Library Lives: Everyday Reading and Cultural Change in Delhi

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Abstract: From nineteenth-century urban institutions to post-1951 metropolitan systems and contemporary community-led and informal study spaces, Delhi's library landscape offers a distinctive lens onto everyday reading as a practice shaped by urbanization, migration, pedagogy, and politics. The paper addresses four questions: how Delhi's libraries evolved from elite and associational collections to postcolonial public systems; how institutional, community, specialized, and informal spaces facilitate social interaction and everyday literary engagement; how libraries figure as contested civic sites in moments of socio-political crisis; and how habitual reading practices reflect and reshape cultural change in a multilingual, migrant-heavy metropolis. By synthesizing historical accounts, policy reports, institutional surveys, and cultural analyses, I argue that public and *para*-public libraries in Delhi are dynamic infrastructures of access, sociality, and meaning-making, central to democratizing knowledge and sustaining dialogic urban publics.

Keywords: postcolonial city, urban modernity, public policy, leisure and learning, spatiality

Introduction

Libraries in Delhi have long mediated the relationship between everyday reading and urban change, converting textual circulation into shared practices that sustain civic literacy, cross-linguistic exchange, and social mobility. The city's institutions—ranging from nineteenth-century associational collections to a UNESCO-assisted metropolitan public system inaugurated in 1951—translated postcolonial ambitions for adult education and inclusion into spaces where newspapers, magazines, fiction, and exam-oriented texts structured daily routines and sociable literacies. Such spaces have repeatedly been reconfigured by planning regimes, library legislation debates, municipal infrastructures, and national policy imaginaries seeking to align public libraries with democratizing development, multilingual collections, and social education.

This study analyses Delhi's libraries through four interlinked research questions: historical evolution, socio-spatial ecologies and roles, contestation and civic symbolism, and everyday reading as cultural practice. The approach aligns institutional histories, official compendia, and cultural scholarship on South Asian libraries to trace how reading, especially by non-professional, 'lay' publics, becomes a lived practice at the intersection of accessibility, language, time, and place. I argue that the libraries and reading rooms in Delhi—whether municipal, autonomous, denominational, philanthropic, or community-run—operate as dynamic mediators of urban belonging and change, with their everyday uses revealing as much about metropolitan life as about the texts on their shelves.

What Counts as a Library in Delhi?

What counts as a library in Delhi? The question appears deceptively straightforward, but it unsettles any simple equation between

libraries and buildings, or between collections and access. To ask it is to inquire into the infrastructures of attention, care, and civic belonging that shape how reading becomes possible in a city marked by both density and dispossession. In Delhi, a library is less a discrete institution than a distributed public ethos—an assemblage of proximate, multilingual, and socially differentiated spaces that together sustain reading as a civic capacity.

This distributed ecology extends from municipal anchors and university libraries to smaller, often precarious formations: community reading rooms, licensed 'study libraries', pavement book exchanges, mobile vans, and deposit stations. What binds these sites together is not their architecture but their animating ethic. Delhi yields an aspiration toward equitable access, accompanied with the belief that the right to read forms part of the right to the city (Lefebvre 1996; Harvey 2008). Defined this way, the library is both a place and a practice, offering the infrastructural preconditions of attention, such as seat, light, safety, air. The collections reflect Delhi's multilingual literary landscape: Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, English, along with the genres the city's population *actually* read: exam guides, devotional literature, serial fiction, and periodicals.

Foregrounding these conditions reframes 'access' as a problem of infrastructural citizenship rather than mere information delivery (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018). Reading, in this sense, is not simply a cognitive act but a socio-material one. It depends on the availability of time, light, safety, and proximity, all of which are unevenly distributed across Delhi's urban fabric (Star 1999; Simone 2004). The library thus emerges as a node within what anthropologists of infrastructure call

the social life of maintenance—those mundane, iterative labours that make collective life sustainable (Denis and Pontille 2015). A functioning library, however modest, enables citizens to inhabit the city as readers without purchasing quiet or security. It offers the mundane affordances that stabilize attention such as barrier-free entry, functioning toilets, shaded benches, steady replenishment of newspapers; and in doing so turns attention itself into a civic practice.

This infrastructural reading of the library brings into view a politics of inclusion embedded in design. Services for incarcerated or differently abled readers, Braille and large-print collections, women-only time blocks, and mobile or deposit libraries that reach distant colonies—all instantiate a principle of access by architecture, not by exception. The question is not simply whether Delhi possesses enough libraries, but whether its infrastructures of reading recognize the plural and uneven temporalities of its publics—shift work, commuting, care routines, exam preparation.

The city's proliferating 'quiet study rooms' are symptomatic of both demand and deprivation. These privately operated, fee-based spaces —marketed to aspirants and students preparing for competitive exams—have become indispensable in a metropolis where neither homes nor streets easily sustain concentration. Their emergence indexes what might be called the 'privatization of quiet', an infrastructural inequality in which safety, light, and time are commodified. If such spaces are now the *de facto* reading rooms for a generation, the challenge for policy is go beyond the commercial framework and integrate libraries into a civic framework that

acknowledges the need for licensed, fee-capped libraries held to standards of inclusivity and safety.

