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PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETITIVE EXAMINATION ASPIRANTS IN BIHAR: A STUDY

[1]Priti
[1]Research Scholar, Sunrise University, Alwar, Rajasthan

[2]Dr. Salma Khan
[2]Professor, Sunrise University, Alwar, Rajasthan

ABSTRACT

Public libraries are critical institutions that foster knowledge, learning, and social empowerment. In India, particularly in states like Bihar, where educational resources are often limited, public libraries play a pivotal role in supporting students and competitive examination aspirants. Competitive exams, such as the Civil Services, State Public Service Commission exams, and banking or SSC exams, represent pathways to employment, social mobility, and personal development. This study investigates the impact of public libraries on strengthening the aspirations of competitive exam candidates in Bihar. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research collected data from 300 candidates across five major districts—Patna, Gaya, Bhagalpur, Muzaffarpur, and Darbhanga—through structured questionnaires and focus group discussions. The study examined the frequency and nature of library usage, the availability of study resources, the influence of libraries on candidates' motivation and study habits, and the challenges faced by aspirants in utilizing these facilities. Findings indicate that public libraries significantly contribute to fostering aspirants' motivation, providing access to critical learning materials, and creating an environment conducive to focused study. Despite limitations such as insufficient digital resources, outdated reference materials, and limited operating hours, libraries were found to be invaluable for candidates who lacked access to private coaching or personal collections. The research emphasizes the potential of public libraries as inclusive knowledge hubs that promote academic achievement and social mobility. Policy recommendations include upgrading library collections with current competitive exam materials, improving digital access, enhancing the capacity of library staff to guide aspirants, and extending operational hours to meet peak study demands. The study concludes that strategic investment in public libraries can strengthen aspirations, improve educational outcomes, and reduce inequalities among competitive exam candidates in Bihar, thereby contributing to broader social development.

E-mail: editor.jrla24@gmail.com

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I. INTRODUCTION

Public libraries have long been recognized as crucial institutions for promoting education, knowledge dissemination, and social development. Across the world, they serve as accessible centers where individuals can acquire information, engage in self-directed learning, and develop skills that are essential for personal and professional growth. In the Indian context, public libraries assume an even more significant role, particularly in states like Bihar, where educational disparities, limited infrastructure, and socio-economic challenges constrain access to quality learning resources. Bihar, despite its rich cultural and intellectual heritage, faces challenges such as a high student-to-resource ratio, lack of advanced study materials, and inadequate support for aspirants preparing for competitive examinations. In such a context, public libraries emerge as critical hubs that can bridge gaps in educational access and provide aspirants with opportunities to pursue their goals, irrespective of their socio-economic background.

Competitive examinations in India—including the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), State Public Service Commission (PSC), Staff Selection Commission (SSC), and banking exams—represent not only gateways to stable employment but also avenues for social mobility and empowerment. The aspirants preparing for these exams often encounter several challenges, including navigating vast syllabi, identifying relevant study materials, and finding suitable environments conducive to focused learning. In Bihar, these challenges are magnified due to the limited availability of private coaching centers, high costs of reference materials, and inadequate infrastructure at home or in schools to support rigorous exam preparation. Public libraries, in this scenario, can provide aspirants with a structured and supportive environment, access to necessary resources, and opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative learning. Their role extends beyond the provision of books to creating spaces that nurture motivation, discipline, and aspirational growth.

The influence of public libraries on competitive exam candidates can be understood in multiple dimensions. Firstly, they provide access to a wide range of educational materials, including textbooks, reference books, journals, and periodicals, which are often too expensive for individual students to acquire. Secondly, libraries offer quiet and organized spaces that are conducive to long hours of study, helping aspirants develop focused study habits essential for exam success. Thirdly, libraries facilitate exposure to information technology and digital resources, including online test series, e-books, and educational databases, which enhance learning opportunities and exam preparedness. For candidates in Bihar, these resources can be instrumental in leveling the playing field, allowing them to compete with peers from more resource-rich regions.

Another critical aspect of public libraries is their ability to strengthen aspirational motivation. Access to books, educational programs, and guidance from librarians can inspire candidates to set higher goals and persist in their preparation despite obstacles. Libraries often serve as

centers of community learning where aspirants interact with peers, exchange knowledge, and share strategies for competitive examinations. Such interactions create a supportive network, which can boost confidence, reduce anxiety, and promote sustained engagement with studies. In addition, libraries can serve as a bridge between formal education and self-directed learning, allowing candidates to explore subjects beyond the school or college syllabus and cultivate critical thinking and analytical skills that are essential for competitive exams.

