

# Iconic Libraries in India

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Libraries are beautiful. Apart from the knowledge and exposure they offer, the mere architecture of these structures are majestic. Libraries are a place of worship or can be termed as **Temples of Learning**. As if just being amidst thousands of books isn't enough, libraries double our joy by their silence, altruistic environment and awe-inspiring architecture.

India, known for its history and heritage, has some of the best libraries in the world that do not just house valuable books across various eras and subjects, but are also known for their inspiring and nostalgic structure, too. The first known Library established in India by Nayak Kings of Thanjavur between 1535 to 1675 A.D.

From north to south and east to west, libraries in India have inspired a lot of people, even from different countries, as

## Temples of Learning



## Tagore's **Shantiniketan**, an Abode of Learning

Reading a Book has a unique sense of joy. Kindles may come, tablets may go, but the feeling of reading a book while sitting in a massive library will go on forever. Also, as a writer, libraries are the most peaceful and alluring places you can sit and write your heart out. Here is the list of some iconic libraries in India that will not just leave you spellbound with their magnificent structures, but will also kindle your literary thirst and quest to read as much as possible, for these libraries have thousands of well-rated books, journals, research papers, manuscripts and documents of immense historical value.

**In the following pages we bring you some of the most beautiful Libraries of India from its rich historical, architectural perspectives as Knowledge Banks.**

### National Library of India, Kolkata, established in 1836



This is the stately grandmother of Indian libraries. It is the biggest library in India and the library of official public records has over 2.2 million books in its collection. With its eighty-six thousand maps, three thousand two hundred manuscripts and forty-five kilometres of shelf space, there is no easy way to categorise the National Library. It is great for research involving government records and colonial papers, but is really just a great place for nearly all kinds of research.

Accessing lots of the resources can be a little difficult though and you will have to navigate a fairly arcane bureaucracy, but that's all part of the fun! To access the Bhasha Bhavan (main reading room), you need to fill out an online form to get a Reader's Pass, which then has to be attested to by a Government Gazetted Officer.

These Passes are only issued between 10am and 1pm, and 3pm and 4pm Monday to Friday.



The library is open Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm and on Saturday.

When someone says iconic libraries in India, our mind immediately recalls the **National Library of India, Kolkata**. Known to be one of the best libraries in India, this library is not only good in terms of its holdings, but the library ranks well in terms of maintenance, architecture, cleanliness, and historical importance too.

Established in the year 1836 as the Calcutta Public Library, it has the largest stock of book volumes in India. With a whopping collection of more than 2.2 million books, this library should be on every book lovers wish list. This library was the official residence of Lt. Governor of Bengal, before India got its independence.

If you are a traveller or a geography connoisseur, you might just love this library a lot more, for it has over 86000 maps. Also, the total shelf space of this library is over 45 kilometres and it can accommodate up to 550 people in its reading room at once. Well, why wouldn't it house 550 people? Before National Library was housed here, the reading room was a ballroom of the Viceroy's Lodge.

*Address: Belvedere Estate, Block A, Alipore, Kolkata. Contact: 3324792968*



## Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.



As the name suggests, this museum-cum-library is situated in the historical building that served as a Official Residence of our first prime minister, **Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru**. Known to have one of the best collection of books and resources in India, the building that houses the library was built in 1930s. Initially built as the British Indian armys commander-in-chiefs residence, this place is known for its grandeur and solace.

With an aim to preserve and recreate the Indian independence movements history to the young minds of today, the library houses archives of Mahatma Gandhi's writings. Apart from these, the library and museum also has private papers of C. Rajagopalachari, Jayaprakash Narayan, B. C. Roy, Charan Singh, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, and Sarojini Naidu. Known as one of the best libraries in Delhi for Social Sciences, this library is the house for a wide, varied collection of labor related books and periodicals. The library building looks like a classy residence from its exteriors and that indeed adds a unique look to it.

If you are looking for the old-school, timber panelled, rich collection of books, an un-matachable library experience, then the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library is for you. Predictably, this library



has some of the most important resources on Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi and the independence movement, including photos, newspapers and books. It is also famous in Delhi for being the best library for resources on social sciences, with a huge collection of PhD theses, reports and journals.