Governance and modernization belong within this expanded conception of the library, but as means rather than ends. Transparent oversight, predictable funding, professional training, interoperable catalogues, and statutory deposit workflows can widen discovery and institutional trust. Yet modernization must remain attentive to what Brian Larkin calls 'the poetics of infrastructure': the sensory and affective registers through which publics experience the state (Larkin 2013). Digitization, for instance, cannot displace the print routines and tactile sociabilities that anchor lay reading. Instead, a hybrid design—digital for discovery, print for use—would better align technological rationality with urban experience.

At the other end of the spectrum, Delhi's community libraries remind us of reading as an act of urban commoning (Linebaugh 2008; Foster and Iaione 2016). These initiatives transform the book into a shared resource rather than a private commodity, sustaining the circulation of texts in times of strain—pandemic closures, displacement, or infrastructural neglect. They exemplify the civic impulse to 'common' the book, but their precarity also exposes the limits of volunteerism as public policy. They should supplement, not substitute for, institutional provision. The ethical challenge is to build state infrastructures robust enough to recognize and cooperate with such commons rather than rely upon them as compensations for austerity.

When seen as civic infrastructure, the library becomes a mesh rather than a monument. It is a safety-first, policy-aligned network through

which readers move without having to buy access to light or security. Its measure lies not in grandeur but in regularity: the persistence of benches, fans, and newspapers that make reading possible across languages and life stages. To invest in these mundane conditions is to practice informational justice: the equitable distribution of the material and social means of attention (Jaeger and Burnett 2010).

Delhi's geography of reading remains deeply uneven. The north–south corridor of university and research libraries is relatively dense, while peripheral colonies, resettlement areas, and industrial belts remain under-served. The capital's literary life—its festivals, book launches, and book bazaars—rests uneasily on this infrastructural asymmetry: a dense circulation of books but a thin network of public reading spaces. For many, especially women and students in shared housing, the public library is not a luxury but a precondition for intellectual life. To ask what counts as a library is, therefore, to ask how the city allocates quiet, who is allowed to linger, and what forms of study it deems legitimate.

From this perspective, the library is not merely a cultural amenity but a democratic institution: one of the few spaces that address the citizen as reader rather than consumer or voter. Its political promise lies in its ordinariness—the fact that it functions without spectacle, sustaining habits of collective thought through routine. A library that opens on time, maintains light and shade, and replenishes its newspapers performs a civic miracle more enduring than many proclamations of "smart city" modernity.

To strengthen Delhi's libraries is, then, to strengthen the city's capacity for collective reflection. The task is at once infrastructural and imaginative: to secure the material conditions that make reading possible, and to align technological modernization with the social realities of neighbourhood life. The right to read cannot be asserted by rhetoric alone; it must be enacted through routine. A city's reading life is ultimately measured not by its flagship institutions but by the quiet persistence of its smallest ones—the benches that stay filled, the fans that keep turning, and the multilingual publics that, day after day, keep returning.

Historical evolution

Delhi's emergence on what might be called the "library map" of modern South Asia began in the late nineteenth century, when associational and municipal forms of civic literacy began to take institutional shape. The Delhi Institute Library (c. 1862), housed within the Lawrence Institute (now the Town Hall at Chandni Chowk), was among the earliest formal repositories. It aggregated earlier associational collections into a civic-facing space that expressed both the pedagogical and urban aspirations of a newly reconstituted colonial capital (Vashishth 2009; Borah, Sonowal, and Gogoi 2024). This associational nucleus was formally inaugurated as the Delhi Public Library in 1902 (a municipal body distinct from the post-1951 institution of the same name), which moved from the Lawrence Institute to Kaccha Bagh with minimal staff and meagre funds, soon facing the recurrent constraints that defined early public reading rooms: crowding, shortages of periodicals, and irregular municipal financing (Vashishth 2009).

The Hardinge Municipal Public Library, later renamed the Hardayal Municipal Library, emerged directly from this lineage in the aftermath of the 23 December 1912 bomb attack on Viceroy Hardinge. A civic subscription of roughly ₹70,000, led by Rai Bahadur Shiv Prasad and supported by donors including the Maharaja of Kashmir, financed a dedicated building by 1916 (Vashishth 2009). This act of philanthropy exemplified what scholars of the colonial city have called vernacular civic modernity: the use of associational culture, print, and philanthropy to create semi-public infrastructures of reading and debate within a constrained imperial framework (Borah, Sonowal, and Gogoi 2024; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Renamed for Lala Hardayal after Independence, the library became Delhi's enduring municipal anchor, combining heritage stewardship, such as its early manuscripts and gazetteers, along with everyday services such as periodical reading rooms, multilingual circulation, and children's sections, emblematic of the hybrid civic infrastructures through which philanthropy, municipality, and citizen initiative sustained public access amid fiscal fluctuation (Vashishth 2009).

