PUBLIC LIBRARY POLICY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: INTERNATIONAL MODEL, INDIA'S FRAMEWORK AND THE MAHARASHTRA EXPERIENCE

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Abstract :

This paper compares public library policy framework in selected foreign countries with national level policy in India and state level legislation and practice in Maharashtra. Using policy document analysis, interview with library professionals, and case studies of model libraries, the study examines legislation, government structures, funding mechanisms, services mandates (including digital services) ,professional development , and measureable outcome for access and inclusion. Finding will highlight convergences in policy goals and implementation and international best practice and local needs.

Introduction :

Public libraries are foundational civic institutions that advance literacy, lifelong learning, and digital inclusion and social participation. International instruments such as the UNESCO public library Manifesto and IFLA standards place public libraries at the center of education and democratic access to information. However, policy design and implementation vary widely across jurisdictions. India's National on libraries (NML)(launched 2014) and state level legislations such as the Maharashtra Public Library Act 1967 amended , the country's formal commitments to library modernization and public access ; yet practical challenges in funding ,ICT adoption ,and professional training persist, this paper compares international policy frameworks with India's national policy and Maharashtra's statutory regime ,with the aim of identifying actionable policy measures to strengthen public library services at the state and local levels. Some key question are:

What are the principal policy objectives and instruments used in international public library frameworks?

How does India's national policy and programmes?

How does the Maharashtra Public Libraries' Act and its recent amendments structure governance, funding and services at state and local levels?

Where are the major implementation gaps and what policy levers could aggress them?

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Literature review :

(IFLA/UNESCO, 2021) This Manifesto proclaims UNESCO's belief in the public library as a living force for education, culture and information, and as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women. UNESCO therefore encourages national and local governments to support and actively engage in the development of public libraries.

(IFLA Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom , 2019) Access to the internet provides a major opportunity for libraries - and in particular public libraries - to expand their offer of access to information, and so the value they provide to users. They have brought new audiences to our institutions, and allowed for the development of new services and types of support, building on the existing expertise and values of library and information workers. Nonetheless, limitations on resources, pressures from community members, laws, and the attitudes of library and information workers themselves may affect how much of this potential can be realised.

(ALA, 2023) The American Library Association (ALA) publishes a variety of policy documents for public libraries, including the Library Bill of Rights, ALA Code of Ethics, and numerous other statements and guidelines found in the ALA Policy Manual. These documents provide a framework for intellectual freedom, privacy, and service to users, and collection development, which guide libraries in their operations and in creating their own specific policies.

(htt) National Mission on Libraries, Upgradation of Libraries providing Services to the Public. The broad objectives of the scheme inter alia include sustained development of libraries & information services in pursuance of National Knowledge Commission's recommendations. These objectives intend to cover promotion of Information Communication Technology (ICT) application in all Libraries, Modernize Library Management, a National Survey of Libraries & Citizens and improvement of competence of library professionals through training

(THE MAHARASHTRA PUBLIC LIBRARIES ACT, 2023) provision for library service to the public is not made to the satisfaction of the Director by any local authority, or any society registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 (XXI of 1860) or any trust registered under the Bombay Public Trusts Act, 1950 (Bom. XXIX of 1950) or where the State Government is of the opinion that any such local authority, society or trust is not willing or is incompetent to provide library service to the public to the satisfaction of the Director in any local area, the State Government may establish a library for the use of the public in that area.

(Narayan, 2012) NML has been pivotal in modernizing India's libraries, fostering inclusivity and promoting access to information, but there remains a need for improved implementation, particularly in rural regions. Its continued efforts, coupled with the successful execution of ongoing projects, are key to fully realizing the mission's transformative potential.

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Comparative Matrix of Public Library Policies :

Dimension	Foreign Countries(UK/USA) as ex)	India	Maharashtra
Legal basis &policy Mandate	UK; Public libraries and museums Act 1964 mandates free access to library services. USA: no national Act, but strong state level and policy advocacy.	No single national law; policy guided by the national mission on libraries (2024), RRLF (1957), and cultural policy documents.	Governed by the Maharashtra Public libraries Act, 1967(amended 2024), providing statutory basis for state, district, and village libraries.
Governance & Institutional structure Dimension	UK: Libraries run by local councils, with oversight from Department for digital, culture, Media &Sport. USA highly decentralized ,local board state library agencies	Ministry of culture +RRRLF +NML as central agencies; implementation left to states.	Directorate of libraries +State Library Council; District Library committees manage local institutions
Funding & Financial Sustainability	Funded by local government taxation, state/federal grants, philanthropic support.	Centrally sponsored schemes (NML, RRRLF), State budgets, local municipal contributions; funding uneven across states.	State government provide grants; local bodies contributes; funding gap common, reliance on state allocations.
Infrastructure & Accessibility	UK: Dense library network, including mobile libraries , USA: large scale urban/rural networks, many with modern facilities.	About 54000 public libraries (many small/rural); infrastructure quality varies widely.	`12000+libraries across districts and villages; urban libraries better developed; rular outreach weaker.
Services & Inclusion	Wide range of service; lending,	Traditional book lending and literacy	Reading room, lending services;

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	children's programs, maker spaces, literacy initiatives, digital inclusion.	programs; slow adoption of new models; NML encourage modernization.	book fairs; limited specialized service; inclusion efforts emerging.
Digital strategy & ICT Integration	UK: Digital catalogs, national library network; USA: strong e-resources Systems, virtual library platform.	NMLcreated national virtual library of India; digitalization efforts underway but uneven.	Some digitalization at state libraries; pilot's e library project; still largely print based in rural areas.
Human Resources & Professional Development	Professional qualifications required; counting education strong (ALA-accredited degrees ,CLIB in UK)	LIS courses offered at university ; training RRRLF /NML ; storage of trained libraries in ruler areas	Professional training limited; vacancies common; staff often lack ICT skill; need for CPD program.
Innovation & Future readiness	UK/USA libraries evolving into community hubs ,maker spaces digital innovation	Policy direction toward modernization (NML);implementation slow; few innovation pilots	Still traditional in approach; isolated pilots in urban centers; ruler libraries lag behind.

Methodology :

- Approach : Comparative policy analysis using qualitative document analysis and case studies.

- Primary Documents : UNESCO Manifesto, IFLA guideline, national libraries policies of selected countries, India's NML documents (guidelines scheme PDF), Maharashtra Public library act and rules, state government circulars.

- Secondary Literature : peer reviewed articles, government evaluation (eg RRRLF /NML reports)

Research Gap :

The growing recognition of public libraries as instruments of literacy, digital inclusion,

and community empowerment, three major gap persist in scholarship and policy

Conclusion :

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Public Libraries are more than repositories of books .they are vital components of democratic and inclusive knowledge society's .the comparative perspective demonstrates that successful international model share commons traits stable financing, clear legal mandates.

Maharashtra illustrates both the potential and challenges of state level library development .its graded library system and extensive reach provide a foundation, but issues of resources disparity, staff capacity, and digital access remain process.

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