

# Samuhik सामूहिक पहल Pahal

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Libraries in Schools and Communities

# CONTENTS

This issue of Samuhik  
Pahal has been guest  
edited by [PRAYOG](#)  
(Professionals Alliance for  
Youths Growth), which is a  
Not For Profit organization  
and a Registered Public  
Charitable Trust. PRAYOG  
is striving to improve  
learning outcomes of  
students in rural areas.  
Along with improving  
independent thinking and  
enhancing creativity of  
the students, it is also  
creating livelihoods for the  
youth.

## Editorial

- 03 **Celebrating Children's Libraries in India**

## Reflections & Opinions

- 05 **Nurturing Ecosystem of Children's Literature and Reading for  
Pleasure in India**  
*Amrita Patwardhan*
- 09 **Connecting the Dots Between Literacy and Reading**  
Libraries' Critical Role in Children's Learning  
*Keerti Jayaram*
- 13 **Books, Digital Resources, and the Right to Read**  
A Community Library's Response  
*Zoya Chadha*

## Interview

- 18 **In Conversation with BlueJackal**  
*PRAYOG Team*
- 24 बाल साहित्य के निर्माण में एकलव्य संस्था के अनुभव और अन्तर्दृष्टि  
*विनीत रंजन*

## Resources

- 28 **Starting A Community Library**  
*Syeeda Zainab*
- 30 **Bookstores Across India**  
Some Independent Bookstores for children's books  
*Surya Prakash Rai*

## Photo Essay

- 31 **A Library Campus in Rural Bihar**  
*Anita Kumari, Kailash Pati and Ragini Sharma*

## Ground Zero

- 36 **Diverse Geographies, Diverse Libraries**  
*Siddhi Kalbhor*

# Celebrating Children's Libraries in India

Over the ages, the library as a place has embodied the values of knowledge, reflection and lifelong learning. As library educators in present times, we can convey these vital aspects through our collections. We can also demonstrate our commitment to the values of inclusion, freedom, trust and openness by practising these values in the library as a place.

Such a library will always have a place in our hearts and minds.<sup>1</sup> Libraries have never restricted themselves to be just places where books are stacked in shelves. They have become much alive and vibrant spaces today. And when it comes to children's libraries, we want to see them brimming with joy and enthusiasm. It is a matter of immense pleasure that we can say this about the children's libraries that have sprung across India. This is surely something we must celebrate.

A library must be a vibrant space with a diverse collection of books. It should give enough scope for the users to understand the world around them. It should also be dynamic, with a vision to reach out to its users and give enough scope for new users and readers. It must be welcoming, attractive and user friendly as well, while having a diverse collection and utilizing spaces optimally. These are some of the key attributes of a dynamic library space.

A good library begins with the library educator at the centre. The vision of the librarian needs to ally with the vision of the library. This vision also needs to be revisited at regular intervals.

Libraries should be social institutions with their objectives, functions and operations

aligning with the communities they serve. They cannot be fostered just by legislation or whims of philanthropists.<sup>2</sup> A lot more effort is required to make them dynamic and interactive.

Children's libraries have emerged in diverse forms. These include community libraries, mobile libraries, and pop-up libraries. Most commonly they are found in school set-ups. They should be epicentres where children enjoy being surrounded by books, browse across bookshelves and experience the joy of finding their own books to read.

Taking ahead these experiences, libraries are engaging with children through a range of book related activities. They are encouraging them to become readers. They are introducing them to not just stories, but to complex themes as well.

Libraries are also providing a loving, compassionate ear to what children have to say. They are reaching the remotest of locations as well. They are envisioning to become safe spaces for children in conflict-ridden zones. They are setting the narrative for mental health and well-being of children and adults.

This reminds us of what Maya Angeleou has shared while saying how a library saved her own life as a child:

*When it looked like the sun  
would not shine anymore*

*God put a rainbow in the clouds*

*Look at that — look at that!*

*That's a library — a library is a  
rainbow in the clouds.*

Stories of such libraries instil us with hope.





A large number of such libraries have started to evolve in India. One of the contributing factors have been the vibrant effects of library related courses and training programs. The rise in the publication of children's literature in the country is also a facilitative part of this process. The human element in the library set-up is very critical. Courses for library educators are enabling practitioners and educators to learn the art of library practice.

A lot of appreciation also needs to reach out to children's books' authors, illustrators, translators, publishers, and all those engaged in publishing diverse children's literature. There has been a significant increase in publishing critical children's literature across multiple age groups. The themes have also become diverse over the years. The content is evolving to become more inclusive.

These strands of children's literature leave behind a lot of curiosity, thoughts and excitement, for both readers and library practitioners. Many good books are also being translated to other languages. However, a lot of effort is still needed on this front. The publication of good books have definitely

added a spark to children's libraries. But given the size of our country and its diversity, much deeper thought is required to ensure that these books reach out to all the children.

This Samuhik Pahal issue has focused on two aspects: First, the views of a diverse set of people who are enabling libraries, and who have contributed with their thoughts and reflections on children's libraries. An effort has also been made to gather the ideas of authors, illustrators and editors on the publishing of children's literature. Second, there is a focus on library initiatives from across the country. These initiatives are opening up books for children, where words and illustrations act as songs for them.

These libraries are not just holding a collection of books that are sourced from outside and curated. They are also contributing to some wonderful creations in children's literature. They are becoming the voices of children and their communities. This is why such libraries are worth celebrating.

These children's libraries make space for every way of being. They uphold inclusion and diversity. Each of these libraries has its own story of origin, survival and thriving. Of course, they come with their own struggles and challenges as well. This gives us more reasons to share, learn and get inspired.

Let us first begin by getting to know them, and celebrate them. This could help us imagine and explore their immense potential and possibilities.

- PRAYOG Team

## Endnotes

1. Mukunda, Usha. December 2021. 'Library as a place.' *Teacher Plus*.
2. Rao, K.R., 1961. 'Library development in India.' *The Library Quarterly*, 31(2), pp.135-153.



# Nurturing Ecosystem of Children's Literature and Reading for Pleasure in India

*Amrita Patwardhan*

## Libraries, Children's Literature and the Reading Ecosystem

**C**hildren's literature and the library ecosystem in India have come a long way, over the years. Government of India, by setting up National Book Trust (NBT) in 1957, and Nehru Bal Pustakalay division for children's publishing, did signal the young nation's seriousness about promoting reading. It has contributed towards publishing of affordable books in multiple Indian languages and promotion of books through book fairs and other activities.

Children's Book Trust (CBT), also set up in the same year with the leadership of well-known cartoonist Shankar, became a center

of publishing, professional development courses, especially focused on children. Despite this early start, followed by the promise of National Centre for Children's Literature at NBT in the early 1990s, as well as the earliest education commissions highlighting the importance of libraries for children, the ecosystem stagnated over the years.

The last two decades, however, have seen the resurgence of new players. This has contributed to the evolution of multiple dimensions of children's literature and the reading promotion ecosystem. This includes independent publishers focusing on children such as Tulika, Eklavya, Pratham Books and Jugnoo. Initiatives to promote libraries for



Tata Trusts

Government school teacher doing a read aloud in Jharkhand

children, like Room to Read and Tata Trusts, have also emerged. Professional development efforts, such as the Library Educator's Course (LEC) in Hindi and English, are slowly and steadily building a much needed cadre of trained library educators. Finally, there is a widening pool of players recognizing books, authors and illustrators through awards in the space of children's literature, providing much needed visibility.

To develop the field of children's books and reading for pleasure, we need quality of collection, and ease of access to good books. We also need trained educators who help bring books alive to children, and avenues to disseminate books. All these are interconnected features.

This makes all these diverse and yet connected efforts critical elements for the ecosystem to grow and thrive. We have taken a few steps in the direction through combined efforts of many players. However, we still have a very long way to go in making reading for pleasure a reality for the majority of children in the country.

## The Parag Initiative

Tata Trusts' Parag initiative has made a small contribution in identifying sectoral gaps in children's literature and reading promotion. It has tried to address them through work done in partnership with multiple stakeholders. These include publishers, non-profit organizations and academic institutions.

Work has focused on multiple strands. The initiative supports development of quality books in different Indian languages. It offers professional development courses for librarians, teachers, educators and illustrators. It has instituted awards and curated booklists in the form of the Parag Honour List. The work has also involved setting up and activating thousands of school and community libraries in some of the most remote regions in the country.



Curated collections from multiple publishers, of various genres, and in regional and local languages

## Supporting Book Development: Promoting Diversity and Equity

In the book development space, the Parag initiative has mostly worked with non-profit publishers such as Eklavya. The focus has been on developing their publication wing with a focus on books in Hindi. It has also tried to foster collaborative publications in a few other Indian languages, including non-scheduled languages.

It has partnered with Centre for Learning Resources with a focus on bi-lingual books and early readers. With Pratham Books, Muskaan and Anveshi it has worked on the 'Different Tales' series with a focus on childhoods of marginalized communities. With Tulika, the initiative has focused on select non-fiction books, and books on disability, among others.

Important collaborations have also taken place with Jyotsna Prakashan and Nav Karnataka on re-imagining classics from Marathi and Kannada in children's books. Similarly the initiative has worked with Moolagami Prakashan on early readers in tribal languages.

All this work has made us realize the need and challenges of working in multiple languages. Our effort has been to bring in a diversity in themes and representations of childhood, languages, and formats in





Libraries take many forms, here we see a mini library in a house within the community

children's books. Another important goal has been to keep the prices affordable through book development support.

## Developing Capacities, Enhancing Access

Professional development has been done through courses for library educators. These programs include the 'Library Educator's Course' (LEC) and 'Children's Library Course' (CLC) and the 'E-course on Introduction to Children's Libraries.' The initiative has also run a yearlong blended course for young illustrators through Riyaaz Academy with Ektara, Bhopal. The goal is to equip them to illustrate for children. Sustained investments in strengthening collections and professional development are central to activating library spaces in schools and communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw sudden and prolonged closure of schools. Several efforts were made by many to explore online and digital means of reaching children.

We realized limitations of these formats both with respect to effectiveness and reach. The problems were especially compounded for young children in remote areas, where face to face local contact was most effective in engaging with children. We saw many ways in which partners and communities reached out to children.

Community volunteers in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, and in South Odisha, took books through mobile libraries to children in their hamlets. These volunteers traveled on foot, cycle or scooter once a week.