These Delhi trajectories mirrored wider Indian patterns in which municipal, princely, and associational actors built hybrid, subscription-heavy infrastructures of literary access long before the emergence of comprehensive public systems (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003; Borah, Sonowal, and Gogoi 2024). From the mid-nineteenth century onward, library and reading-room movements linked literacy and associational life to an expanding public sphere of periodicals, vernacular presses, and voluntary societies that fostered new publics (Borah, Sonowal, and Gogoi 2024).

A decisive institutional shift occurred in 1951 with the inauguration of the Delhi Public Library (DPL)—a UNESCO-assisted pilot project conceived to demonstrate inclusive, charge-free public library service "adapted to Indian conditions" (Gardner 1955). The project embodied post-Independence developmental optimism, linking adult education and mass literacy with democratic access at metropolitan scale. Inclusion was operationalized through free membership (with refundable deposits where guarantors were unavailable) and an explicitly networked design: a Central Library opposite Old Delhi Railway Station, a Zonal Library at Sarojini Nagar, numerous branches, sub-branches, resettlement-colony libraries, deposit stations in partnership with Resident Welfare Associations, and mobile library vans reaching underserved areas. Specialized units such as a Braille library and a prisoners' library embedded equity into organizational design, while children's corners and multilingual holdings materialized the new republic's pedagogical and linguistic pluralism (Gardner 1955; Vashishth 2009).

From the mid-1950s to the 1990s, national planning documents repeatedly identified libraries as key democratic infrastructures. The Advisory Committee for Libraries (1957) proposed a four-tier system —state, central, district, and block—anchored by training, children's services, and social education; the Fourth Plan Working Group (1966–71) urged state directorates and investment in metropolitan systems modelled on DPL; the Seventh Plan Working Group on Library Services and Informatics (1985–90) linked development to resource sharing and early automation; and the National Policy on Library and Information System (1986) and Empowered Committee Action Plan (1988) called for legislation, standardized governance, and training pipelines (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Despite these ambitions, there has been chronic under-investment: per-capita library expenditure remained at only a few paise, legislation was patchy, and urban–rural distribution highly uneven (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). Yet Delhi's DPL stood out as a metropolitan model precisely because it operationalized equity through infrastructure: deposit stations decentralized access; mobile vans mapped reading services onto working-class colonies; and specialized units localized inclusion. From the 1990s onward, DPL entered a phase of technical modernization—adopting CDS/ISIS cataloguing under the Delivery of Books Act, reporting language-wise acquisitions, and later implementing KOHA-based workflows and DELNET resource sharing—while everyday use remained resolutely print-centric and periodical-heavy (Vashishth 2009).

Delhi's public library system thus embodies a layered institutional arc: nineteenth-century associational heritage, mid-twentieth-century UNESCO modernism, and late-twentieth-century policy drives toward equity, federation, and automation. The resulting ecology is both infrastructural and civic: benches, hours, and cooling arrangements are as crucial as catalogues and metadata. Public reading in Delhi remains an ordinary urban practice—a set of routines through which multilingual publics claim attention, proximity, and safety as civic rights—so that the library's historical evolution charts not only the expansion of literacy, but the slow democratization of informational citizenship in the Indian metropolis (Vashishth 2009; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Institutional and specialized anchors

Hardayal Municipal Public Library (HMPL, 1862) is the city's oldest continuously operating public library and a paradigmatic municipal anchor, with a reported stock of roughly 170,000 volumes spanning Hindi and Sanskrit (about 84,000), English (about 64,000), and Urdu–Arabic–Persian and allied titles (about 21,000), alongside 56 journals and 30 newspapers subscribed for everyday readers across Old Delhi's dense wards (Vashishth 2009). Its governance by an 11 member Managing Committee chaired by the municipal mayor formalizes a civic compact—policy setting, membership rules, and staff appointments—that couples heritage stewardship (including a rare collection of 7,543 volumes) with quotidian access through branch reading rooms, even as periodic funding constraints have limited acquisitions and a 2010 exhibition fire destroyed 91 rare documents (Vashishth 2009). The institutional infrastructure emphasizes reading room culture more than circulation—newspapers are available 358 days a year from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., with lending concentrated at the main site and two branches—while cataloguing combines an indigenous in-house classification (retained for legacy collections) with contemporary SOUL 2.0 cataloguing for reclassified rare books, reflecting an incremental modernization strategy responsive to local users and staff capacities (Vashishth 2009).

