being considered for Government. Information providers. Partnerships between libraries and the government in delivering a range of traditional and non-traditional information services can be effective and government to think in this direction for the development of public library services.

Government policy-makers should think of libraries beyond the usual 'book lending activity' and consider them as knowledge gateways, which would enable the society to become a knowledge society. Numerous domestic and international NGOs that exist today are concerned with public library development for partnership between state-funded public libraries and NGO-supported libraries and information centres and the Government encourage such type of organisation to work the development through PPP.

Revitalisation of India's public libraries implemented at the state-level, with state governments having the ultimate decision-making authority with regard to library development and all states have to come

forward to develop public libraries through PPP model in coordination with different agencies that are interested in this activity.

The implementation of library legislation has been uneven between different states in India. A general lack of faith in public governance also plagues the attempt to provide public services through library legislation. With new PPP model, if adopted by all the states, the public libraries can regain their past glory.

The role of public libraries in India is still misunderstood and hence, they remain underdeveloped. Libraries need to be thought of as 'knowledge centres' rather than mere storehouses for books. If the library is truly a growing organism as stated by Dr S.R. Ranganathan, then Indian public libraries need to embody this dynamic principle⁶.

The issue of funding public libraries in most countries is always a concern, and same is the case with India. A greater investment in libraries can go a long way in meeting the basic literacy and social development goals through the PPP approach.

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