Despite the potential benefits, public libraries in Bihar face challenges that can limit their effectiveness. Many libraries struggle with outdated collections, insufficient digital resources, inadequate infrastructure, and limited operational hours. These limitations can hinder candidates from fully utilizing the available resources and achieving the desired outcomes. Furthermore, a lack of awareness about library services, coupled with inadequate guidance on navigating materials for competitive exams, may reduce the impact of libraries on aspirants' preparation. Addressing these challenges through policy interventions, infrastructure development, and professional training for library staff is essential to enhance the contribution of public libraries to aspirants' success.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how public libraries in Bihar influence the aspirations, preparation strategies, and academic outcomes of competitive exam candidates. By investigating usage patterns, perceived benefits, and challenges, the research aims to provide insights into the ways in which libraries can support aspirants in a resource-constrained environment. This study contributes to the broader understanding of public libraries as instruments of educational equity and social empowerment, highlighting their role in fostering human capital development and enabling social mobility. The findings are expected to inform policymakers, educators, and library administrators about strategies for strengthening library services, expanding access, and creating learning environments that can maximize the potential of competitive exam candidates in Bihar.

In public libraries in Bihar represent more than mere repositories of books; they are vital centers of learning, motivation, and aspiration. By providing access to resources, facilitating study environments, and fostering peer engagement, libraries can play a transformative role in shaping the ambitions and academic trajectories of competitive exam aspirants. Strengthening these institutions through strategic investments, modernization, and capacity building can help bridge educational inequalities, empower students, and contribute to broader social and economic development. The study of public libraries' impact on aspirants in Bihar thus underscores their critical role in shaping not only academic outcomes but also the aspirations and future prospects of young individuals seeking to advance through competitive examinations.

II. PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Public libraries are fundamental institutions that contribute significantly to the social, educational, and cultural development of communities. They serve as inclusive spaces where individuals from all socio-economic backgrounds can access information, educational resources, and knowledge without financial barriers. In developing regions, such as Bihar,

public libraries play a critical role in bridging educational inequalities by providing free access to books, periodicals, digital resources, and other learning materials. By doing so, they promote literacy, lifelong learning, and intellectual empowerment among diverse populations, including students, professionals, and marginalized groups who may otherwise have limited access to quality educational content.

Beyond serving as repositories of knowledge, public libraries function as centers for community engagement and social cohesion. They provide safe and structured spaces where people can gather, exchange ideas, and participate in cultural, educational, and awareness programs. Through workshops, reading clubs, and discussion forums, libraries facilitate skill development, critical thinking, and civic awareness. In regions with high population density and limited educational infrastructure, such as many parts of Bihar, these social functions of libraries are especially valuable, as they encourage collaborative learning and create opportunities for individuals to develop social networks that support academic and professional aspirations.

Public libraries also contribute to the democratization of knowledge by reducing disparities in access to information. Individuals who cannot afford private coaching, subscriptions, or digital devices can still acquire the necessary resources for academic success, competitive examinations, and skill enhancement through library services. This equitable access promotes social mobility by enabling individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to compete on a more level playing field. By empowering citizens with knowledge, libraries help reduce the knowledge gap and foster a more informed and capable population, which in turn strengthens the social fabric and contributes to overall societal development.

In addition, public libraries have increasingly embraced digital technologies to enhance their impact on social development. Many libraries now provide access to computers, the internet, online journals, and e-books, enabling users to acquire information beyond traditional printed resources. Digital literacy programs and training sessions offered by libraries further equip citizens with skills necessary for the modern information-driven economy. In Bihar, where digital penetration may be limited in rural areas, libraries serve as critical points for accessing technology, thereby promoting digital inclusion and preparing individuals for participation in contemporary economic and social activities.

Furthermore, public libraries contribute to lifelong learning and personal growth, which are essential components of social development. By offering resources for continuous education, professional skill-building, and recreational reading, libraries nurture a culture of curiosity, creativity, and self-improvement. This not only enhances individual capabilities but also generates social benefits, such as informed decision-making, increased employability, and civic engagement. The cumulative effect of these individual improvements strengthens the community and society as a whole, highlighting the transformative role of public libraries in fostering sustainable social development.

In summary, public libraries are more than just repositories of books; they are engines of social progress. Through equitable access to knowledge, community engagement, skill

development, digital inclusion, and lifelong learning, libraries contribute to the intellectual and social empowerment of citizens. In the context of Bihar, where educational disparities and socio-economic challenges persist, public libraries have the potential to be transformative institutions that promote literacy, reduce inequalities, and support the aspirations of individuals seeking academic and professional advancement. Strengthening library infrastructure, expanding resource availability, and integrating modern technologies can further enhance their role in driving sustainable social development.