By contrast, Delhi Public Library (DPL, 1951) exemplifies metropolitan scale and specialization as a UNESCO assisted model built around a central library (Old Delhi Railway Station), a zonal library (Sarojini Nagar), multiple branches and subbranches, resettlement colony units, 22 deposit stations in collaboration with resident associations, and 70 mobile service points that spatialize access across the city's neighbourhoods (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011). DPL's social

mission translates into membership rules designed to minimize exclusion—free enrolment with a refundable security when guarantors are unavailable—and programming that makes reading a collective civic practice, including social education groups (drama, music, study circles) and competitions for adult, child, and visually impaired readers (Sohail and Alvi 2011). System metrics index the breadth of everyday readership: in one reporting year the network served 73,467 members who borrowed 1,169,734 books (an average 3,378 issues per day), consulted 20,659 reference items on site, and recorded 244,499 reading room attendances—figures that mirror the city's periodical heavy, exam oriented, and family reading patterns observed in user studies (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011). Specialized services embed equity in routine operations: the Braille Library held 15,699 books and issued 16,421 volumes to 505 blind members, while prisoner services reached 570 registered readers in Tihar Jail with 15,839 issues, and seven "DVD corners" in select branches extended audiovisual access without displacing demand for print (Vashishth 2009). On the technical side, DPL's workflows moved from CDS/ISIS database creation under the Delivery of Books Act (with tens of thousands of English and Hindi records) toward KOHA adoption and networked resource sharing (e.g., DELNET), while continuing to report language-wise receipts under statutory deposit and depository status for certain international publications—an evolution that augments discovery without eroding the primacy of print for lay publics (Vashishth 2009).

Delhi's specialized and denominational repositories deepen this ecology by anchoring linguistic, religious, and philosophical traditions within everyday reading routines, while adopting modest automation where feasible. Fatehpuri Masjid Library (1926), managed

by the Delhi Waqf Board, maintains a roughly 15,000 volume collection across Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Hindi, and English with a core in Islamic studies, subscriptions to serials and newspapers, and a set of Mughal period manuscripts (about ten), offering consultation, reference, and photocopy services within a manually operated, Colon classified system and limited seating (Vashishth 2009). Ramakrishna Mission Library (1956) couples a 50,000 volume general collection and 150 periodicals with full automation (VLIS), barcode enabled circulation, OPAC access, and separate seating for men and women, supported by a small professional and volunteer staff that integrates devotional affiliation with modern librarianship (Vashishth 2009). The Raghumal Vedic Public Library (1915) adds a focused Sanskritic and Vedic collection (30,000+ volumes), while the Punjabi Academy's composite libraries seed Punjabi language access across districts (main library collection about 22,000; a 44 unit branch footprint; and staff and budget lines dedicated to periodicals and acquisitions), all of which sustain local reading through open shelf browsing, basic consultation, and paper registers in the absence of full automation (Vashishth 2009). Civic institutions like the NDMC Central Library (1984) illustrate a compact municipal model—about 13,000 volumes, 40 periodicals, 18 newspapers, OPAC and internet services, and a 45–50 seat reading room—balancing consultation with limited circulation across eight small branches, including a dedicated children's and a sports library (Vashishth 2009).

Children's libraries translate policy commitments into everyday practices by designing space, curation, and programming around graded reading and sociable learning. National Bal Bhawan's library (1956) serves ages 5–16 with roughly 35,000 volumes, open shelf access, and activities such as storytelling sessions, poem recitations

(*kavi goshti*), creative writing, and author interactions, embedding reading within playful and performative formats that suit school timetables and parental logistics (Vashishth 2009). Dr. B. C. Roy Children's Reading Room and Library (1964), funded by the Children's Book Trust, organizes its holdings by age bands (A: 5–8, B: 9–12, C: 13–18), issues photo IDs for child members, and structures differentiated borrowing privileges for local and distant readers, thereby translating an educational mission into disciplined routines that children and guardians can sustain across terms and holidays (Vashishth 2009).

Across this spectrum, a common denominator is routinized reliance on periodicals, newspapers, and practical literature as social scaffolds for reading, with fiction, devotional texts, and reference layered atop this daily bedrock, especially in institutions whose reading rooms are open and well ventilated, with long hours matched to work and school rhythms (Vashishth 2009). DPL user studies reinforce this profile: magazines and newspapers dominate preferences, English is widely chosen alongside Hindi and Urdu, and staff-mediated navigation supplements browsing, while time scarcity and distance are the principal obstacles for working readers—findings that explain the enduring centrality of reading room benches, periodical racks, and proximate neighbourhood nodes (e.g., deposit stations and branches) in driving habit formation (Sohail and Alvi 2011). Financial and governance arrangements further shape these anchors' trajectories—HMPL blending municipal grants, subscriptions, and donations under a committee structure, and DPL relying on plan and non-plan grants that historically skewed toward establishment costs over books—so that modernization (OPACs, cataloguing backlogs, digitization pilots) must be paced against steady investments in core affordances (hours, climate, seating, multilingual replenishment) that

make everyday reading possible (Vashishth 2009; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Community and informal ecologies