Home libraries were set up by active School Management Committee members in Khunti district of Jharkhand in their veranda. In Pali district of Rajasthan and Yadgir in north Karnataka, children, who were members of their schools' children's library committees, set up libraries.

Open access, locally made bookshelves were set up in Bahraich in Uttar Pradesh. These became places for children and adults to pick a book of their choice and return it on the shelf after reading.

All these adaptations in library access and work were possible due to prior investments in developing good collections of books in the school libraries which were opened up at the community level. Building a cadre of educators and community volunteers who believed in the power of books, open access and meaningful activities around books was also critical. It was these investments, done prior to the pandemic, which helped in running various forms of libraries during the pandemic. This highlights the importance of professional development efforts.

To aid this process of development, Parag has worked on a first-of-its kind, blended, Library Educator's Course. It has been developed and offered by Tata Trusts in Hindi and Bookworm in English. This course is building a cadre of library educators. The alumni of this course



now run libraries in schools and communities in diverse settings in multiple states of India.

Grooming a community of practitioners bound by a vision about vibrant libraries and the role these can play in transforming the reading experiences of children, teachers, schools and communities is critical. However, this is also a slow and difficult process. We need to work in this area to energize library spaces across the country.

## **Libraries, the Culture of Reading and Learning**

Education Commissions and policies have repeatedly highlighted the need and provisioning of libraries. However, our education system, and the society at large, do not have easy access to functional, vibrant libraries for all children. We do not even miss not having such access. This is to do with our education system, which is dominated by recall-based examinations. Krishna Kumar, well known educationist, elaborates this phenomenon and why we have struggled to build a [culture of reading](#) and reasons why reading for pleasure has remained undermined in the country.

These challenges are real and need to be addressed. However, there are a number of emerging examples that give us hope. The post-pandemic world reminds us of the need to have multiple learning spaces for children. These spaces may be in schools, homes and in communities.

Libraries can potentially function as open, inclusive, safe and guided spaces for children. They can help them expand their skills, knowledge and motivation to learn and make sense of the world around. We have a growing number of professionals, organizations and networks who are championing this at multiple levels.

One of the key recommendations of National Education Policy 2020 is on building foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills in children. This has now taken the

form of NIPUN Bharat mission. This policy goal is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve without functional libraries in schools and classrooms.

Learning to read with understanding, and being able to express one's thoughts and emotions through writing, is fundamental to FLN. Meaningful use of literature in class will go a long way in building desire, interest and competence in children. This will also help them become independent readers and writers. It will fuel overall development of children as well, through the world that literature opens up for its readers.

It is my firm belief that a cadre of trained library educators, who can select diverse reading material for children, help children connect their lived experiences with books, become examples of adults who draw joy and purpose through reading literature, will transform the landscape of reading for pleasure, one library at a time!

**Amrita Patwardhan** has been working with the education team of Tata Trusts since 2003. Her special areas of interest are early literacy, children's literature and tribal education. She has also worked as a primary school teacher and teacher educator.

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Tata Trusts

# Connecting the Dots Between Literacy and Reading

## Libraries' Critical Role in Children's Learning

*Keerti Jayaram*

**W**ithin our programs, we consider being a thinking learner as having the ability to think independently. This includes the capacity to make sense of what one sees, hears or reads.

A thinking learner is also able to confidently articulate and express ideas, thoughts, feelings and opinions clearly through spoken, pictorial or written communication.

Children need to understand that words represent objects, places, people and a lot more. They also need to fathom that language grows through this process of symbolic representation. They must also get practice in writing as another mode of representing ideas, thoughts and feelings, etc.

### **Reading, Writing, Stories and Children's Inner Worlds**

During the early years of our journey, we conducted a study. It involved 150 children in Grade 2. Only two children responded that they wanted to read and write to communicate with their friends.

All the other children in the study linked reading and writing with school and getting marks. Alternatively they associated them with obtaining 'good jobs'.

From this, it must be evident as to why we need to emphasize the links between reading and writing with talking. In the words of James Britton, "Reading and writing float on a sea of talk."

### **Why is Literacy Important? Where Do Libraries Fit In?**

A child's inner world is full of stories. Children experience the world in the form of stories. Libraries build on this. They help develop relationships between written words, stories and children. They do this in multiple ways.

Libraries help connect reading and writing to children's inner worlds and experiences. They also enable beginning level readers and writers understand that the alphabet and letters are sound symbols that can be combined to create spoken words.

As a child begins to experience print and the written forms of words, she begins to understand scribbling, drawing and writing as various modes of communicating and expressing. When children make inner connections with written symbols and texts or pictures, it becomes a meaningful and relevant activity for them.

These elements play a critical role in making decoding a meaningful process. They also help establish connections between the spoken and the written forms of language. Words after all are a synthesis of sounds and symbols, which in turn form speech.

Lev Vygotsky says, "Writing is the written form of speech." But literacy is far more than just 'akshargyaan' or 'knowledge of letters'. And by this we don't deny the importance of akshargyaan. However, if the experience of a child is absent in the learning process, then it becomes a mechanical and meaningless rote learning activity.

A beginning level reader often struggles to read and understand the printed words in a text. However, young children soon learn to connect and weave stories from pictures. They then gradually link the pictures to the text next to it.

## **Literacy or Stories? Which Comes First?**

Children often do pretend reading. This is an important stage at which they realize that written words carry meaning. We all have faced this issue when introducing a text to a child. At times, we have felt that perhaps it is important to work on literacy first and then introduce texts and stories to children. However, this also increases the chances of missing out the stories.

Through our journey at Organization for Early Literacy Promotion (OELP), we believe both should go hand in hand. Both are important. A well-researched and exciting way of addressing this challenge is through read alouds.

Through read aloud sessions, children learn to engage with the structures and forms of written language. They are also enticed into the world of books and begin to want to read.

Our day begins with conversations with the child and read alouds. A good read aloud draws the child to the book and the world of reading. We practice three stages for a read aloud: pre, during and post reading. Each stage is important.

Many school teachers we work with have raised questions about the way we facilitate read alouds. They ask, why do we bring books, if children are not able to read? It has taken us a while to share and demonstrate that literacy is not just about reading and writing.

More importantly, it is about making meaning through written words. talking, listening, discussing, reflecting, drawing, etc. All these are integral parts of this process.

In OELP, we use the Four Blocks Framework for building the foundations of literacy.

This framework allows dedicated time for read alouds, book talks and conversations, followed by building vocabulary, writing and expressing, and finally learning the script in meaningful ways. We try to create games and interesting activities to engage the children. Most of these are based on DIY, low-cost materials.

People ask, “What comes first for you - reading or literacy?” I would like to quote Jim Trelease from his ‘Read Aloud Handbook’ here. In this book he mentions, “It is not just important for a child to learn HOW to read but equally important for a child to WANT to read.”

I just wish if we could break barriers between libraries and classrooms. OELP tries to do this by bringing books and libraries into the classroom. We strongly believe that engagement with books and written texts, and literacy learning, go hand in hand. These are processes that strengthen each other.

## **Marginalization, Literacy and Children's Sense of Self and Belonging**

We need to also understand that the world is not an equal space. What are the challenges for children growing within low literate communities?

Many children from marginalized castes come with poor self-esteem. They often arrive in classrooms with their own challenges and fears. The structured spaces of schools are an unfamiliar environment for them.

It is vital to make them feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. That needs to be the starting point. It is only when they are socially and emotionally comfortable that they begin to engage, absorb and make sense of what they see and hear in their classroom and its surroundings.

It is important to allow children to bring their real world experiences into the classroom. I remember a conversation in Grade 1 around a Tulika book, ‘Gola ka Ghar’. As the



conversation progressed to different types of homes, the children brought out the difference between ‘a ghar’ and ‘a makaan’.

They claimed that they lived in ‘ghars,’ while their teacher and other ‘bade log’ lived in makaans. Even at this young age, this group of children were aware of their place in society, and the fact that they did not live in ‘makaans’.

We believe that there is perhaps a missing link in NEP 2020. In OELP, we believe that foundational learning should precede foundational literacy. It is important to build each child’s sense of self and belonging. We have found it necessary to inculcate this sense among children that they matter. This is essential if we want them to engage meaningfully with the process of learning.

Work done at Harvard Centre for the Developing Child has established that children need to feel safe and secure for learning to begin. Our education system often misses out on the ‘sense of self’.

This is why practices like beginning with activities based on children’s names works well in engaging beginning level children in classrooms. Such activities provide children with a sense of acceptance. These also make learning meaningful and fun.

## **Challenges of Working at the Interface between Libraries and Literacy**

Having meaningful and engaging conversations has been a huge challenge for teachers in rural government schools where we work. We believe that conversation is significant for learning to happen. This goes both ways, where we talk to children as well as listen to them.

Conversations that happen in the classroom are often very shallow and mechanical. As a culture, we don’t seem talk to/with children. Instead, most often we talk down to them. This is an area in which we have really struggled. We need to demonstrate and model

engaging conversations. We also must build teachers’ capacities on having meaningful and interesting conversations in classrooms. Videos of good conversations may be shown to teachers during their training.

When we talk about promoting reading among children, just giving books is not enough. This needs to be followed up with activities like buddy reading, word games, literacy games and discussions. All these are essential, so that we can use good children’s literature to nudge questions, provoke thinking and spark dialogues.

## **Creating a Culture of Reading**

As part of the efforts to build a culture of reading amongst children and the larger communities through libraries, OELP has taken two approaches. We discuss them below.

**Potli Baba:** Children go to the *chaupaal* with a bundle of books and read out stories to the elderly. Older people love children’s books. They are extremely happy when children read out stories to them. They narrate stories to children, which they in turn write down and share in the library.

**Kahani Melas:** These are festive day events planned in government schools. During these melas, many activities related to books are undertaken by the children, their parents and community members. Teachers and parents are also involved in this process. All this helps to build a buzz around books. Children feel excited and enthusiastic as the ownership of the event is taken by them.

During summer vacations, we have at times worked on such book based kahani melas over a period 6–8 weeks. During this period, activities around story books are conducted periodically in the villages.

During these melas, children listen to stories from the elderly. They also collect local knowledge. They get to know about their villages’ histories as well. This helps them

discover their own village and their people in a deeper way. All these activities culminate in a grand 'Kahani Mela' which brings all the book-based experiences together.

