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## The public library was at the heart of my social mobility

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## THE LIBRARY, TREASURE ISLAND

### The public library was at the heart of my social mobility

Raj S Bhopal *emeritus professor of public health*

Launer's eulogy to the public library jogged deep memories.<sup>1</sup> My parents left a small town in northern India, Moga, to settle in Glasgow, Scotland, arriving on New Year's Eve in 1955. We settled, like many immigrants, in the Gorbals, an area known for its deprivation. My father had left school at the age of 9, and my mother, to her lifelong chagrin, never went. Nonetheless, both my parents extolled the virtues of education.

We had no books. When I started school at the age of 5, my first language was Punjabi and I had a smattering of English. I struggled academically. Luckily, Gorbals public library was at hand and was a godsend. My first three books were borrowed, read, and returned on the same evening. My first book was called *How Big Is Big?* I became a voracious reader. Our houses were small, and the family was large so there was no quiet study space. Luckily, the spacious reading rooms of Glasgow's public libraries had lovely oak desks and chairs, where I got down to serious after school study.

As an undergraduate I enjoyed superb university libraries. During my intercalating physiology degree, my fellow students and I accessed the departmental library 24 hours a day. When I entered public health in 1983, I loved the familiar musty smell of the library in the department of public health at Glasgow University. I knew I belonged in the library, the heart of scholarship and learning. The centrality of the physical library in both community and academia was soon to be swept away.

My educational and academic success was powered by the public library system. I found my treasure in the library—social mobility. Policy makers, please take note.

Competing interests: None declared.

1 Launer J. John Launer: The library, my treasure island. *BMJ* 2023;381: doi: 10.1136/bmj.p1005 pmid: 37164368