

From Intervention to Institution: Why Libraries and Librarianship Remain Underdeveloped in India's Development Sector

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ABSTRACT

Libraries play an important yet often overlooked role in India's development sector. They are widely recognised as symbols of literacy, inclusion, and access to knowledge, but are rarely viewed as institutions that require long-term professional management and sustained investment. This paper examines how library work is conceptualised, staffed, and supported across academic libraries, public libraries, and library initiatives established by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and philanthropic foundations. It argues that while NGOs and corporate trusts have significantly expanded access to books, reading programmes, and community library spaces, comparatively little attention has been given to building the professional capacity, governance structures, and institutional systems needed to ensure their long-term sustainability.

Using examples from contemporary Indian practice, including the Parag Initiative of the Tata Trusts, the Central Himalayan Rural Action Group (CHIRAG), Bookworm Trust in Goa, and findings from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), the paper identifies recurring patterns of project-based implementation, limited recognition of professional library expertise, and weak institutional continuity. These patterns are contrasted with the relative stability and organisational support found in well-established academic libraries, highlighting their implications for user engagement, educational outcomes, and the long-term effectiveness of library services. The paper argues that libraries within the development sector need to be recognised as essential educational infrastructure rather than temporary project components. Achieving meaningful progress in reading culture, foundational literacy, and equitable access to knowledge will require sustained professional leadership, institutional continuity, and stronger systems of governance.

KEYWORDS: libraries; development sector; NGOs; librarianship; institutional sustainability; foundational literacy; India.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries in India have changed considerably over the years, although these changes are not always visible to those outside the profession. The familiar image of a library as a quiet room with wooden almirahs, shelves of books, and handwritten accession registers no longer represents the range of work that libraries undertake today. Modern libraries are expected to manage both print and digital collections, provide access to online information resources, support teaching and research, assist students preparing for competitive examinations, organise reading activities, and engage with the communities they serve. Initiatives such as the National Digital Library of India, developed by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur, along with automation programmes introduced in many states, reflect the steady expansion of library services over the past two decades.

Yet, while library services have evolved, the way libraries are understood within India's development sector has not kept pace. Organisations working in education, literacy, and community development increasingly include libraries as part of their programmes. Reading corners are established, books are supplied, and new library spaces often feature prominently in annual reports and donor communications. These efforts have undoubtedly widened access to reading materials, particularly in underserved communities. At the same time, they reveal a deeper institutional issue that receives far less attention. In many development projects, libraries are treated as activities to be implemented within a fixed project period rather than as institutions that require professional management, long-term planning, and sustained organisational support.

This distinction is important because a library is much more than a collection of books or a room set aside for reading. Its effectiveness depends on trained professionals, organised collections, consistent services, and systems that continue well beyond the life of a project. Without these foundations, even well-funded library initiatives often struggle to remain active once external support comes to an end.

Drawing on professional observations from academic libraries, public libraries, and NGO-supported knowledge centres, together with examples from contemporary library and literacy initiatives in India, this paper examines this gap between intention and practice. Instead of assessing individual organisations, it focuses on a broader structural question. Why does a sector that frequently speaks of sustainability, institutional development, and systems strengthening continue to treat libraries as temporary interventions rather than as institutions that themselves require long-term investment, professional leadership, and continuity?

APPROACH AND SCOPE

This paper is an analytical, practice-based review and does not present findings from a primary empirical investigation. Instead, it brings together professional observations from academic libraries, public libraries, and NGO-supported library initiatives in India with information available in the public domain, including programme documents published by organisations working in this field and national evidence on literacy and reading outcomes. By combining these sources, the paper seeks to examine broader institutional trends rather than isolated cases.

The purpose is not to assess or compare the performance of individual organisations. Rather, it identifies recurring structural patterns that can be observed across the development sector and illustrates them through examples that are publicly documented and current as of 2026. Wherever specific organisational practices are discussed, the discussion is based on information available in the organisations' own reports, publications, or official websites.

These examples are used only to illustrate wider trends and should not be interpreted as criticism of any particular initiative.