Community library initiatives in Delhi and North India have articulated the right to read as a civic entitlement by operationalizing free access, open membership, and multilingual curation through neighbourhood-scale spaces that welcome first-generation readers and lay publics otherwise excluded by fees, distance, or institutional gatekeeping (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Functioning as *para*-public infrastructures, these libraries bridge fiscal and capacity gaps in the state system by mobilizing volunteers, forging local partnerships, and embedding reading within pedagogic and civic programming—health information sessions, rights literacy discussions, reading circles, and homework support—that translate texts into shared knowledge practices (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). Their ethos aligns with the longer genealogy of library movements that linked reading to democratic pedagogy, while their formats and hours are adapted to the constraints of dense urban peripheries where formal branches are sparse or operate with limited seats and schedules (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Within Delhi's mixed ecology, community models often complement the metropolitan network's own outreach instruments—most notably the deposit station scheme through resident welfare associations and the mobile library service—which decentralize collections and extend lending into housing clusters that lack proximate branches (Vashishth 2009). Yet community libraries differ in governance and social programming, taking on roles that

institutional units cannot always prioritize, such as multilingual read-alouds for early readers, women only hours, and targeted collections for migrant workers and first-time test takers, thereby making access both material and culturally legible (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). In moments of civic mobilization or infrastructural stress, these spaces also act as resilience nodes—curating counter-disinformation resources, hosting reading-for-rights sessions, and sustaining slow reading practices that anchor deliberation in environments otherwise optimized for speed (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020).

Alongside community projects, informal 'commercial libraries' and exam reading rooms—typically small, privately run, open late into the night, and located near clusters of paying guest accommodations—have become vital infrastructures for longform study among migrant students and working youth. Ethnographic and cultural accounts describe these rooms as hybrid spaces where desk time coexists with sociability, tip sharing about exams and applications, and tacit mentoring that collectively disciplines time under precarious temporalities of shift work, circular migration, and cramped rental housing (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Their collections are lean and pragmatic—newspapers for current affairs, guidebooks and previous year papers, basic reference handbooks, and English learning materials—chosen for high throughput and predictable utility, while the true value proposition is stable attention supported by climate control, reliable seating, and peer presence.

In Delhi's peripheries and dense rental markets, these informal rooms offer the 'infrastructure of attention' that public branches cannot always supply at scale or hours, which is why they complement rather than displace institutional libraries and community sites (Sohail and

Alvi 2011). System level data and user studies from the metropolitan network—periodical-heavy reading, exam-oriented demand, and strong on-premise consultation in reading rooms—help explain this complementarity, as commercial rooms absorb late-hour and high-duration study while branches and deposit stations meet daytime and family reading needs, including children's sections and social education groups (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011). In effect, everyday reading is situated at the confluence of affordability, proximity, safety, cooling, and peer ecologies, with readers moving fluidly among para-public, institutional, and private options across a single day or week (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020).

These community and informal forms also widen what counts as a 'library', making publics visible beyond walls and reinforcing that the library is as much a social relation as a building—a point sharpened in recent years by protest and pavement libraries that materialize constitutional texts, rights manuals, and reading circles in the open, transforming sidewalks into temporary reading rooms and situating books at the centre of democratic claims-making (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). The social imagination of the library in Delhi thus spans municipal benches, school-room floor mats, storefront desks, and pavement circles, each translating textual access into overlapping publics and cultivating habits of attention that endure beyond any single site (Vashishth 2009).

For policy and planning, these ecologies underscore the need to formally recognize para-public actors as partners—through microgrants, donated surplus, and training—and to coordinate hours, language replenishment, and outreach with metropolitan nodes so that readers encounter a continuous, multilingual service

day across institutional and community spaces (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). National frameworks have long urged outreach, mobile service, children's sections, and disability inclusion; extending those logics to community and informal partners can stabilize the mundane affordances that sustain habitual reading—seating, cooling, periodicals, safety—while the metropolitan system continues to modernize discovery and sharing (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). In doing so, Delhi can consolidate a plural library field in which institutional, community, and informal sites coproduce everyday reading as both instrumental and identity-forming practice for a city on the move (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Libraries as contested civic spaces

In South Asia, libraries have never been merely neutral storehouses but historically situated institutions where colonial depositories, associational reading rooms, and postcolonial language politics bound textual sovereignty to social inclusion and exclusion, rendering the library a place where authority, access, and memory are negotiated in real time (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). That long genealogy helps explain why library damage, closures, or hollowing out trigger outsized public reactions: beyond bureaucratic failure, these events are read as breaches in a civic compact that promises lay participation in the textual commons and the everyday practice of public reason (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