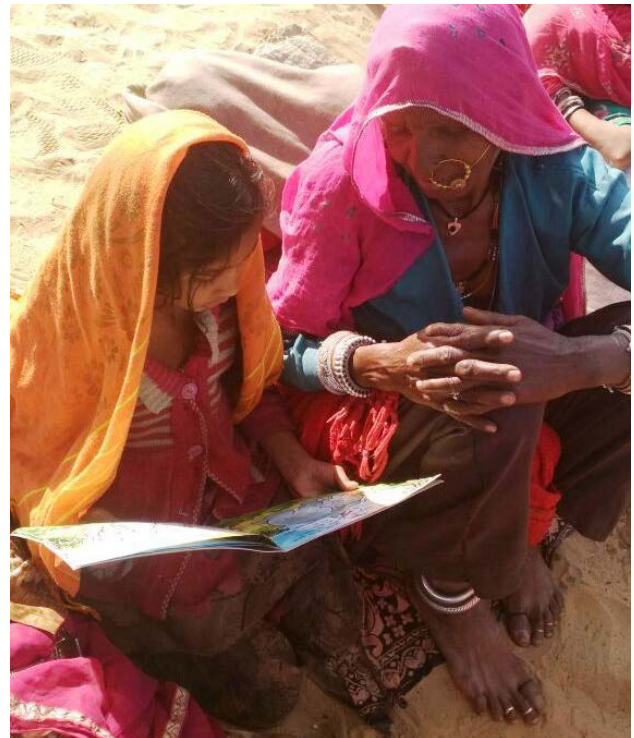
When children borrow books from our libraries and take them to their homes, they often come with demands that their mother has asked for a particular kind of book. Stories not only reach out to children but to the larger families as well.

The OELP team records the journey of the book and all those who have read the book. Many a times, these have triggered children to relate the story to their own contexts. For example, in their urge to know the history of their village, a group of children recently developed stories of monuments in and around their village. To give another example, a village map that was developed six years ago is now being redone, as children felt that a lot of local landscape has changed. So, history is not something carved on stones. It is what we create.

Through our experience, we have realized that the interest in reading and books is immense. The organization is now trying to involve adolescent girls to take leadership in the library program. There is a larger role of parents, schools and CSOs to ensure a child's learning journey. Parents' response, especially in low literate communities, is very high when they see their children read and write.

I remember little Ganga. Her parents were not very supportive of their daughter's education. However, one day when she wrote their name on the soil with a stick, they were completely speechless. They were so touched by seeing this. They could not believe that their little girl had learnt to read and write. Now Ganga's father is the one who persuades other parents in the village to send their children to school.

These examples have often encouraged the larger sections of these communities to send



OELP

their children to schools. We also try creative ways of involving parents. Sometimes children amaze you with their gestures, like making invitation cards for their parents to ensure their attendance to PTA meetings.

When it comes to reading, literacy and learning, there are many grey areas. There are no definite answers. It is not so easy to give primacy to one over the other. However, one thing is certain. There is a strong mutual connect between literacy and reading. Libraries play a very crucial role in strengthening this connect.

**Keerti Jayaram** is the Founder and Director of OELP (Organisation for Early Literacy Promotion). She has had more than 30 years of experience in elementary education as a teacher, teacher educator, curriculum developer, researcher and parent, and has interacted actively with the academic world as well as with the multiple worlds of education practitioners.

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# Books, Digital Resources, and the Right to Read

## A Community Library's Response

*Zoya Chadha*

**A**t the terrace of a building across the lane, a child appears. We hear him before we see him, as he peers down into the library's courtyard and calls out, "Hello!"

The librarian sorting books in the shade of the trees looks up each time. "Hello!"

This back and forth goes on for some time. The ritual of calling out across the lane resumes later in the day, and the next morning.

Each time someone calls out, the library responds.

This was in the winter of 2020 in Khirki Extension, New Delhi. The library branch was not then open. After having to vacate our old building, the new one was still being built. Its shelves were taking shape, books being

placed on them rapidly by librarians, so that members could access their right to read.

In March of that year, as the first nationwide lockdown was announced, we at TCLP had been forced to temporarily close our free community libraries. We worked immediately to build a new one that would be digital, that would be low-internet use, and as far accessible as it could be as an online library. We continued to agitate for the right to read in and through the internet, and responded to the changing and pressing needs of members as the pandemic wore on.

We have been running our digital library for three years now, and it is linked inextricably with the physical libraries. This relationship has been assailed with questions and challenges. In responding to these tensions, we have also had moments of sheer collective strength.



TCLP

Members gaming together at the end of a Cyber Learning Workshop.



This practice of responding constantly to the changing needs of members is what gives direction to the work of a library.

## **Right to Read and the Internet**

Free libraries, owned and run by communities, are a response to the way in which the right to read has been denied to people for centuries, and continues to be denied today. The denial of reading - reading being not only the ability to decode documents of the past and the present, but also the ability to think through books about yourself and the world - is part of a larger structure of oppression that operates to keep people powerless in the face of inequality.

Free community libraries fight against this denial. They actively agitate against it and model a more equal world. They do so by centering dalit, bahujan, working class, female and queer readers and their own stories amidst this historical oppression.

In a world that is relying increasingly on technology, where digital media is embedding itself into the daily lives of many at a rapidly increasing rate, a library must respond in a way that centres access and justice. Access to the internet is itself exclusionary and gendered. It is marked by limited smartphone availability, network connectivity and prohibitive data costs.

Further, whose stories are heard and amplified on social media and digital platforms? Whose stories are narrated and archived for posterity? Who gets to access these stories and histories? When we think of the right to access the internet, we must examine how the same exclusionary structures that deny the right to read do not disappear when we move online. They only take on new forms.

As librarians, one way to understand the relationship between books in the physical sense and as digital resources is to ask ourselves what we are working toward. A

response to this is that we work so that everyone can use libraries and access books. And this includes particularly those who are oppressed on the basis of caste, class, gender identity, religion, disability and other structures. We are, in other words, working toward a more just and equitable world.

Then how can our online library and digital programming strengthen our work toward this better world? How can we apply the core value of welcoming all to the digital resources that we build?

Keeping these questions at the centre, we work with library members to share news, media and literature on online library channels. Three times a week, members receive read-aloud videos and audios, links, library news, national news, and community videos for all ages on their phones. If you can't come to the library to listen to a story that day, you will have a video or audio on your phone of one of your librarians reading it out.

Material is shared in a variety of formats to strengthen accessibility, and text captions contextualize the posts. The tool we use most widely as our online library channel is WhatsApp. It is a platform that very nearly all those with smartphones were already familiar with and accessed regularly. It also puts limitations on file size. This ensures that the library is cognizant of the amount of internet data that our members would use while accessing the online library posts.

When members cannot come to the library in person, they are able to access the digital library platforms. These include a website and a YouTube channel, for reading. In this way, our digital library - called Duniya Sabki - strengthens access.

During the multiple lockdowns in Delhi-NCR, members frequently shared over call or text about listening with great interest to the Duniya Sabki channels. A member told a librarian over call that she and her whole family would sit down at night to listen

to an audio story by Premchand together. Many members stayed connected from their villages. Schoolteachers heard about the channel from each other and stayed connected. They forwarded the audio-video stories and resources to their class WhatsApp groups.

Now that physical libraries are open and bustling, librarians often find themselves with members who want to discuss something they saw on the channel. Recently a librarian was pulled aside by a nine-year old member who summarized to her an entire story that she had recorded for the digital library. "In that story, you read out how the man sneezes so loud that everyone gets blown away. Sometimes, my sneezes are really loud too."

As we celebrated the farewell of another librarian from one physical branch to another, a young member moved to the front of the gathering and said, "You are amazing. You read such good stories with us. And your video of *Makdi Ki Kahani* was the best. I watched that one so many times."

Another day, an adult walked into the library for more information after someone forwarded him the library's post about an Aadhaar camp nearby. He wasn't a member of the digital or physical library. But he knew someone who was.

## Charting Pathways for a Digital Library

Members have charted, from the very beginning, the trajectory of the digital library. All are regularly invited to put in requests for the kind of stories, media or resources they want on their digital library. This is a regular exercise in revising and testing the limits of the digital. It also helps understand how the online library works in tandem with the physical branches.

In keeping with the vision of the free library movement, audio-video resources developed by us respond to the needs and

interests of our members. Often we centre anti-caste narratives and dalit-bahujan literature, women and queer rights, adivasi struggles, disability inclusion, and people-led movements for justice across India and the world.

On the occasion of Manusmriti Dahan Diwas, the day Babasaheb Ambedkar burnt the book that codifies caste atrocities and the oppression of women, a colleague and I borrowed a book from the library's 'Against Caste' shelf and read up on it. We watched videos about this historic event and its continued impact, and a clip from a film on Ambedkar's life that re-enacted the day of the first burning.

Together, we put together an audio recording in which we connected this rejection of caste and gender discrimination with the work of the library movement. There is no space for caste and gender discrimination in the world we are building together. This was shared across our library channels, of which more than 2,400 families are a part.

This is one instance of how digital and physical resources work together to strengthen the library's vision. There are many more. Members of all ages often record their own experiences to share with the community - experiences of reading, of achievement, of struggle - so that the digital library is a space of resonance. It is a space through which we organize around shared rights and shared experiences.

To be asked to choose, then, between books and digital resources and to think of the two as a dichotomy is a forced opposition of things. Both of these must work together to support each other for the goal of real access and presence. Digital libraries and media cannot replace physical books and 'offline' libraries. To imagine a world where that happens is an exclusionary one where reading is the estate of a few. Nor can we dismiss digital resources and media as unnecessary

or irrelevant. In our laptop learning program, we often ask members who the internet belongs to. The response is resounding and immediate: 'Everyone.'

Recently, a member walked in and shared that on the way to the library she had seen children, adults, and people of different ages taking turns to play a game on one phone. "I saw that and I thought, it's true about what we say in the library - that everyone should have the right to use technology."

## Digital Rights in and Through Libraries

Essential government services are becoming increasingly digitized. These include vaccine booking systems, labour card registrations and central university admissions. Those who are already excluded from healthcare, education and other systems are at a greater risk. These online platforms should be rightfully accessible to everyone.

But they are made for only a certain kind of person. This is someone who is a fluent reader, non-disabled, English speaking, well-versed in digital technology, with a faultless internet connection, who is able to confidently approach these systems because they have already served him well in the past. Those who are left out of this conception of a user of government services are inevitably those already oppressed on the basis of caste, class, gender and disability.