In fact, many of the organisations referred to in this paper have made valuable contributions to promoting reading, literacy, and community learning in different parts of India. The concern raised here is therefore not about the quality or commitment of individual programmes. Instead, it relates to the broader institutional context in which library initiatives are conceived, funded, managed, and sustained. The paper argues that the structural challenges affecting library work extend beyond individual projects and reflect wider assumptions about the role of libraries within the development sector.

LIBRARIES AS SYSTEMS: LESSONS FROM ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Library education in India has long emphasised that libraries are institutions requiring professional knowledge, established systems, and long-term stewardship. This understanding is deeply influenced by the work of S. R. Ranganathan, whose contributions shaped library science as a distinct academic discipline governed by its own principles and professional standards. Academic libraries continue to reflect this tradition by functioning as integral parts of educational institutions rather than as supporting facilities that operate on the margins.

The organisation of work within an academic library is based on clearly defined processes and professional responsibility. Students undergoing practical training and newly appointed library professionals learn to handle accessioning, classification, cataloguing, serials management, collection development, and the administration of digital resources in a systematic manner. Every catalogue record, metadata entry, and acquisition decision contributes to the institution's long-term knowledge infrastructure. Mistakes are therefore not merely clerical errors. They can affect the discoverability of resources, disrupt teaching and research, and ultimately influence the credibility of the institution itself.

In well-established academic institutions, the library occupies a recognised and essential place within the academic ecosystem. Faculty members depend on uninterrupted access to scholarly journals, books, and electronic databases to support their teaching and research. Students rely on carefully developed collections and professional guidance throughout their academic journey. At the institutional level, recurring budgets are earmarked for subscriptions, automation software, digital repositories, and other information resources. Librarians are actively involved in collection development, vendor negotiations, licensing, access management, and policy decisions, reflecting their recognised professional role within the institution.

Academic libraries have also responded to significant technological changes over the past two decades. Traditional card catalogues have largely been replaced by Online Public Access Catalogues (OPACs), while printed journals have increasingly given way to electronic resources accessed through national and consortium-based initiatives such as the UGC-INFONET Digital Library Consortium. The expansion of remote access services and digital collections has further transformed the nature of library work. In response, librarians have developed expertise in areas such as digital resource management, copyright and licensing, institutional repositories, and information literacy. These changes demonstrate the profession's ability to adapt while maintaining continuity in service delivery.

Academic libraries are by no means free from challenges. However, they continue to be recognised, at least in principle, as institutions that require stable systems, qualified professionals, and sustained investment. Librarians occupy defined positions within organisational structures, participate in institutional planning, and exercise professional responsibility in areas related to information management and user services. As academic institutions expand and evolve, library services generally develop alongside them. This institutional continuity provides an important point of comparison for understanding how libraries are planned and managed within India's development sector.

LIBRARIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT SECTOR: EXPANSION WITHOUT INFRASTRUCTURE

Libraries established and supported by NGOs and philanthropic organisations have made an important contribution to expanding access to books and reading opportunities across India, particularly in areas where public library services are either weak or non-existent. Through community libraries, school library corners, mobile libraries, and reading programmes, these organisations have created spaces where children and adults can engage with books beyond the limits of textbooks and examination-oriented learning. In many rural and underserved urban communities, such initiatives provide the first meaningful opportunity to experience reading as a source of curiosity, enjoyment, and lifelong learning.

The scale of this work is evident in several well-known initiatives. The Parag Initiative of the Tata Trusts, launched in 2006, has played a significant role in strengthening children's literature in Indian languages while supporting school and community libraries that encourage reading for pleasure rather than memorisation. Its Library Educators' Course has trained librarians, teachers, and education practitioners across different states. In Rajasthan, for example, more than three thousand government schoolteachers have received library training through a programme initiated by Parag. In Uttarakhand, the initiative works with the Central Himalayan Rural Action Group (CHIRAG) to support school library corners, where community educators known as *Bal Shikshaks* conduct structured library sessions as part of the daily school routine.

A different but equally significant example is Bookworm Trust, established in Goa in 2005. The organisation has developed children's libraries and activity centres across the state while supporting school libraries through its *Libraries in Schools* programme. It has also expanded its outreach through mobile library services and, more recently, through the *Libraries in Homes* initiative designed for children with special needs. According to the organisation's published reports, its programmes reach tens of thousands of children and involve hundreds of schools, teachers, and community educators across several states each year.