In Delhi, the metropolitan network makes this promise legible through the spatial grammar of its design—free or near-zero-barrier membership, open reading rooms at branches and sub-branches, deposit stations embedded in residential associations, and mobile

routes that stitch service into peripheral colonies—materializing inclusion at the level of benches, periodical racks, children's corners, and multilingual shelves (Vashishth 2009). Yet this same architecture is vulnerable both to the slow time of neglect—budget compression, hiring lags, acquisitions stagnation that national reports have repeatedly flagged—and to acute disruptions that ricochet through campuses and civic squares, transforming libraries and adjacent pavements into signifiers of intellectual autonomy and communal solidarity amid polarized politics (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Multilinguality and gendered access are the fault lines along which this promise is either realized or deferred: institutional records point to multilingual holdings and designated services for children and visually impaired readers, but user studies show male-dominant daily usage, time poverty among working patrons, and distance as a binding constraint, underscoring that formal inclusion requires programmatic redesign—women-only hours, neighbourhood-timed deposit stations, and late-evening reading rooms—to translate nominal rights into actual reading capability (Sohail and Alvi 2011; Vashishth 2009). When those mundane affordances—hours, cooling, seating, replenishment—are missing, publics encounter "availability without accessibility," which in turn fuels demands for alternative reading spaces and schedules that politicize the temporal and spatial regimes of library life (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Against this backdrop, protest and "pavement" libraries should be understood less as episodic novelties and more as civic techniques that recompose open space into pedagogical commons through curated reading of constitutional primers, rights manuals, and

poetry, sustaining slow attention and dialogic encounter as counter-temporalities to accelerated feeds (Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). In Delhi these sidewalk assemblages echo the network's own extension logic—deposit stations and mobile services—yet carry an insurgent inflection by commoning the book as a shared resource when formal venues feel inaccessible, thereby foregrounding that the library is a practice of constituting publics as much as a building with stacks.

Because the library's promise is infrastructural, its repair must also be infrastructural: modernization agendas—OPACs, KOHA adoption, statutory deposit cataloguing and networking—require braiding with the everyday affordances that keep benches full and habits durable; otherwise discovery improves for the connected while the unconnected lose the very conditions that make lay reading viable (Vashishth 2009; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). National frameworks, from -mid-century committees to informatics-era plans, have consistently paired legislative vision with mandates for outreach, children's services, disability inclusion, training pipelines, and stable financing, but their own surveys catalogue the chronic shortfalls that can hollow out service at the point of use (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Read this way, Delhi's libraries become indices of the city's public reason: when branches hum, deposit stations circulate proximate collections, mobile routes are reliable, and children's sections are lively, the democratic promise is audible in everyday life; when hours shrink, acquisitions stall, or rare holdings suffer, publics assemble their own reading commons as both attachment to and critique of the ideal (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011). Policy responsive to this

contested terrain will meet publics halfway—micro-grants and surplus book flows to community partners, training for para-public staff, coordinated hours and multilingual replenishment across institutional and neighbourhood nodes—so the institutional, para-public, and insurgent library together form a coherent ecology where everyday reading remains a shared civic capacity rather than a scarce privilege (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Everyday reading: habits, media, and language

Information, entertainment, and staying up to date: everyday reading at Delhi Public Library is patterned by practical aims, channelled through magazines and newspapers that fit the cadence of work, study, and commuting, a profile that repeatedly surfaces in user surveys and reading -room counts (Sohail and Alvi 2011). In a small but detailed DPL study, college students and retirees dominate daily use, working patrons cite time scarcity as the principal barrier to regular visits, and periodicals outrank longform books for on-premise reading, underscoring how library time is carved from narrow windows rather than reserved as an open-ended luxury (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Language choices and genre preferences track aspirations and life course roles: English is preferred by large majorities among students and working users (circa 78%), Hindi remains the salient co-language, and Urdu persists in specific nodes, while magazines, newspapers, and exam-oriented materials are the most consulted formats across age cohorts (Sohail and Alvi 2011). Housewives in the same study report both positive attitudes to reading and multi-hour daily engagement despite distance and household logistics, pointing to a gendered distribution of reading time that is not captured by raw

counts of daily visits alone and that depends on library affordances like proximate deposit stations and predictable hours (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Institutional programming makes these habits possible by turning access into routines: reading rooms, periodical racks, children's corners, and social education groups convert individual intention into collective practice, so that borrowing and reference consultation are complemented by on-premise perusal that fits a tea break, a bus layover, or a school run (Vashishth 2009). The metropolitan network's extension services—mobile libraries and deposit stations managed with resident welfare associations—push this pattern into colonies and peripheries, where proximity and predictability matter more than collection depth for sustaining everyday reading (Vashishth 2009).

Media use in this ecology is best understood as hybrid rather than transitional: OPAC and database modernization, Delivery of Books Act cataloguing, and networking improved discovery and sharing, but print circulation and on-site use of periodicals continued to rise at several units, suggesting that digitization supplements rather than displaces print centric practices for lay publics (Vashishth 2009). This hybridity is legible at the bench—readers alternate between newspaper pages, exam guides, and onscreen catalogue checks—but it is anchored by the physical affordances that stabilize attention (seating, cooling, light), which policy plans repeatedly identify as non-negotiable for public inclusion (Government of India 1957; 1990).