Many prominent academics like Ramachandra Guha have relied on the library's extensive collections. Currently, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library is undertaking a mammoth digitisation project meaning that members can access huge quantities of rare literary material at the click of a button.

The library is only open to 'bonafide researchers' who must pay a tiny membership fee of INR 500 a year. However, what qualifies as a 'bonafide researcher' is flexible! This membership allows you to borrow books from the library, which considering the rarity of the collection is an amazing opportunity! To become a member you will have to physically visit the library and speak to a librarian between 9am-6:30pm Sunday to Friday or 9am-5:30pm on Saturdays.

*Address: Teen Murti Bhawan*  
*Contact: 01123017599*

## Raza Library, Hyderabad



Another government protected monument, the **Raza Library** has a rich, opulent look. Originally built as part of a palace in the city of Rampur, the library indeed looks like a palace. The library's collections are as unique as the library's architecture and there are about 17,000 rare manuscripts, 5000 miniature paintings, and 205 hand-written palm-leaf manuscripts. With approximately 30,000 books in various languages like Tamil, Turkish, Urdu, Sanskrit, Hindi, etc., the library is breathtakingly stunning both in terms of its infrastructure as well as its collections.



## Saraswati Mahal (Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu)



Founded in the sixteenth century, Saraswati Mahal is one of the oldest libraries in Asia, originally set up for the Nayak Kings of Thanjavur. One of the most beautiful libraries in India is the Saraswati Mahal Library that is situated in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, India. Known to be one of the **oldest libraries in Asia**, this library has a rare collection of various manuscripts written palm leaves in different languages. It also houses a collection of ancient parchment papers written in Indian languages like Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, Marathi, etc. With over 60,000 volumes listed as online holdings, on the display are some of the classiest and most ancient volumes that are primarily related to history. Through prior intimation, viewing of some rare holdings can be arranged in this library. Furthermore, the history of the library is so rich that it is said that this library was used as a Royal Library by the Nayak Kings of Thanjavur for their private use during their rule between 1535 and 1675 AD.

The library is a treasure chest of invaluable artefacts like one of the world's best preserved sets of palm-leaf manuscripts. Most of the texts are in Sanskrit but you can also access resources in a range of classical South Indian Languages. The library is set in the stunning Thanjavur palace complex.

*Address: E Main St, Rajakrisna puram, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.*

*Contact: 4362234107*

## Connemara Public Library, Chennai.



Situated in the heart of Chennai at Egmore, this library has been around for years now. Most Chennai residents have nostalgic memories attached to this library as this might have been the first library that they would have ever been to. One of the four national depository libraries, the Connemara public library not only has the most important books about our nation and history, but it also has many books ranging from children's tales to autobiographies.

Known to be the depository library for the UN, this library has collections of centuries-old publication. Established in the 1890s, this library still functions in an impeccable manner. With 770,000 volumes of books, 3500 periodicals, and 160 newspapers, the Connemara Library is where Hermione Granger will go, when in doubt, if Hogwarts were in Chennai.

## State Central Library of Hyderabad



Situated in Telangana, the state central library was constructed as a building by Nawab Imad-ul-Mulk in the year 1891. After almost a century, it was granted the heritage status in the year 1998. With a widespread area of 72,247 square yards, the library's architecture resembles that of a palace. The huge halls and high ceilings of the library are quite impressive and appealing to the visitors. Apart from 500,000 books, the library also houses magazines and palm-leaf manuscripts. This is one of the very few libraries in India that has Arabian, Persian, and Urdu manuscripts.

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## Trivandrum Public Library



Also known as the State Central Library, the Trivandrum Public Library is the very first public library in India. Established in the year 1829, this library houses various collections of literature, especially in Malayalam language.

Built during Travancore's King Swathi Thirunal's reign, this library is also known as Trivandrum People's Library. Built with a heritage-oriented architecture, **the library has a separate children's library in its campus.** With the classic red brick model of architecture, the library keeps up the cultural heritage of buildings to the point.