Our response here as librarians is twofold. First, we must create a space where communities can collectively speak out against these exclusionary systems. Second, we must create spaces in the libraries where members can be supported to access these platforms. Our laptop access program in the TCLP branch libraries, for instance, gives members free access for leisure, entertainment, education, or accessing any such portal. We support members to learn to use laptops through a supportive interface with links and audio notes about different platforms, and also through workshops,

where we together think critically about digital and social media. What we work toward, then, is not only digital access, but also the different forms of digital presence.

During the lockdowns in Delhi-NCR, we ran online reading intervention classes with library members. Classes were held online. We delivered physical books to members for reading during and after classes. We also shared links to online websites and free resources.

For this particular intervention, our members were aged between eight and fifteen. They had limited access to the internet and were on their way to becoming fluent readers. They often asked why websites and apps with all the pretensions of being free and open to all actually allowed access only when one registered. Members were met with pages requesting they share their full names, their phone numbers, their email addresses, and more. Members asked, consistently - "Why are they asking us this? Why do we need to share this information?" These are pointed questions at both the lack of transparency about data privacy and the inaccessibility of the user registration step itself. They take us to larger questions about the ways in which companies and governments make certain choices with regard to technology that are both biased and exclusionary.

Library practitioners and activists must critically examine the increasing digitization in their own contexts, as it brings with it growing privacy, surveillance, and data concerns. As with systems like Aadhaar, we must make information about these very real concerns available while acknowledging that it is a necessity for many.

We cannot afford to disengage. This is a tension that we cannot resolve. We must acknowledge and work with this tension. For example, when we share information about a nearby Aadhaar camp with our members via our digital library channels, we would not only look at what the process is, but also how





Member video series: "Student Leaders ko Jaano" on YouTube

exclusionary it is. Further, we invite stories that are related to this exclusion. How can we build archives of these stories as we agitate against such systems?

We still run reading intervention classes. However, these now operate fully out of our physical library branches. It is a common sight to see members leave one room after their English reading intervention class and enter another for using the laptop access program to practise their language skills through one of the free resources we have curated. It is also common to see members watching music videos - at times singing along to the videos made by rappers from their own library community. Our digital resources and our books seem to be in constant conversation with each other.

Our laptop and internet learning curriculum in the libraries is a direct response to members of all ages who have expressed the need for it. We work with an ever-evolving set of questions. How can we challenge the inequities and injustices of the world as they take on new forms when we move online? How can we agitate for a free and just online world, while also building a space where the

internet can be used by library members powerfully for leisure, for education and for expression? How can our digital library curriculum support members to begin using the internet with the sense and strength of a collective community?

These are questions to which the answers are not easy, nor are they singular. As we continue to run libraries and work to build greater access and presence, we will respond to the changing, and difficult, realities of our time. A library is precisely that - a space that is always present for its community and members. A space that responds, while keeping the goal of justice and greater access at the centre.

**Zoya Chadha** is a librarian and educator based in New Delhi. She manages the digital library and digital learning curriculum at The Community Library Project (TCLP).

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# In Conversation with BlueJackal

PRAYOG Team

*BlueJackal is an independent platform for engaging with, creating and publishing visual narratives, comics and picture books. It also initiates dialogue and learning within these contexts through interactive programs. It is run by Shivangi Singh, Shefalee Jain, Lokesh Khodke and Sharvari Deshpande. Shivangi and Lokesh participated in the conversation. While the interview was conducted bilingually in English and Hindi, the transcript has been translated to English.*

**S**urya (Prayog): *How did the thought to start this publishing house emerge? Why did you feel the need to start something new? Also, the name is very intriguing. How did it come up?*

**Shivangi (Blue Jackal):** The beginning of BlueJackal was from a meeting with friends. We were all informally discussing our desire to move beyond individual art practices, studios and art galleries. In such spaces an artwork often just ends up getting displayed on walls. A very limited audience becomes the viewer. The first such meeting happened at Lokesh's and Shefalee's house in Delhi, sometime in 2015.

Then, all of us were working in our respective jobs as well as practising art. However, we wanted a space where we could collectively think and create something. Many of us who met then, had some experience of working as children's books illustrators. Publishing as a collective activity and engagement became one possible centre of interest.

This we thought would allow us to move beyond our studio practices, push us to think about the kind of stories we wanted to tell and also the kind of audience we wanted to reach. This was the beginning of what would eventually become BlueJackal.

We started off with 'Situation Comics,' which is an open call for participants to respond to a given situation/prompt, in the form of one-page comics. We propose a situation or a prompt based on a historical event or on a fabulation, which invites creative participation to unfold as a comic strip. Situation Comics has had three episodes, each of the open calls received a wide range of entries that also addressed the contexts of the artists who made them.

Our first 'Howl for Entries' (a play on 'Call for Entries') came from a need to reflect on Rohith Vemula's institutional murder and the poignant and strong last note that he left for all of us to grapple with. Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD scholar from University of Hyderabad, Telangana, India, wrote [this note](#) just before he was pushed to take his own life on January 17, 2016, due to caste-based discrimination within the university.

We received entries from a variety of artists. Their responses and concerns were diverse. What we loved was that people who were not formally trained in the Visual Arts also participated in this! It was so exciting to be able to build a platform where contributors can share their artworks while retaining complete ownership of it. One of the reasons to start the platform online was to go beyond the exhibition spaces we were familiar with. Another cause was that it was possible with limited funding.

**Lokesh (BJ):** Like Shivangi said, we were already connected to the world of books through publication houses like Eklavya Publication, Muskaan Publication, and with magazines like Chakmak (published by Eklavya, Bhopal). We had been conducting workshops with children as art educators

as well. And these experiences pushed us to ask certain pressing questions like, 'What is childhood?' Can it be defined? If yes, then what are the multiple ways in which this could be done?

We wanted to take these questions forward at BlueJackal. Therefore, our platform began evolving organically as well as consciously. Initially we were unclear about what our source of funding would be.

However, we did not stall work due to monetary constraints. We were aware of, and influenced by, zine culture and little magazine culture, as well as the graphic novel and comic culture of Delhi. So, this encouraged us to publish with limited means on cheap paper at affordable prices.

We wanted the name of our group/initiative to be something playful and yet thought provoking. We were discussing several names when the story of 'Ranga Siyaar' came up. The siyaar/jackal in this story is seen as a 'treacherous' and 'shrewd' animal, who 'deceives' the other animals with his accidentally found blue coat. But looked at from another point of view, it is also a story of survival of the jackal in the treacherous and hierarchical forest.

The story also reminded us of casteist proverbs like "isne apni jaat dikha di" or "asli rang dikha diya." These imply that, one must not cross boundaries of given identities. And that if one does, then they will be shown their 'true' place. We wanted to keep with the idea of playful treachery, which for us is not manipulative but an adaptive means of survival.

**Surya (P):** So wonderful! This brings me to a question. Some books portray risky texts. Not risky because it should be kept away from readers, in fact all the more reason to read it. However, because it holds some complexity and hence is significant. We have to also think whether our readers are prepared to be opened up to these topics. So how do you



choose these topics? What are the challenges associated with these choices?

**Lokesh (BJ):** I suppose your question comes from the context of children's literature and what is appropriate or accessible to children. BlueJackal is not a children's book publication. But at the same time, we also don't want to keep children from reading our books. We have always wanted to break the boundaries between children's literature and the so-called adult literature. It is quite a challenging task, but also worth working toward.

Children come from diverse experiences and backgrounds. These give them different kinds and intensities of experiences and knowledge at various points of their childhood. It is unfair, when we decide to open content to them just on the basis of certain normative standards. These often come from people like us, who are mostly from a very limited upper middle class understanding of childhood. So, it is tricky to decide which themes should be opened to the children just by looking at their age.

Let's take the book 'Payal Kho Gayi' (Hindi), which has been published by Muskaan and Eklavya, as an example. It has been written by children from a *basti* and illustrated by Kanak Shashi. It was produced as part of a





workshop conducted by Muskaan. Here, six to eight year olds from a small *basti* were asked to respond to a hypothetical situation. They were requested to imagine that their friend Payal had gone missing. Could they guess where she could be? Where would they look for her?

The children thought over this and also made some drawings. 'Payal Kho Gayi' was born out of these very thoughts and drawings of the children. Among the many possibilities that the children thought of, regarding where Payal could be, two can be seen on the inner side of the front and back covers of the book in the form of drawings. One shows Payal could be in prison and another shows a man abducting Payal in a car.

Now, many parents and teachers might argue that young children should not read this picture book. However, we must remember that there are many kinds of childhoods around us. Children from diverse backgrounds are exposed to multiple kinds of realities. Therefore, it becomes important to address these. How we could do this remains an important question to address. You can read [an article](#) on 'Payal Kho Gayi' by Shefalee Jain on the BlueJackal website.

**Shivangi (BJ):** In BlueJackal's latest set of books 'OCTA 2021: Two One Za Two, Two Two Za...' our effort was precisely this. We wanted to, together with other artists, think about the category of childhood through workshops. Childhood is very often viewed as 'good', 'innocent' and in need of 'protection.'

These stereotypes extend to children's book illustrations, where an 'ideal child' is often illustrated as - the fair skinned child, the obedient child, the gender conforming child.

To rethink these ways in which we define childhood, we invited 24 artists for these workshops. We gave them a prompt to help begin the process of this rethinking. The prompt was to bring one or more rhymes and proverbs from their growing up years, in their mother tongues. These were to be used as tools to critically rethink images and imaginations of childhood.

The discussions around these rhymes and proverbs opened a diverse picture of childhood for each of us during the workshops. 'OCTA 2021: Two One Za Two, Two Two Za...' brings together these reflections in the form of illustrated picture books, stories and rhymes. It compiles seven books of different sizes and formats into a book box.

**Binit (P):** We got a chance to read many of BlueJackal's latest books such as 'Chudail' and 'Dohri Zindagi.' These books touch upon various topics and themes which are so present in our daily lives and experiences. However, not everyone talks about them. I would like to know what inspires your choices of themes and topics while making books?

**Lokesh (BJ):** Thank You Binit, for sharing so elaborately on how you are reading, and also looking deeply into the books. It is very encouraging to hear this. It makes us want to continue to work in this area.

Actually, what you mentioned about layers of life is itself our inspiration behind creating them. If life is filled with so many layers, why keep touching just one repeatedly? Doing so creates a kind of opaqueness, where we fail to see the diverse layers of our own, and of other's, lives.