Historically, Indian library movements linked everyday reading to civic pedagogy and nationalist awakening by expanding associational

and municipal reading rooms that socialized readers into public debate; contemporary Delhi extends that lineage through multilingual curation, exam pragmatics, and community-led inclusion, producing a repertoire where fiction, devotional texts, guidebooks, and periodicals circulate as tools of self-fashioning and world knowledge (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). In this repertoire, slow, shared, and purpose driven reading practices emerge as techniques of urban survival and aspiration—from retirees' daily newspapers to students' long evening exam sessions—sustained by library infrastructures that remain, despite constraints, among the city's most accessible platforms for thought (Sohail and Alvi 2011; Vashishth 2009).

Survey micropatterns flesh out these claims: working users overwhelmingly cite time scarcity, students lean toward information and exam materials, retirees split evenly between information and entertainment, and English preference edges out Hindi across categories while Urdu persists in specific locales, a distribution that mirrors the multilingual, life- course- structure of Delhi's readerly publics (Sohail and Alvi 2011). Staff mediation appears as "sometimes" rather than "always," and most users read on site for one to three hours per visit, implying that intuitive shelf organization, visible periodical displays, and clear wayfinding can unlock latent demand without imposing reference bottlenecks (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Taken together, these habits reveal that the smallest infrastructural choices—hours tuned to shift patterns, fresh periodicals at the front desk, children's corners with graded materials, social education groups keyed to local calendars—convert policy ideals into durable

reading routines (Vashishth 2009). Planning documents continually register the same lesson at scale: modernization succeeds when it is braided with the mundane affordances that keep benches full, language replenishment steady, and multilingual publics returning, because it is through these quotidian frictions that everyday reading remains a shared civic capacity rather than a private privilege (Government of India 1957; 1990; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Policy frameworks and modernization

Across seven decades of committees, working groups, and policy notes, a remarkably stable problem diagnosis recurs: low per-capita spending, fragmented administration, uneven or absent state legislation, staffing shortfalls, and weak coordination among public, academic, and special libraries, alongside recurring priorities—children's services, disability inclusion, rural/urban outreach, and informatics-led networking (Government of India 1957; 1990). The mid-century Report of the Advisory Committee for Libraries (1957) articulated a four tier architecture (state–central–district–block) with training, social education, and children's services at its core, while later instruments—NAPLIS (1986) and the Empowered Committee Action Plan (1988)—argued for bringing libraries into a coordinated policy ambit via legislation, apex bodies, state directorates, financing norms, and professional pipelines (Government of India 1986; 1988). This line of policy thinking also anticipated the contemporary emphasis on interoperability (cataloguing standards, union catalogues, and resource sharing), and it linked modernization explicitly to outreach, so that digital discovery would be braided with

access at benches and neighbourhood nodes rather than displace them (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

In Delhi, these national frames illuminate both the metro scale design of DPL and the sequence of its upgrades. On the one hand, DPL operationalized inclusion through a network that runs from a central and zonal core to branches, sub-branches, deposit stations with resident associations, mobile routes, and specialized units (Braille; prisoner services) that embed equity by design (Vashishth 2009). On the other, modernization proceeded incrementally: CDS/ISIS databases under the Delivery of Books Act through the 1990s, language wise reporting of statutory receipts, and subsequent migration to KOHA with participation in networked sharing, even as periodical heavy print use persisted among lay publics (Vashishth 2009). Parliamentary and ministerial updates in the last decade reinforce this pattern: “modernization” is recurrently funded as an ongoing process (digitization, preservation, capital assets), while membership and use fluctuate with shocks (e.g., COVID-19), prompting calls for virtual platforms without abandoning the print anchored routines that still structure everyday reading. Read together, Delhi’s record shows a policy ethos that treats everyday reading as both an end (cultural wellbeing) and a means (human development), with implementation hinging on the ordinary affordances—hours, cooling, seating, multilingual replenishment—that convert discovery into durable practice (Government of India 1957; 1990).

Libraries as infrastructures of everyday culture

Seen at city scale, Delhi's libraries stage everyday reading as a social practice embedded in layered infrastructures: material (buildings, chairs, light, climate), logistical (hours aligned to shift work and commuting, proximity, affordable transport), linguistic (multilingual holdings and signage), and symbolic (membership rules, non-discrimination norms, civic values encoded in open reading rooms). Institutional anchors and specialized repositories provide cultural depth and predictable routines; community projects thicken service in underserved localities with free lending and targeted programming; informal study rooms supply late-hour, climate-controlled "infrastructure of attention" near hostels and rental clusters; and mobile/deposit nodes stitch gaps between them (Vashishth 2009; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Readers move among these nodes across a week—borrowing near home, consulting in town, studying after hours—not because any single site is sufficient, but because each offers distinct affordances that match life course- roles and constraints (Sohail and Alvi 2011).