## Allahabad Public Library



Also known as Thornhill Mayne Memorial, the Allahabad Public Library is situated at Alfred Park in Allahabad. Considered to be the biggest library in

the state of Uttar Pradesh, this library was founded in the year 1864. The library is bound to catch the eye of the people with its Scottish Baronial Architecture. With approximately 125,000 books, 40 types of magazines, and 28 newspapers, the library is also known to be housing 21 Arabic manuscripts. One of the must-visit places in Allahabad, this library is indeed one of the beautiful libraries in India.

## David Sassoon Library, Mumbai.



Situated in the centre of Mumbai, the library is a famous literary and heritage site. One of the 145 monuments protected by the Indian Government, this library is one of the oldest libraries in Mumbai. While the library itself is a great heritage site, the backyard of the library is maintained as a wide, green garden that will make you forget all about the busy city life while you indulge in your favourite book. Built using yellow Malad stone, this library has a unique English architecture.

Initially intended to be an entire institute dedicated to mechanics, science, and technology, the library was named as The Sassoon Mechanic's Institute. However, due to shortage of funds, the library was renamed to David Sassoon Library, after its primary donor.



## Asiatic Society of Mumbai Library, Mumbai.



This colonial building will leave you spellbound with its amazing architecture. With a collection of over 200,000 books, this library also houses 20,000 rare books in varied languages. The spectacular steps of the grand, imposing Town Hall are enough to swipe the Mumbai bookworms off their feet. With the collection not restricted just to books but spread across as periodicals, manuscripts, coins, etc., the library is truly a treasure to all literary and history lovers. The Asiatic Society also houses Sopara Relics in its holdings. In short, this place is a dream come true for literature, arts, history, and archaeology lovers.

Founded in 1804 as a compendium of knowledge on India for the British Raj, this library is one of the most historic in India. The Asiatic Society of Mumbai has about one hundred thousand books, fifteen thousand of which are considered rare, valuable or antiquarian. The focus of this library is, naturally, on India, but it is renowned as a significant resource in the fields of Asian Studies. If you feel like escaping the sticky heat of Mumbai to peruse the 16th century Sanskrit manuscript Aranyaka Parvan of the Mahabharata or even look at an original Italian manuscript of Dante's Divine Comedy, this is the library for you. The library annually publishes the The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay and holds regular events and lectures.

There are a number of different types of membership options and applications are reviewed by a panel who judge on the basis of 'sustained interest in the aims and objectives of the Society'. Feel free to come in and have a look but only



members can borrow. Non-Indians are only eligible for limited membership. You can find the membership form [here](#).

*Address: Town Hall, Fort, Shahid Bhagat Singh Rd*

*Contact: 222660956*

## Delhi Public Library



Delhi Public Library is one of India's biggest book repositories. Here you'll find over 1.6 million books, one of the most enviable collections in the subcontinent. Covering a dizzying array of subjects, this library is particularly known for its wide selection of early Indian literature and law. If all this choice wasn't exciting enough, you can also access books in a diversity of languages, notably Hindi, Urdu, and Sanskrit. They even have a Braille library. If you want to tackle learning an Indian language to read these texts in their original form, [check out our guide to studying Hindi online](#).

To become a full member you have to provide proof of residency in Delhi, but you can become a six-month temporary member by showing your passport and/or student card from your institution as well as providing an INR 1000 security deposit. To become a member, fill out [this form](#) and return it to the library. You need to be a member to borrow but you are welcome to browse as a non-member.



There are branches of the Delhi Public Library all across the city, find out which one is closest to you. They all have different opening hours but generally close between 6pm and 7pm.

## Sahitya Kala Akademi Library



Sahitya Kala Akademi is an important institution on the Indian literary scene, being famous for its extensive collections on literary theory, translation studies,

women's studies and cultural histories. Beyond this, it is notable for its incredible linguistic diversity with texts in twenty-four different Indian languages.

Incredibly well stocked, and a favourite of Delhi's literati, the library is open from 9:30am-6:30pm everyday except Sunday. To become a temporary (15-Day) member you can download the [online form](#) and make a deposit of INR 50. You can visit for free but to borrow you must be a member.