These initiatives have addressed longstanding gaps in access to books and reading opportunities. They have brought quality reading material into government schools, rural communities, and resource-constrained urban neighbourhoods, creating environments where children can read voluntarily, strengthen language skills, and develop the habit of independent learning. Their contribution to promoting reading culture is both visible and significant.

At the same time, a closer look at these initiatives reveals a recurring structural concern. While considerable effort is invested in establishing library spaces and reading programmes, comparatively less attention is given to building the

institutional systems required to sustain them over the long term. Funding is often linked to specific projects and donor cycles rather than recurring institutional support. Dedicated library positions are limited, and professional qualifications in library and information science are frequently regarded as desirable rather than essential. As a result, responsibilities that would normally be distributed across several professional roles are often concentrated in the hands of a single staff member. Procurement, cataloguing, circulation, reporting, community outreach, training, and programme documentation may all become the responsibility of one individual, usually working on a contractual basis with limited decision-making authority within the organisation.

Even organisations that have invested seriously in developing library services acknowledge the challenges of sustaining them financially. One widely documented rural education initiative in Uttarakhand, for example, notes that both its model school and its wider outreach programme continue to depend largely on philanthropic support rather than assured institutional or public funding. Such examples illustrate that the issue is not a lack of commitment on the part of individual organisations but the absence of stable institutional arrangements that can support library services beyond the duration of a funded project.

Consequently, libraries in the development sector often occupy an uncertain organisational position. They are highlighted in project reports, donor presentations, and field visits as visible indicators of programme success, yet they frequently remain absent from long-term staffing plans, organisational budgets, and strategic decision-making. The result is a paradox: libraries are expected to deliver sustained educational outcomes without being supported as enduring institutions in their own right.

PROFESSIONAL ERASURE AND THE LOSS OF AUTHORITY

A recurring yet insufficiently discussed issue in NGO-supported library initiatives is the gradual disappearance of the librarian as a recognised professional role. In many organisations, designations that once identified library professionals are replaced by broader titles such as *coordinator*, *facilitator*, or *programme associate*. Although these changes are often intended to reflect multidisciplinary responsibilities or flatter organisational structures, they can have unintended consequences. Professional titles are not merely administrative labels; they acknowledge specialised knowledge, define responsibilities, and confer institutional legitimacy. When librarianship is absorbed into generic programme roles, the professional nature of library work becomes less visible, both within the organisation and to external stakeholders such as funding agencies, government departments, and partner institutions.

The implications extend well beyond terminology. In many organisations, library professionals have limited involvement in decisions concerning curriculum integration, digital library initiatives, technology adoption, or programme planning. Decisions relating to book selection, library automation, collection management, or monitoring frameworks are often taken at programme or managerial levels, while the responsibility for implementation rests with the library staff. This reflects an implicit assumption that library work is largely administrative or operational, rather than a specialised area that contributes to educational planning and institutional development.

In practice, however, many decisions that appear routine are central to the quality and effectiveness of library services. The way collections are classified determines how easily users can discover and access information. Decisions about book selection influence the diversity of ideas, languages, and perspectives available to readers. Similarly, consistent cataloguing and circulation practices help build confidence in the library and encourage regular use. When these systems are weak or poorly maintained, the consequences extend beyond operational inefficiency. They affect user experience, reduce confidence in library services, and gradually weaken the place of reading within the institution.

Employment practices further reinforce this situation. Library staff in many development projects are appointed on short-term or project-based contracts, making it difficult to retain institutional knowledge or develop systems over time. Frequent staff turnover often means that cataloguing practices, outreach activities, and collection management processes have to be rebuilt repeatedly instead of being refined through experience. Academic libraries, despite facing their own administrative constraints, generally benefit from greater continuity in staffing and organisational support. This allows institutional systems to evolve gradually rather than begin afresh whenever personnel or funding changes.

The result is a persistent contradiction. Many organisations in the development sector advocate sustainability, institutional strengthening, and capacity building as guiding principles of their programmes. Yet these same principles are not always reflected in the way their own libraries are organised and supported. Libraries are expected to contribute to long-term educational change, but the professional roles and institutional structures required to sustain that contribution often receive limited attention.