For example, while making 'Chudail,' I had thought that it must be a comic which is humorous. It must bring in a critical reflection

on politics, culture, family and gender, in a way that these feel like a part of our daily lives. How can I try to put forth pertinent and thought-provoking questions to the readers, without generalizing them and yet not making them very remote and difficult to grasp.

**Shivangi (BJ):** Also, what is happening around us in post-2014 India is important. We want to reflect upon that. We want to do this through comics, stories and graphic narratives. It is not always necessary that the current state of things be expressed through journalism. It can be commented upon beautifully and effectively through stories too.

And, journalism is not what it used to be earlier. So, we make visual stories that are playful and poetic and are at the same time rooted in socio-political realities. Some examples of this are 'Letters to O' written by Lokesh, 'Ek Philistini Shayad Kahe' by Shefalee Jain and 'Laila Majnun' by Sharvari Deshpande.

**Lokesh (BJ):** Similarly, 'Dohri Zindagi' is a folktale from Rajasthan, retold by Vijaydan Detha and illustrated by Shefalee Jain. This story has been adapted earlier through plays. So, when Shefalee chose to work on it, she wanted to focus on the other, lesser visited layers of the tale through her illustrations.

Words build a story. As artists, we also bring a parallel reality to these words. This reality comes from our experiences. Sometimes these also come from the different times and geographies that we belong to.

So, when the two come together, the narrative need not always essentially portray just what the words are saying. Illustrations have their own way of opening up a different world, which may not have been written in words.

Take the example of 'Jani Mhane,' a work by Sharvari Deshpande, who is one of our team members. 'Jani Mhane,' written in Marathi, is originally a 12<sup>th</sup> century work. However, the

illustrations made by Sharvari are rooted in contemporary times.

**Binit (P):** Now that we have talked about stories inspired from daily lives, how are you thinking of writing them for children? Although some literature is classified as children's literature, we like to think that even adults can read and enjoy these works. How can these themes related to daily life be simplified and also be written for children?

**Lokesh (BJ):** We are always thinking about this. For example, Samanta Raita's story on the BlueJackal website, titled 'Moon on an Old Scooter,' has been designed as a web comic. It is folklore, retold in a contemporary way. If you look at this story, the structure is



BlueJackal

rather simple. It contains a certain amount of light-heartedness.

However, it cannot just be seen as children's literature. It also becomes more significant when Samanta tells the story because he belongs to the Saura tribe from which the story emerges.

**Shivangi (BJ):** There is another such invited story, titled 'The Secret of Erdmannlistein' by Wanda Dufner, on our website. It comes from her own memory of going for a picnic as a child.

It also speaks of the loneliness some children face when they don't fit in. That is also as much a story for children as for adults.

Both 'Moon on an Old Scooter' and 'The Secret of Erdmannlistein' were sent to us in response to a BlueJackal open call. It invited artists and contributors to bring legends, myths and folktales from their contexts and retell them in comic, picture book or visual story formats.

**Lokesh (BJ):** We try to look at many things while trying to represent or talk about challenging and difficult topics in children's literature. We are inspired by the many examples of other authors and illustrators around us.

Some time back there was a controversy over this book in Jharkhand. Antara released this book called 'Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire: Adventures in Champakbagh' by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar.

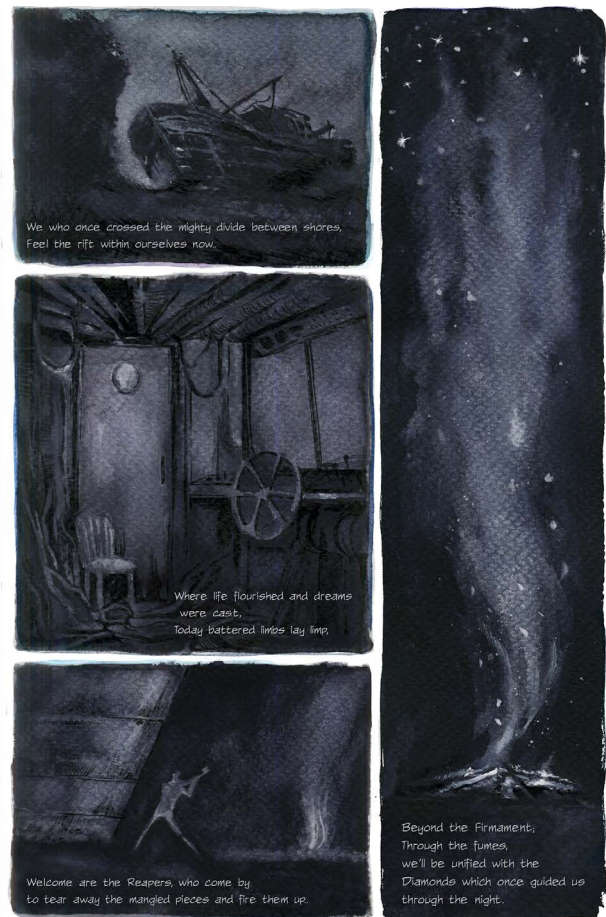
'Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire' is a book for children and young adults like many others such as the 'Aditi and Her Friends' series by Suniti Namjoshi. It is a very interesting story about a dragon who is adopted and brought up by some children.

At one point in the story, the children have run out of food at home and are very hungry. The dragon catches some mice and roasts them with his breath and the children eat the mice happily.

The writer does not mention anywhere in the story that the children belong to the Musahar community. However, it is interesting to note how delicately the author has introduced a layer to the children's story.

Children from a different context can now understand or get exposed to different kinds of food that can be consumed by people either out of choice or by necessity!

**Siddhi (P):** This way of including insights of people through open calls is very interesting. Your team has many books which have been written and illustrated by the same person. How do these books come out differently?



Also, you have talked about simultaneously maintaining and dissolving the strategic boundaries between writers, illustrators and researchers. Please tell us more about that.

**Lokesh (BJ):** I think it keeps changing from book to book as to what kind of collaboration it is going to be. When we are writing a story by ourselves, then realities are different as compared to a retelling of a story.

**Shivangi (BJ):** Through our collective practice and work, we try to break the silos of being a single type of writer or illustrator or a researcher. Also, art is not something a selected bunch of 'qualified' people should be doing.

The contributors we invited were also not necessarily all artists. All of us from the team come from a visual arts background. We keep realizing that there are limitations to this too.

**Surya (P):** How do you see yourself in the future, let's say ten years down the line?



**Lokesh (BJ):** Not that we have a definite answer to this question. Still we try moving ahead with some shorter term goals. We also think about how and where we take not only our publications but also share our ideas and thoughts. In this regard, we sometimes do workshops with different organizations and age groups. During the past many years, independent comics, zines and picture book publishing has increased across India.

Many of us, who are collectives as well as individual makers and publishers across India, have come together to create a platform called 'Indie Comix Fest'. It is a space where independently published comic books can be showcased and sold. It also aims to create a community of creators and likeminded people. BlueJackal had been co-organizing the Delhi chapter of Indie Comix Fest since the last few years, along with a group of comics creators and publishers.

We also try to approach libraries, so that our books are read by many people. Most of the time it is done through word of mouth. Like how we reached Prayog, TCLP, Muskaan schools etc.

We are trying to reach the remote regions too, where work of social change is happening at the grassroots. So, we are eager to work in such places either through workshops, books and the content created by us.

**Surya (P):** What suggestions would you give to other organizations, libraries, educational spaces or individuals working with children's literature, especially when one is beginning to explore this area? It becomes very tough to just share a booklist only because we have curated it. Our context and purpose may or may not be the same or best suited for some other place. So, what would you do in such a situation?

**Shivangi (BJ):** First, I think we ourselves need to learn from organizations about their processes as how they build their collections and prepare lists of books that needs to



BlueJackal

be added. What should be the screening process? I have to personally say that we should have an online resource list that could be accessed by anyone. This list will have information about the latest releases or the books available in each genre or theme, for example the latest books released under the theme of gender in children's literature and so on.

I feel this would be a very unique and interesting way to explore different collections under different categories and then select the books that we want to have in our collection. In some ways this type of categorization is already done by different libraries on an organizational level. However, it would be really nice to have a platform where this type of categorization and listing is done on a larger level for us to learn and explore.

**Lokesh (BJ):** I would like to add that often children take interest in multiple things and disconnected areas simultaneously. And a library can be an amazing place where this aspect can be playfully engaged with.

**Surya (P):** We are also learning by making mistakes. For example, whenever we decide that a book should be in a particular category or it is related to a particular thing, but then after sometime we revisit it and we might then decide that now this belongs to some other theme. So, in this way, we buy books from different publications, we read them and then decide about the age group, theme and genre it can be categorized under. This learning has evolved from various places and sources.

# बाल साहित्य के निर्माण में एकलव्य संस्था के अनुभव और अन्तर्दृष्टि

विनीत रंजन

एकलव्य फाउण्डेशन मध्य प्रदेश में स्थित गैर-सरकारी संस्था है जो पिछले चालीस वर्षों से शिक्षा के क्षेत्र में नवाचार का काम कर रही है। इसके साथ ही यह बाल साहित्य और शिक्षा साहित्य विकसित करने का, हाशियाकृत समुदायों के बच्चों की आवाजों को बाल साहित्य में जगह देने का और विविधतापूर्ण साहित्य विकसित करने का प्रयास भी कर रही है। बाल साहित्य को विकसित करने के अनुभवों पर एकलव्य के प्रकाशन टीम की सदस्य दीपाली शुक्ला से प्रयोग टीम की जैनब और सिद्धि ने संवाद किया। यह आलेख इसी बातचीत पर आधारित है।

**जैनब :** दीपाली जी हम आपके सफर के बारे में जानना चाहेंगे। आपकी लॉ की पृष्ठभूमि है, आपने मानव अधिकार में स्पेशलाइजेशन किया है और कुछ साल पत्रकारिता भी की है। इन अनुभवों ने आपके काम को और एकलव्य में आपके अभी तक के सफर को कैसे प्रभावित किया?