*Address: Rabindra Bhavan, 35 Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi.*

*Contact: 0112338662*

## Parliament Library of India







The Parliament Library in Delhi is your go-to library for research in Indian politics and national affairs. It's Acts and Bills, and Gazettes and Debates sections include everything from both central government and state government acts, ordinances and rules, joint select committee reports and debates from the Lok Sabha, Raj Sabha and state legislatures through to acts and parliamentary records from selected foreign countries. It also has a broad collection of books and periodicals in Indian regional languages, covering nearly all the official languages of India. Designed by famous Indian architect Raj Rewal, it is well worth a visit just for the building alone.

Unless you are a member of parliament, accredited to the press gallery or an Indian public servant, you will need to first apply to access the collection as a 'bonafide research scholar'. You can do this as an Indian or international researcher. You just need to organise in advance a letter from your university and embassy or high commission, if you are from abroad. Full details on how to apply for a researcher pass including the [application form](#) are available under the [Parliament Library rules](#).

*Address: Gokul Nagar, Central Secretariat, New Delhi, Delhi 110001, India*  
*Contact: +91 11 2303 4295*

## The Akshara Library

The Akshara Centre is an Indian-led social justice activist organisation that lobbies for women's uplift, empowerment and education. Its library program is hugely successful and involves a physical node Akshara Library that serves as a base for literacy programs across the city. The library is notable for its social justice and activist materials including books, journals and newsletters. For a completely different library experience and to learn about how libraries can be used as tools for community development, drop into the Akshara Library between Tuesday and Saturday 10am to 6pm. It's completely free!

*Address: Balasheth Madurkar Marg, Elphinstone Road (West), Mumbai.*

## Khuda Baksh Oriental Library (Patna, Bihar)



'The Pride of Patna', set up in 1891 Khuda Baksh Oriental Library is known for its impressive collection of Mughal miniatures, documents and military history.

It will not only be the city's first e-library, but will fulfil wishes of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, put into words in the visitors' book during a trip to the Library in the early 1950s.

Just located close to the banks of the Ganges, in Patna, holds a unique repository of 21,000 oriental manuscripts and 2.5 lakh printed books. This is a rare collection of books and manuscripts acquired over years by Khuda Bakhsh Khan, who donated his entire collection to the people of Patna by a deed of trust.

The Indian government has declared the library, an Institution of National Importance by an act of Parliament in 1969, recognising the immense historical and intellectual value of its collection of rare and valuable material. The library

was opened to the public in 1891 by the son of Bihar Khan Bahadur Khuda Bakhsh with 4,000 manuscripts, of which 1,400 were inherited from his father, Maulvi Mohammed Bakhsh.

*Khuda Bakhsh was born in Chapra on 2nd August 1842, and was bought up by his father, who dedicated his life for the betterment of humanity. He started his professional career as Peshkar having been educated at both Patna and Calcutta. He then was appointed the Government Pleader of Patna and in 1881, he received the title of Khan Bahadur for his social service. In 1895, he was elevated to the position of Chief Justice of Nizam's Court Hyderabad for a period of 3 years.*

*Later in 1903, he was also honoured with the title of CIE. Even though he received many titles and awards, he remained a humble man with sheer determination and vision. The library was his life-long achievement and he spent everything he had to fuel the growth of the library. As he result, he was penniless and eventually had to borrow money for his medical treatment. The government of Bengal made him a generous grant of Rs 8,000 to clear his debts. At the age of 66, he died on 3rd August 1908 and was buried in the premises of the library.*

The great work of Khuda Bakhsh is continuing today, as we enter the digital age and IT modernisation continues throughout India. In the 1950s, the library started Reprographic services, followed by computers, databases and the digitisation of the entire library stock to provide an online service. The National Informatics Centre is a leading government of India organisation in Information Technology, and they are working on the project to digitise the library stock and deliver an online service that will take Khuda Bakhsh to the world and well into the millennium.

*Address: Ashok Raj path Rd, Patna, Bihar, Contact: 6122300209.*



## Maulana Azad Library (Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh)



The official library of Aligarh Muslim University, Maulana Azad Library is the second biggest library in Asia. While its collections are expansive it is known particularly for its resources on the independence movement, South Asian religious history and theology and the Mughal period. It has an extensive collection of rare, valuable and antiquarian texts.

*Address: AMU Rd, Aligarh Muslim University Campus, Aligarh*  
*Contact: 5712700512*



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**Best Regards**

**Dr. Joy Banerjee,**

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