WHEN LIBRARIES BECOME SYMBOLS INSTEAD OF INSTITUTIONS

In many development initiatives, libraries are valued more for what they represent than for how they function. The presence of a room with bookshelves, reading tables, and neatly arranged books is often taken as visible evidence of educational progress. As a result, programme achievements are commonly reported through indicators that are easy to document, such as the number of books distributed, libraries established, reading corners created, or beneficiaries reached. While these measures are useful, they reveal little about whether the library is actually functioning as an effective learning resource.

Far less attention is paid to aspects that determine the long-term quality of library services. Questions such as whether collections are organised systematically, whether books match the reading abilities and interests of users, whether catalogues and circulation systems are maintained properly, or whether library resources are integrated into classroom teaching often remain outside routine monitoring and evaluation. These dimensions are less visible in project reports, yet they are central to the educational value of a library.

The consequences of overlooking these institutional processes become evident over time. Automation software introduced through project funding may remain only partially used because staff have neither the time nor the specialised training to maintain it. Catalogues remain incomplete, donated books accumulate without any clear collection development policy, and library spaces gradually become repositories of books rather than centres of

active reading and learning. Although the size of the collection may continue to increase, actual use often declines because the systems needed to make those resources accessible and relevant are weak.

A different picture emerges where libraries are supported by qualified professionals and embedded within stable institutional structures. In such settings, collections are developed with reference to the curriculum as well as the reading interests and abilities of the community. Teachers are encouraged to use library resources throughout the teaching-learning process rather than restricting them to occasional library periods. Library services also evolve over time in response to changing educational needs and user feedback. The contrast between these two situations is not primarily a question of commitment or intent. Most organisations establish libraries with genuine educational objectives. The more significant difference lies in the institutional arrangements that support those objectives. Where professional expertise, organisational continuity, and clear systems are in place, libraries are far more likely to remain active, relevant, and sustainable.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The issues discussed in this paper extend well beyond the question of professional recognition for librarians, important though that recognition is. They have direct implications for the quality and sustainability of educational outcomes. Unlike many educational interventions that are designed around fixed project periods, libraries derive their value through continuity. Their impact develops gradually as collections grow, systems become more reliable, and users build confidence in accessing information independently. A child who learns to use a library regularly acquires habits of inquiry, independent reading, and self-directed learning that extend beyond formal schooling. Similarly, when teachers are encouraged to integrate library resources into classroom teaching, the influence of the library is no longer confined to a separate library period but becomes part of everyday learning. Communities, too, develop a sense of ownership only when library services remain available and dependable over time. Such relationships cannot be established through short-term interventions alone.

The importance of sustained access to reading is reflected in recent national evidence on foundational literacy. The *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024*, conducted by Pratham across nearly 18,000 villages and covering approximately 6.5 lakh children, reported the highest reading levels among Standard III students in government schools since the survey began. The proportion of children able to read a Standard II-level text increased from 16.3 per cent in 2022 to 23.4 per cent in 2024. The picture, however, was less consistent among older students. Reading levels in Standard VIII, which had declined from 69 per cent in 2018 to 66.2 per cent in 2022, recovered only marginally to 67.5 per cent in 2024, with considerable variation across states. States that had invested more systematically in foundational literacy and numeracy programmes generally recorded stronger improvements than those where such efforts had been less sustained.

These findings cannot, of course, be attributed to library services alone. Teacher preparation, curriculum reforms, classroom practices, and national initiatives such as NIPUN Bharat have all contributed to improvements in learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the findings reinforce a broader point made throughout this paper. Regular exposure to reading beyond prescribed textbooks remains uneven across the country, and libraries are among the few institutions capable of providing such opportunities consistently. Their contribution is cumulative and long-term. Without stable institutional support, the gains achieved through reading initiatives are difficult to sustain.

India's development sector has invested substantially in literacy programmes, teacher education, and school improvement over the past two decades, and libraries have often formed part of these efforts. Yet they are seldom accorded the same institutional importance as teacher education systems, curriculum development, or assessment reforms. Too often, libraries continue to be viewed as visible project outputs rather than as educational institutions that require long-term investment, professional leadership, and organisational continuity. That distinction has important consequences, not only for libraries themselves but also for the broader goals of literacy, equitable learning, and educational development.