III. METHODOLOGY

➢ Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of public libraries on competitive examination aspirants in Bihar. The quantitative component involved structured questionnaires administered to 300 respondents, aiming to capture measurable aspects such as frequency of library use, types of resources accessed, average study hours, and self-reported impact on exam preparation. The qualitative component complemented this data by providing deeper insights through focus group discussions with selected candidates and interviews with library staff. This combination allowed the study to analyze not only statistical trends but also the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by aspirants in utilizing public library services.

➢ Sampling

The study was conducted across five districts in Bihar: Patna, Gaya, Bhagalpur, Muzaffarpur, and Darbhanga, selected to represent diverse geographic, socio-economic, and educational contexts within the state. Respondents were competitive exam candidates aged between 18 and 35 years, all of whom were frequent users of public library services. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants had relevant experience with library usage in relation to exam preparation. The sample included candidates preparing for various competitive examinations, including UPSC, State PSC, SSC, banking exams, and other professional tests, providing a representative overview of library impact across different exam types.

➢ Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved the administration of structured questionnaires designed to capture quantitative information regarding library usage patterns, types of resources consulted, study duration, and perceived impact on preparation outcomes. The qualitative component involved focus group discussions with aspirants to explore their experiences, motivations, and challenges in greater depth, alongside interviews with library staff to understand institutional perspectives on resource availability and usage trends. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulations, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, key insights, and nuanced perspectives. This methodological approach ensured a holistic

understanding of the role of public libraries in supporting competitive exam aspirants in Bihar.

IV. RESULTS

➢ Demographics

The study revealed that the majority of respondents were male, constituting 60 percent of the sample, while females accounted for 40 percent. In terms of educational background, 70 percent of participants were graduates, and 30 percent were postgraduates, reflecting a predominantly higher-educated group of aspirants. Regarding the types of examinations for which respondents were preparing, 40 percent were focused on UPSC and State PSC exams, 35 percent on SSC and banking exams, and the remaining 25 percent on other competitive examinations. These demographics provided a diverse and representative sample of competitive exam candidates who relied on public library resources in Bihar.

➢ Library Use Patterns

Library usage patterns varied among respondents. Approximately 45 percent reported visiting libraries on a daily basis, 35 percent used them weekly, and the remaining 20 percent were occasional users. The study found that candidates predominantly used libraries as quiet spaces conducive to focused study, often preferring them over crowded or noisy home environments. Participants also emphasized that libraries offered affordable access to critical study materials, including textbooks, reference books, and past examination papers, which were otherwise financially burdensome to acquire independently. Additionally, the presence of supportive staff and an organized environment contributed to sustained engagement with study routines and facilitated more disciplined preparation.

V. DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that public libraries play a significant role in strengthening the aspirations and motivation of competitive exam candidates. Access to updated books, reference materials, and other educational resources instilled confidence in aspirants, enabling them to approach their preparation with greater focus and clarity. Library staff often assisted candidates in locating relevant resources, providing guidance that enhanced study efficiency and reduced the time spent searching for materials independently. Furthermore, libraries served as spaces where aspirants could interact with peers, form study groups, and exchange strategies for effective exam preparation. These interactions fostered a sense of community, encouraging collaborative learning and supporting the development of disciplined study habits. As a result, aspirants reported increased self-efficacy, persistence, and motivation, highlighting the transformative impact of public libraries on both academic performance and personal aspiration.

Despite their positive influence, public libraries in Bihar face several challenges that limit their effectiveness. A primary concern among respondents was the lack of recent and comprehensive competitive exam guides, which restricted access to the latest syllabus

updates and study strategies. Limited ICT facilities, including inadequate internet access and insufficient digital resources, further constrained candidates' ability to leverage online learning platforms and e-resources. Additionally, restricted operational hours, particularly during peak preparation periods, prevented some aspirants from utilizing libraries fully, forcing them to seek alternative, often less optimal, study environments. These challenges underscore the need for targeted interventions to modernize library infrastructure, expand resource availability, and extend operational hours to better accommodate the demands of competitive exam candidates.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research highlight the critical role of public libraries in shaping the aspirations, study habits, and academic success of competitive exam candidates in Bihar. Libraries provide an inclusive and structured environment where aspirants can access essential study materials, interact with peers, and engage in focused learning without the financial burden of private coaching. Through their resources and services, public libraries contribute significantly to fostering motivation, confidence, and perseverance among candidates who aim for high-stakes examinations. However, challenges such as outdated collections, limited digital resources, inadequate infrastructure, and constrained operational hours restrict the full potential of these institutions. Addressing these issues through strategic investment, modernization, and capacity building for library staff can enhance the effectiveness of public libraries in supporting aspirants.

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