**दीपाली :** यह पूरा सफर काफी रोमांचक रहा है। एक समय मैं काफी कहानियाँ लिखा करती थी और ये जो लिखने का शौक था वह मेरी अपनी शिक्षा के साथ साथ चलता रहा। स्नातक के बाद मेरी दिलचस्पी लॉ पढ़ने में थी क्योंकि यह एक ऐसा विषय था जो मुझे कानून को जानने-समझने में मदद करने वाला था। दूसरा, उस वक्त लड़कियाँ लॉ कम ही पढ़ा करती थीं। आज से लगभग बाईस साल पहले मानव अधिकार हमारे देश में उभर ही रहा था। इसके साथ ही महिलाओं को लेकर देश में नए-नए कानून और दिशानिर्देश भी आए थे। लेखन की बात करूँ तो मैंने महिलाओं से जुड़ी काफी कहानियाँ लिखी हैं जो अलग-अलग अखबारों और पत्रिकाओं में प्रकाशित हुईं। मजे की बात यह है कि मेरी पढ़ाई और नौकरी साथ-साथ चल रहे थे। एक तरफ लॉ की पढ़ाई और दूसरी तरफ प्रिंट मीडिया में सब-एडिटर के रूप में काम। छह साल तक प्रिंट मीडिया से जुड़ने के बाद मैं इसी क्षेत्र में आगे काम करने का सोच रही थी। उन्हीं दिनों एकलव्य फाउण्डेशन के बारे में पता चला। मैंने सम्पादकीय टीम से जुड़ने के लिए आवेदन किया और मेरा चयन हो गया। शुरू-शुरू में एकलव्य का माहौल मेरे लिए एकदम नया था। यहाँ हायरार्की नहीं थी, उस तरह से डेडलाइन नहीं थी जैसी प्रिंट मीडिया में होती थी। किताबों को बनाने के कुछ हिस्से मेरे काम से जुड़ते गए। धीरे-धीरे स्क्रिप्ट को पढ़ने से लेकर उसका सम्पादन, उसकी डिजाइन को लेकर चित्रकार के साथ चर्चा, लेखकों के साथ फीडबैक, अनुबन्ध यह सब काम मेरे रोजमर्रा के कामों में शामिल होते गए। एक सम्पादक के तौर पर खुद पर काम करने और खुद को बेहतर करने का काम तो था ही। एकलव्य में एक और बढ़िया बात यह होती है कि यहाँ सम्पादकीय टीम लगातार साहित्य को

लेकर बात करती है जिससे हम विभिन्न नजरियों को जान पाते हैं। इससे पढ़ने का चस्का भी बढ़ा। दो साल तक सम्पादकीय टीम में फेलोशिप करने के बाद यह लगा कि यहाँ आगे भी काम करना चाहिए क्योंकि काम करने की आजादी है, टीम का सहयोग है और सबसे बड़ी बात कि काम में मजा आ रहा है। धीरे धीरे साल बढ़ते गए। और आज जब मैं अपने सफर को पीछे मुड़कर देखती हूँ तो यह महसूस करती हूँ कि यहाँ काम का सक्रिय और सकारात्मक माहौल, शिक्षा को लेकर विचार और दर्शन मुझे कहीं अन्दर तक छू गया है। यहाँ काम करने की आजादी है, मौके हैं और अगर आप पहल लेते हैं तो फिर आप काफी आगे बढ़ सकते हैं। मैंने ग्यारह साल तक सम्पादकीय टीम के साथ काम किया। उसी दौरान मुझे यह महसूस हुआ कि जिन बच्चों के लिए हम किताबें बनाते हैं वो इन किताबों को कैसे देखते-समझते हैं, एक पाठक के तौर पर उनकी प्रतिक्रिया क्या होती है, समुदाय में पढ़ने का माहौल नहीं है तो साहित्य के साथ जुड़ाव बनाने में उन्हें किस किस्म की दिक्कतें आती हैं, इन सब मुद्दों पर काम किया जाए। उसके बाद ही मैंने रीडिंग और लाइब्रेरी में काम शुरू किया और फिलहाल इस काम को कर रही हूँ। इस तरह से मेरा पूरा सफर ही रोमांचक रहा है।

**सिद्धि :** बच्चों के लिए बाल साहित्य प्रकाशित करते वक्त किन-किन बिन्दुओं और विषयों को ध्यान में रखा जाता है? साथ ही जिस बाल साहित्य की बात की जा रही है उसके लिए बच्चों को कैसे और कहाँ शामिल किया जाता है?

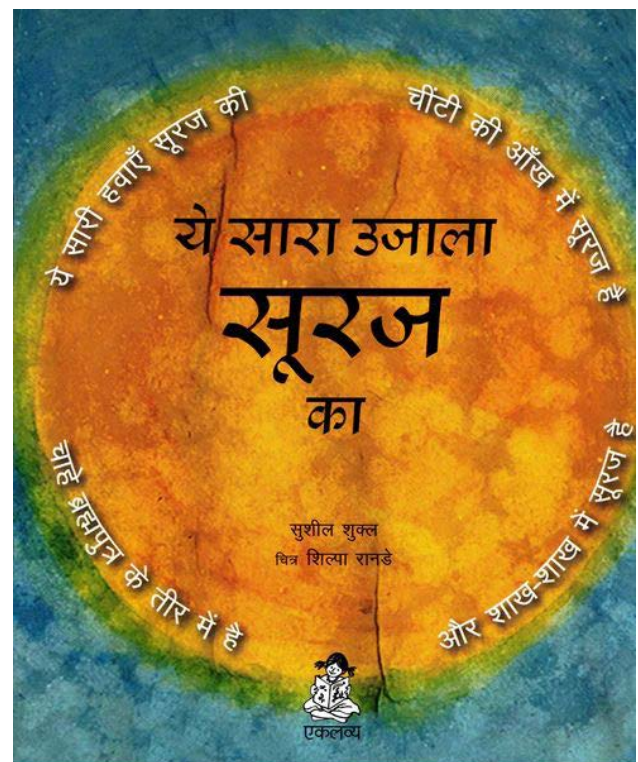
**दीपाली :** पहला यह कि साहित्य बच्चों को सोचने-विचारने का मौका देता हो, दूसरा रचनात्मकता और कल्पनाशीलता को जगह देता हो और तीसरा उसमें नैतिकता का पाठ सीधे तौर पर न हो। जिस तरह का बाल साहित्य एकलव्य प्रकाशित करता आया है और कर रहा है उसमें एक विविधता देखने को मिलती है। जिस तरह से बच्चों में, उनके बचपन में विविधता पाई जाती है वही विविधता साहित्य में भी दिखनी चाहिए। इसी बात को ध्यान में रखते हुए एकलव्य द्वारा प्रकाशित किताबों में आपको ऐसे बच्चे भी मिलेंगे जो आमतौर पर मुख्यधारा की किताबों में विरले ही देखने को मिलते हैं। जिन बच्चों के लिए किताबें विकसित हो रही हैं उनकी जिन्दगी के द्वंद्व, उनके रिश्तों, उनके संघर्षों को साहित्य में शामिल करना जरूरी है और हम इसका प्रयास करते हैं।

कई बार यह देखने के लिए कि बच्चे कहानी के साथ और चित्रों के साथ खुद को कैसे जोड़ रहे हैं, मैंने स्क्रिप्ट को बच्चों के बीच पढ़कर उसके बारे में चर्चा भी की है। एकलव्य के फील्ड कार्यक्रमों में लगातार ऐसे बच्चों के साथ काम होता है जो आदिवासी समुदाय या वंचित समुदायों से हैं। उदाहरण के तौर पर, पिछले 4 साल से

भोपाल के आसपास जो गाँव हैं वहाँ पर एक रीडिंग प्रोजेक्ट चल रहा था उसमें बड़ी संख्या वंचित समुदायों के बच्चों की थी। अगर हम हिन्दी भाषी इलाके की बात करें तो पढ़ने का माहौल समुदाय में न होना एक चुनौती है, दूसरा बच्चों के लिए बाल साहित्य की उपलब्धता भी एक मसला है। स्कूलों में किताबें हैं लेकिन लाइब्रेरी का सक्रिय संचालन एक और बड़ा मुद्दा है। ऐसे में जब आप बच्चों के साहित्य को विकसित करने की प्रक्रिया में शामिल होते हैं तो यह ध्यान रखना महत्वपूर्ण होता है कि आप जिन बच्चों के बारे में विचार कर रहे हैं उन्हें पाठ्यपुस्तक के अलावा पढ़ने के मौके बहुत ही कम मिलते हैं, परिवार में भी पढ़ने का माहौल नहीं होता है, तो ऐसे में बच्चों के साहित्य में किस तरह की किताबें शामिल होनी चाहिए? क्योंकि पाठ्यपुस्तक के जो पाठ हैं वे किसी एक नजरिए से चीजों को देखने और समझने के मौके देते हैं और उनमें कहीं न कहीं नैतिकता पर जोर होता है। पाठ्यपुस्तकें अपने अनुभव से सीखने का, किसी परिस्थिति में हमने जो सोचा उस पर और ज्यादा सोच-विचार करने का मौका नहीं देती।

जिस तरह से शिक्षा समझ, सोच-विचार करने, तर्क करने को विकसित करती है, वैसे ही साहित्य आपको अपने आसपास के परिवेश को देखने, उस पर सवाल करने, उस पर चिन्तन करने के मौके देता है। चिन्तन की ये सम्भावनाएँ तब ज्यादा होती हैं जब बच्चे किसी कहानी को पढ़कर उसके बारे में सोचें, उसे लेकर अपने विचारों को अपने साथियों या वयस्कों के साथ साझा करें, अपने किसी अनुभव को उससे जोड़ पाएँ, उसके किसी पात्र से जुड़ाव महसूस करें या उसके किसी ऐसे हिस्से पर बात करें जो उन्हें पसन्द आया या नहीं पसन्द आया, इस बाबत एक राय बने और उसमें सिखाने का आग्रह न हो। उसमें यह पर्याप्त गुंजाइश हो कि बच्चे जब उस कहानी को पढ़ रहे हों तो उसे लेकर कहीं ना कहीं उनके मन में कुछ सवाल आएँ, कुछ जिज्ञासा प्रकट हो। हमने अपने बचपन में जो खेलगीत गाएँ हैं, उसमें जिस तरह की तुकब-न्दियाँ और शब्दों का खेल था, घटनाएँ थीं वह हमारी जिन्दगी से घुला-मिला था इसलिए वो हमें याद रह गए। सम्भव है कि आज जब हम उन खेलगीतों के बारे में गहराई से सोचें तो उसमें कुछ दिक्कतें नजर आ सकती हैं पर फिर यह भी विचार करना होगा कि सबकी परिस्थितियाँ और अनुभव अलग-अलग होते हैं। इसलिए बच्चों के जीवन में, उनके आसपास, उनके परिवार, उनके समुदाय में जो कुछ भी घट रहा है वो सब कुछ उनके साहित्य में भी आना चाहिए। दूसरा पात्रों का सक्रिय होना भी जरूरी है, मतलब जो भी कहानी है उसके पात्र खासकर बच्चे किसी समस्या से किस तरह से जूझकर समाधान की तरफ जा रहे हैं यह कहानी में शामिल होना चाहिए। अगर हम विविधता की बात करें तो हम पाएँगे कि गाँव में या फिर शहर में रहते हुए भी बच्चों के बचपन में कितनी विविधता है। इस विविधता को कहानियों में दिखना जरूरी है। कहानी के विषय में भी विविधता की जरूरत है, यानी सबकी आवाजों सबके प्रतिनिधित्व पर ध्यान दिया जाना चाहिए। ये साहित्य जिन बच्चों के लिए है वो कहीं ना कहीं उन कहानियों में, किताबों में इस विविधता को देखें और समझें ऐसा हमारा प्रयास रहता है। मैंने देखा है कि जब बच्चे ऐसा साहित्य पढ़ते हैं तो उससे जुड़ पाते हैं। उस पर बच्चों की आपस में बातचीत होती है कि मेरे साथ ये घटना हुई है, मेरे