FROM INTERVENTION TO INSTITUTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The discussion throughout this paper leads to a simple but important conclusion: libraries within India's development sector need to be recognised as institutions rather than viewed as short-term interventions. Unlike projects, institutions are built over time. They depend on continuity in funding, stable organisational structures, clearly defined policies, qualified professionals, and systems that can be strengthened and sustained over many years. It is this continuity that enables libraries to build institutional memory, earn the confidence of their users, and remain relevant long after individual projects have ended.

Recognising libraries as institutional infrastructure also has practical implications for organisations working in education and community development. To begin with, libraries should be incorporated into educational planning from the outset rather than treated as a separate programme component. This requires library professionals to participate in discussions on curriculum design, teacher capacity building, reading initiatives, and digital learning, instead of being brought into the process only after key decisions have already been made. Their professional knowledge is valuable not only in managing collections but also in shaping how library resources contribute to teaching and learning.

Long-term financial planning is equally important. While many projects provide initial support for books, furniture, or library spaces, sustained library services require recurring investment in collection development, technology, maintenance, and professional development. The experience of initiatives such as the Parag Initiative's Library Educators' Course, which has continued across several states for more than a decade, and Bookworm Trust's sustained work in Goa over nearly two decades, demonstrates that continuity is possible when libraries are recognised as a core area of educational work rather than as a temporary project activity.

A similar shift is needed in the way library programmes are evaluated. Success cannot be judged solely by counting the number of books distributed, libraries established, or reading spaces inaugurated. Such indicators provide useful information, but they say little about whether library services are actually being used or whether they are contributing to improved learning. Evaluation frameworks should therefore pay greater attention to indicators such as circulation patterns, the quality of cataloguing and collection management, integration of library resources into classroom practice, user engagement, and the sustainability of reading habits over time. This would bring library assessment closer to the approach adopted in national studies such as ASER, which increasingly examine learning outcomes over successive years rather than relying on a single round of measurement.

Professional recognition is another area that deserves greater attention. The designation of a qualified librarian, supported by clearly defined responsibilities and decision-making authority, represents more than an administrative arrangement. It signals an organisational commitment to treating the library as a specialised educational service. By contrast, assigning library responsibilities as an additional task to general programme staff often limits both accountability and the quality of library management.

These recommendations do not require the development sector to adopt an entirely new way of thinking. Concepts such as sustainability, institutional strengthening, and capacity building already occupy a central place in development practice across India. Extending these principles to libraries is therefore a natural progression rather than a departure from existing priorities. If libraries are expected to contribute meaningfully to literacy, education, and community learning, they must be supported with the same seriousness and long-term commitment that organisations already apply to other educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

Libraries are never just collections of books or spaces set aside for reading. They reflect institutional choices about how knowledge is organised, preserved, and made accessible to different communities. When libraries are viewed primarily as project deliverables, their contribution is often limited to the duration of a funding cycle. When they are recognised as institutions, however, they become capable of supporting sustained learning, strengthening reading cultures, and expanding equitable access to knowledge over the long term.

The examples discussed in this paper illustrate that such an institutional approach is neither unrealistic nor unprecedented. The Parag Initiative's sustained investment in library educator training across several states, CHIRAG's integration of community-based library practices within schools in Uttarakhand, and Bookworm Trust's long-standing work in Goa all demonstrate that libraries can be developed through sustained professional engagement rather than short-term project implementation. These initiatives show that building enduring library systems is achievable. The challenge lies in ensuring that such approaches become part of mainstream development practice instead of remaining isolated examples.

There is now little disagreement that libraries have an important role to play in improving literacy, supporting education, and creating opportunities for lifelong learning. Recent national evidence on reading outcomes reinforces this understanding, while also highlighting the need for sustained engagement rather than one-time interventions. The more pressing question is whether development organisations, funding agencies, and policymakers are prepared to support libraries in ways that extend beyond establishing physical spaces and distributing books. Doing so requires long-term investment in professional expertise, organisational systems, and institutional continuity.

Ultimately, strengthening libraries is not simply about expanding access to books. It is about recognising libraries as enduring educational institutions that require the same level of planning, professional support, and policy attention that is routinely extended to other components of the education system. Only when this shift takes place will libraries be able to realise their full potential in advancing literacy, learning, and knowledge equity in India.

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