This plurality is historical as much as spatial. Associational philanthropy and colonial depositories seeded civic reading rooms; UNESCO-era modernism scaled a metropolitan public system; policy cycles from the 1950s through the informatics era layered training, outreach, and interoperability on top of that base; and contemporary community movements and sidewalk libraries common the book when institutions strain (Government of India 1957; 1986; 1988; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). Policy frameworks supply the normative scaffold—equity, inclusion, outreach, modernization—but realization is uneven on the ground, which is why para-public partners matter and why small, repeated investments in mundane affordances have outsized effects on habit formation (Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003). In this field, libraries are not merely service points; they are

cultural infrastructures that stabilize attention, enable language crossing, and ritualize civic time in a city otherwise shaped by churn, commutes, and precarity. The measure of success is therefore not only in catalogues and portals, but in the regularity of benches filled, periodicals replenished, and children's corners humming — conditions under which multilingual publics keep returning and the right to read is enacted as routine (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011).

Conclusion

On an August evening in Rajinder Nagar, a generator thrummed beneath the street's honking, forcing warm air through a basement where fluorescent tubes washed rows of laminated desks in hard light. A hand lettered sign—"No talking"—tilted on a pillar. Aspirants hunched over newspapers and guidebooks; a plastic jug of water sweated on a ledge. When the siren came, it was muffled by concrete. Later, police tape cinched the stairwell. The headline named three lives and an open secret: Delhi's readers have been pushed into the underbelly of the city to buy what should be a public good—time, light, and a safe chair (Newslaundry 2024).

This scene crystallizes what the paper has argued. Everyday reading is made and unmade by infrastructures—material, logistical, linguistic, and symbolic—not by texts alone. Where benches, hours, cooling, multilingual replenishment, and predictable proximity exist, newspapers, exam literature, fiction, and devotional texts knit together sociable literacies across life courses; where they do not, para-public workarounds proliferate: commercial rooms monetize attention and aspiration, and protest libraries common the book on

pavements when institutions fall short (Vashishth 2009; Sohail and Alvi 2011; Indian Express 2020; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). The incident in Rajinder Nagar was not an aberration but a symptom of policy attention that has too often privileged modernization at the catalogue over continuity at the bench, and of municipal drift that has left heritage anchors and metropolitan systems cash-starved, staff-short, and unevenly provisioned (Government of India 1957; 1986; 1988; 1990; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

A different future begins by treating exam-oriented study as a legitimate public service horizon rather than a private market inevitability. One strand is repair and expansion: stabilize core affordances across the metropolitan network—longer, staggered hours aligned to shift work; climate-secure reading rooms; visible periodical spines; women-only slots; disability-first design; mobile and deposit stations scaled to migrant geographies; and multilingual replenishment that mirrors readerly realities (Vashishth 2009; Government of India 1957; 1990). A second strand is regulation with inclusion: license “quiet study rooms” as a recognized civic category with enforceable safety codes, transparent fee caps, and compliance pathways, so that proximity and late hours do not come at the cost of life. A third strand is partnership and legislation: formalize microgrants and book surplus flows to community libraries; co-locate afterhours study halls in schools and colleges; adopt state level public library legislation that ties financing and accountability to measurable access outcomes; and braid discovery upgrades (OPACs, networking) with neighbourhood metrics (seats, hours, languages, periodical circulation) (PIB 2017; Economic Times Government 2022; Government of India 1986; 1988; Majumdar, Bhalla, and Chander 2003).

Delhi already holds pieces of this puzzle—deposit stations, mobile routes, children's corners, social education groups, specialized services, and a living ecology of community and sidewalk libraries (Vashishth 2009; Boyk, Amstutz, and Perkins 2020). The task is to connect them into a network that renders illegal basements redundant: safe, affordable, multilingual, and predictably near (IndiaSpend 2023). The best memorial to the aspirants who never returned to their desks is not a plaque but a city where studying is never a fire hazard; where reading in one's language of choice is as ordinary as catching a bus; where pavements need not carry the overflow of unmet need; and where public, community, and licensed quiet-rooms together compose a single civic fabric. If policy scaffolds are aligned with the everyday physics of benches, hours, and light, the library will cease to be a last resort and become, again, a common inheritance (Government of India 1957; 1990; Vashishth 2009).

Seen from this angle, the library in Delhi is civic infrastructure: a mesh rather than a monument, a safety-first, policy-aligned network through which readers move without having to buy access to light or security. Its measure lies not in grandeur but in regularity—the persistence of benches, fans, and newspapers that make reading possible across languages and life stages. To invest in these mundane conditions is to practice *informational justice*: the equitable distribution of the material and social means of attention (Jaeger and Burnett 2010). In doing so, the city quietly enacts what Lefebvre (1996) called the *right to the city*—the collective right to shape and inhabit urban space through everyday acts of use, care, and presence. The modest infrastructure of benches and reading rooms

thus becomes an urban commons, where citizens claim the city not through protest or possession, but through the routine dignity of staying, reading, and returning.

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