दोस्त के साथ ऐसा हुआ है, मैंने अपनी माँ को भी कभी-कभी ऐसा व्यवहार करते देखा है जैसा कहानी में है। जब बच्चे इस साहित्य को पढ़ते हैं तो कहानियों पर चर्चा होने के साथ-साथ जेंडर, समाज में व्याप्त अन्य कई प्रकार के भेदभाव पर भी चर्चा होती है और बच्चे यह सब समझ पाते हैं। धर्म को लेकर भी यह समझ बनती है कि हमारी तरह और लोगों के भी धर्म हैं जिनके बारे में जानना महत्वपूर्ण है। ऐसी चर्चाओं से बच्चों में एक शामिलियत (inclusivity) की भावना आ पाती है। जैसे मैं अगर काँचा इलया की 'माँ' कविता का जिक्र करूँ तो उसमें उन्होंने एक माँ के संघर्ष और उसकी ताकत को दर्शाया है, या दिलेर बड़ेय्या की कहानी जिसमें बच्चा देख रहा है कि माँ को एक ऊँची जाति के व्यक्ति के आने पर अपनी चप्पलों को कैसे रखना है, या ईरानी कहानी 'कीमिया' जिसमें एक बच्ची मौत को चकमा दे रही है। मौत जैसे विषय पर यह कहानी पढ़ने वालों को एक अलग नजरिया देती है।



Eklavya

**सिद्धि :** आप जिन विविधताओं की बात कर रही हैं उनके अलावा भी भारत में अनेक विविधताएँ हैं, परिवेश हैं, तो उन सब को स्थान देने के लिए आप लोग क्या प्रयास करते हैं?

**दीपाली :** हमारे देश में भौगोलिक और सांस्कृतिक विविधताएँ काफी हैं। एकलव्य ने इस ओर कुछ कोशिशें की हैं, जैसे— लोक कथाओं, कहानियों का संकलन, गोण्ड, परधान शैली और भील शैली में किताबों में चित्रांकन, खेलगीतों के संकलन आदि। इसके अलावा अलग-अलग संस्थाओं द्वारा विकसित किए गए साहित्य को हिन्दी में अनुवादित करके प्रकाशित करने का प्रयास भी किया गया है। 'बम्बू... टस से मस न होने वाला गधा' किताब इसका एक उदाहरण है। कोशिश यह भी है कि किताबों का अनुवाद दूसरी भारतीय भाषाओं में भी हो और साहित्य उन पाठकों तक भी पहुँचे। इसके लिए भी समय-समय पर कोशिश की गई है। शेड्यूल और



नॉन शेड्यूल, दोनों ही भाषाओं में सामग्री-निर्माण और अनुवाद के काम जारी हैं।

**सिद्धि :** जब किसी समुदाय पर किताब लिखी जाती है, तब उसकी वास्तविकता का ध्यान कैसे रखा जाता है? कुछ हद तक आपने इसके बारे में पहले बताया है, पर क्या आप उसमें कुछ और जोड़ना चाहेंगी?

**दीपाली :** बड़वानी, मध्यप्रदेश के आधारशिला स्कूल के बच्चों ने अकाल को लेकर अपने समुदाय का एक डॉक्युमेंटेशन किया। कई सालों पहले जब अकाल पड़ा था उस वक्त लोगों ने क्या खाया, क्या सामग्री इस्तेमाल की थी, दिन कैसे गुजरे, इन सब को उन्होंने दर्ज किया। जब यह पाण्डुलिपि प्रकाशन के लिए टीम के पास आई तो उस वक्त इस बात को लेकर काफी चर्चा हुई कि इसको कैसे डिजाइन करें। यह भी बात हुई कि इसके लिए चित्रकार को आधार-



Ekavya

शिला स्कूल के बच्चों के साथ कुछ समय बिताना चाहिए, समुदाय को भी जानना समझना चाहिए। नर्गिस जिन्होंने इसको डिजाइन किया उन्होंने बच्चों और समुदाय के साथ चर्चा की, उन्हें जाना-समझा और उनकी जिन्दगी को करीब से देखा। इससे जो किताब तैयार हुई वो समुदाय, अकाल की स्थिति को समझने में मददगार रही। प्रकाशन कार्यक्रम में सम्पादकीय टीम के साथ ही डिजाइन टीम भी है जो चित्रकारों के साथ महत्वपूर्ण मुद्दों पर संवाद करती है और लगातार उनके साथ काम करती है।

**जैनब :** प्रकाशक होने के नाते आप अपने दायित्व को कैसे देखती हैं? बाल साहित्य में प्रकाशकों की क्या भूमिका होनी चाहिए?

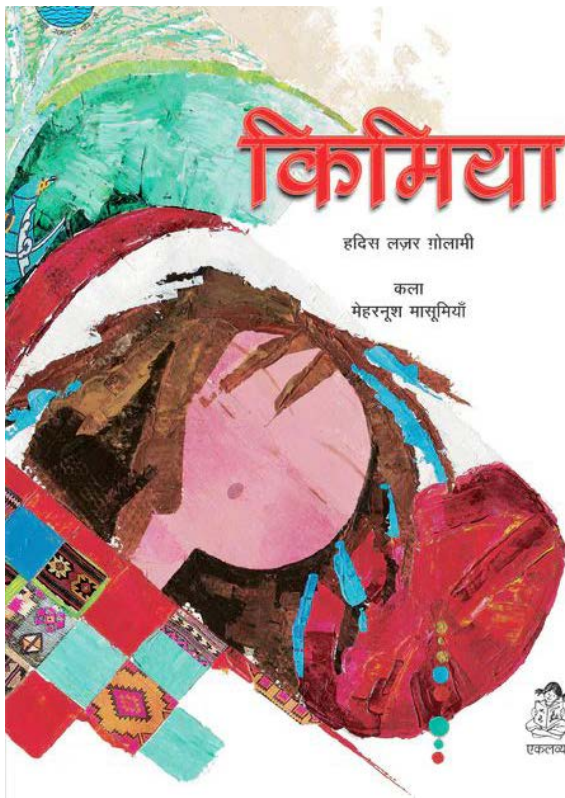
**दीपाली :** एकलव्य संस्था शिक्षा के क्षेत्र में काम करती है जिसमें बच्चों, शिक्षकों और समुदाय के साथ काम करना शामिल है इसलिए संस्था साहित्य की जरूरत को अलग-अलग नजरियों से समझ पाती है। बाल साहित्य में सभी आवाजों को जगह मिले, इसके लिए तो हम काम कर ही रहे हैं। इसके साथ ही यह भी जरूरी

है कि जिन बच्चों के लिए बाल साहित्य विकसित किया जा रहा है उन तक यह पहुँचो किताबों का इस्तेमाल मजे के लिए पढ़ने के लिए, सीखने-सिखाने के लिए कैसे किया जाए इसके बारे में उन शिक्षकों, अभिभावकों के साथ काम करने की कोशिश की जाती है जो बच्चों के साथ काम करते हैं। किताबें बच्चों की पहुँच में हों और उन्हें पढ़ा जाए यह भी महत्वपूर्ण है। बच्चों को उनकी भाषा में साहित्य पढ़ने का मौका मिले, इसके लिए हम प्रयास कर रहे हैं। साहित्य अपने पाठकों के लिए खिड़कियाँ और दर्पण दोनों का ही काम करता है इसलिए ऐसी कहानियाँ आगे भी विकसित की जाएँगी। इसी तरह नॉन फिक्शन में भी विभिन्न तरह की सामग्री हो इसके लिए भी हम काम कर रहे हैं।

कुछ प्रकाशक लगातार बढ़िया साहित्य प्रकाशित कर रहे हैं। इकतारा की किताबें काफी अच्छी हैं। उनमें विविधता है, न केवल विषयों की बल्कि विधाओं की भी। मुस्कान संस्था द्वारा विकसित बाल साहित्य भी बच्चों के जीवन में झाँकने और उनके संघर्ष को समझने का मौका देता है। तूलिका की किताबें भी विविधता से भरी हैं।

**सिद्धि :** अभी के बाल साहित्य या प्रकाशकों के बारे में आपके क्या विचार हैं? क्या आप उनका ध्यान किन्हीं खास विषयों पर केन्द्रित करना चाहेंगी?

**दीपाली :** बाल साहित्य में इन दिनों काफी कुछ ऐसा भी रचा जा रहा है जो बहुत बढ़िया है। इसमें यात्रा विवरण (travelogue), उपन्यास, अनुभव, कहानियों के संकलन, कविताएँ, नाटक, विषयगत किताबें, जैसे—जेंडर पर, पहचान पर आदि सभी शामिल हैं। यह काम दो तरह से हो रहा है, एक तो कई संस्थाएँ इस साहित्य को विकसित कर रही हैं, जैसे दिल्ली में अंकुर संस्था बच्चों के लेखन पर काम कर रही है। इनके द्वारा प्रकाशित किताब 'बालबीती' लॉकडाउन के अनुभवों को सामने रखती है। इस तरह के प्रयासों से बच्चों का लिखा हुआ साहित्य लगातार बाल साहित्य में शामिल हो पा रहा है। विशेष जरूरत वाले बच्चों पर कहानियाँ आ रही हैं जो आपको इन बच्चों के बारे में सोचने का एक अलग नजरिया देती हैं और पुरानी सोच को तोड़ने में मदद करती हैं। प्रकृति और कविता का एक बढ़िया मेल 'ओ पेड़ रंगरेज' किताब में दिखता है। इस किताब में दी गई नेचुरल रंग बनाने की गतिविधि केवल गतिविधि भर नहीं है बल्कि यह कुदरत को गहराई से महसूस करने का मौका देती है। इन दिनों बिग बुक भी प्रकाशित हो रही हैं जो बच्चों को कहानी और इसके चित्रों के साथ एक सफर पर ले जाती हैं। चक्रमक पत्रिका के साथ-साथ प्लूटो जैसी शानदार पत्रिकाएँ भी प्रकाशित हो रही हैं। कल्पवृक्ष संस्था ने पर्यावरण को लेकर बहुत अच्छा गैर-कथा साहित्य विकसित किया है। इस सबसे एक उम्मीद बनी रहती है कि चाहे खेल हो या मौत या फिर प्रेम जैसे विषय हों, पहचान का मुद्दा हो या फिर जेंडर का, इन सभी पर किताबें आएँगी। खासतौर पर शिक्षा और साहित्य को लेकर जो अलग अलग सोच है उसमें बहुत सारे ऐसे धागे हैं जिनके सिर एक-दूसरे से मिलते हैं। बाल साहित्य में कविताओं में भी एक बदलाव दिखता है, जैसे, सुशील शुक्ल की कविता—'ये सारा उजाला सूरज का', को पढ़कर आप बहुत कुछ महसूस करते हैं। हिन्दी में नाटक काफी कम हैं,



इन पर किताबें आनी चाहिए। गतिविधियों की किताबें भी जरूरी हैं। लम्बी कहानियों के साथ ही छोटी कहानियाँ भी हों तो पाठक बनाने के सफर में मदद मिलेगी।

तमाम बच्चों तक इन कहानियों के पहुँचने के साथ ही यह भी जरूरी है कि लाइब्रेरी में बच्चों के साथ काम करने वाले लोग भी इन कहानियों से जुड़ें क्योंकि बाल साहित्य केवल बच्चों के लिए नहीं है, सभी के लिए है। इसलिए लाइब्रेरियन/सुसाध्यकर्ता भी उससे जुड़ें, पढ़ने का एक एक माहौल बनाएँ यह बहुत जरूरी है। उदाहरण के लिए एक किताब है 'बोरेवाला' जिसे एक रीडिंग फैसिलिटेटर पढ़ रही थी और हम दोनों उसके बारे में बात कर रहे थे। उन्होंने कई बार कहा कि उन्हें उस कहानी की भाषा समझ नहीं आ रही।

फिर बात करते करते हम एक ऐसे मोड़ पर पहुँचे जहाँ उन्होंने अपने गाँव में किसी विक्षिप्त इन्सान को लेकर अपने अनुभव साझा किए। वह एक ऐसा मोड़ था जहाँ से कहानी के साथ उनका जुड़ाव होना शुरू हुआ क्योंकि वह कहानी एक छोटी बच्ची और एक विक्षिप्त इन्सान के बीच के रिश्ते को दर्शाती है। तो मुझे लगता है कि सभी के द्वारा बाल साहित्य का पढ़ना और उस पर बातचीत के मौके मिलना बहुत जरूरी है। क्योंकि अगर बच्चों की किताबों की बात करें तो उसकी समीक्षा भी काफी कम देखने को मिलती है इसलिए अलग-अलग माध्यमों से बाल साहित्य पर चर्चा भी बहुत जरूरी है।

**जैनब :** एक किताब की रचना में लेखक, चित्रकार, अनुवादक और प्रकाशक को एक साथ मिलकर काम करने में क्या-क्या चुनौतियाँ पेश आती हैं? आप उनका सामना कैसे करते हैं और काम को आगे कैसे ले जाते हैं?

**दीपाली :** मान लीजिए कोई कहानी आई है और उसमें कुछ ऐसे मुद्दे हैं जिन पर लेखक को पुनःविचार करने और चीजों को थोड़ा और खुलकर देखने की जरूरत है, तो इस बारे में लेखक के साथ संवाद करना और जिन पाठकों के लिए यह किताब है, वे कैसे उसको देखेंगे, इसकी तरफ लेकर जाना एक चुनौती होती है। इसी तरह की चुनौती का सामना चित्रकारों को भी करना पड़ता है। उन्हें कहानी के मूड के मुताबिक चित्र बनाने होते हैं। अगर कहानी किसी खास इलाके की है तो कैसे चित्र होने चाहिए इन बारीकियों का ध्यान रखना जरूरी होता है। चित्रकार को यह ध्यान देना होता है कि चित्र केवल कहानी में लिखी हुई बातों को ही न दर्शाए बल्कि उसे भी दर्शाए जो मूल पाठ में न हो ताकि चित्र कहानी की बारीकियों को किताब में ला सके क्योंकि बहुत बार हम चित्र भी पढ़ते हैं। यह एक और चुनौती है जो चित्रकारों के साथ काम करते समय डिजाइन टीम के समक्ष पेश आती है।

इसके अलावा पूरी दुनिया में बाल साहित्य में किस प्रकार का काम चल रहा है उसमें से उम्दा साहित्य को ढूँढना, पढ़ना, लेखकों को ढूँढना, उनके लिखे हुए को पढ़ना, यह भी उतना ही महत्वपूर्ण है। इसीलिए समय लगाना भी जरूरी होता है क्योंकि आप अच्छा साहित्य लगातार ढूँढ रहे होते हैं। एक किताब है 'जल्द बहुत जल्द' जो तीन पीढ़ियों की कहानी है और यह कहानी लगातार फ्लैशबैक में जाती है। इसके चित्र एकदम अलग हैं तो यह किताब थोड़ा ठहरकर सोचने के मौके देती है और आपके साथ अलग तरह से संवाद करती है। इस तरह का साहित्य जो शायद आपके परिवेश का न हो आपको दुनिया में चल रही चीजों से जोड़ने में मदद करता है। तो अच्छे साहित्य को तलाशना, लेखक, चित्रकार को खोजना इसमें कई चुनौतियाँ आती हैं और यही असल में सम्पादकीय टीम की भूमिका है जो एक साथ चर्चा करते हैं, काम करते हैं और तब जाकर कोई किताब बनकर तैयार हो पाती है।

**सिद्धि :** आप लोग पुस्तकालय पर काम करने वाली संस्थाओं को अपने प्रकाशन से कैसे जोड़ पाते हैं? यदि कोई नई संस्था या पहल हो जो बच्चों के पुस्तकालय स्थापित करना चाहती हो तो आप लोग उन्हें कैसे सहयोग करते हैं?

**दीपाली :** इसमें दो-तीन तरीके से सहयोग दिया जाता है। एक तो ये कि कहीं कहीं कुछ साथी बच्चों के लिए पुस्तकालय संचालित करने को लेकर इच्छुक होते हैं तो उनका क्षमतावर्धन करना, किताबों के बारे में उनकी समझ को और बढ़ाने के लिए कार्यशालाएँ करना, उनको एकलव्य के फील्ड कार्यक्रमों में शामिल होने का अवसर देना ताकि वो देख सकें कि फील्ड पर कैसे काम हो रहा है। दूसरा जो बाल साहित्य एकलव्य ने प्रकाशित किया है उसकी सूची को उनके साथ साझा करना। इसके अलावा इसको लेकर भी प्रयास होता है कि पुस्तकालय केवल एक एक्स्पेंस की जगह न हो बल्कि वो एक सक्रिय लाइब्रेरी हो और उसमें तमाम तरह की किताबों को लेकर चर्चाएँ, गतिविधियाँ हों। इसमें जो साथी उत्सुक होते हैं वो आते हैं। एकलव्य के कार्यक्रम को जानने, साहित्य को पढ़ने, चर्चाएँ करने, किताबों से जुड़ाव बनाने, कौन-सा साहित्य अपने परिवेश में ले जाना चाहिए इस पर सुझाव देना, उनका प्रशिक्षण करना इन बातों में हम उनकी मदद करते हैं।



# STARTING A COMMUNITY LIBRARY

Here are some pointers that can be thought of before we start a community library and when we run it. Running a community library is possible with low resources. Quality must be ensured and thinking about the following points may be helpful.

## BUILDING A DIVERSE COLLECTION

Diverse children's literature has to be included for different age groups of children. You may start with a small number of books, say 50-100. But these have to 'good books.' And then regularly keep on building the collection, as the children's reading evolves. Ensure that there is diversity in terms of themes, genres, age-groups, etc. in the collection.

## LOCATION

Explore for the location from the community itself. Engage children – they will help find the space for the library.

## CONSENT

Consent of the community is a must to start a library. You may engage children, parents, members of local self-governance institutions, retired teachers, and village elders, etc., and include their feedback.

## PURPOSE

Brainstorm on the vision of this library and also your reasons to start one in this particular community.

Does your library aim to enable children access diverse books? Is it for fostering the joy of reading? Does it aim to connect to literacy? Or is your goal a mix of all of these or any other purpose based on your experience and context? Know your children and context first and then define the purpose.

## PEOPLE IN THE LIBRARY

Who would be running the library? A library educator takes up shaping the library as a part of meeting its vision. Finding local youth for this role and nurturing them should be thought of.



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## INVOLVE

Encourage active involvement from the community, and incorporate their art, songs, folklore and other cultural elements into the library's work.



10

## CARE

Care for the children, the library space and the books is very important. Children should always feel welcome in the space. For space, try to make it as vibrant and open as possible. Books should be cared for. Cover all the books, maintain their records, and set-up a 'book hospital' for their repair.



09



06

## ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Children need to be engaged through activities to open up the collection and to enable them to read and understand. More focused engagement in vulnerable communities is required. Activities can include browsing games, read alouds, story-telling, book talks, paired readings, book discussions, book displays, etc. Lending of books to children should be definitely included as a part of the library's activities.



## LIBRARY CALENDAR

Design a calendar for the library and prepare a session plan. A yearly calendar is always helpful. And you must plan for the library sessions.

07

08



## INTERACTION

The library must be an interactive space. There is a need to work on enabling children and the community to interact with the library's collection and space. Interactions within the library space and also from outside their context, like sessions by educators from different libraries, can be thought of.

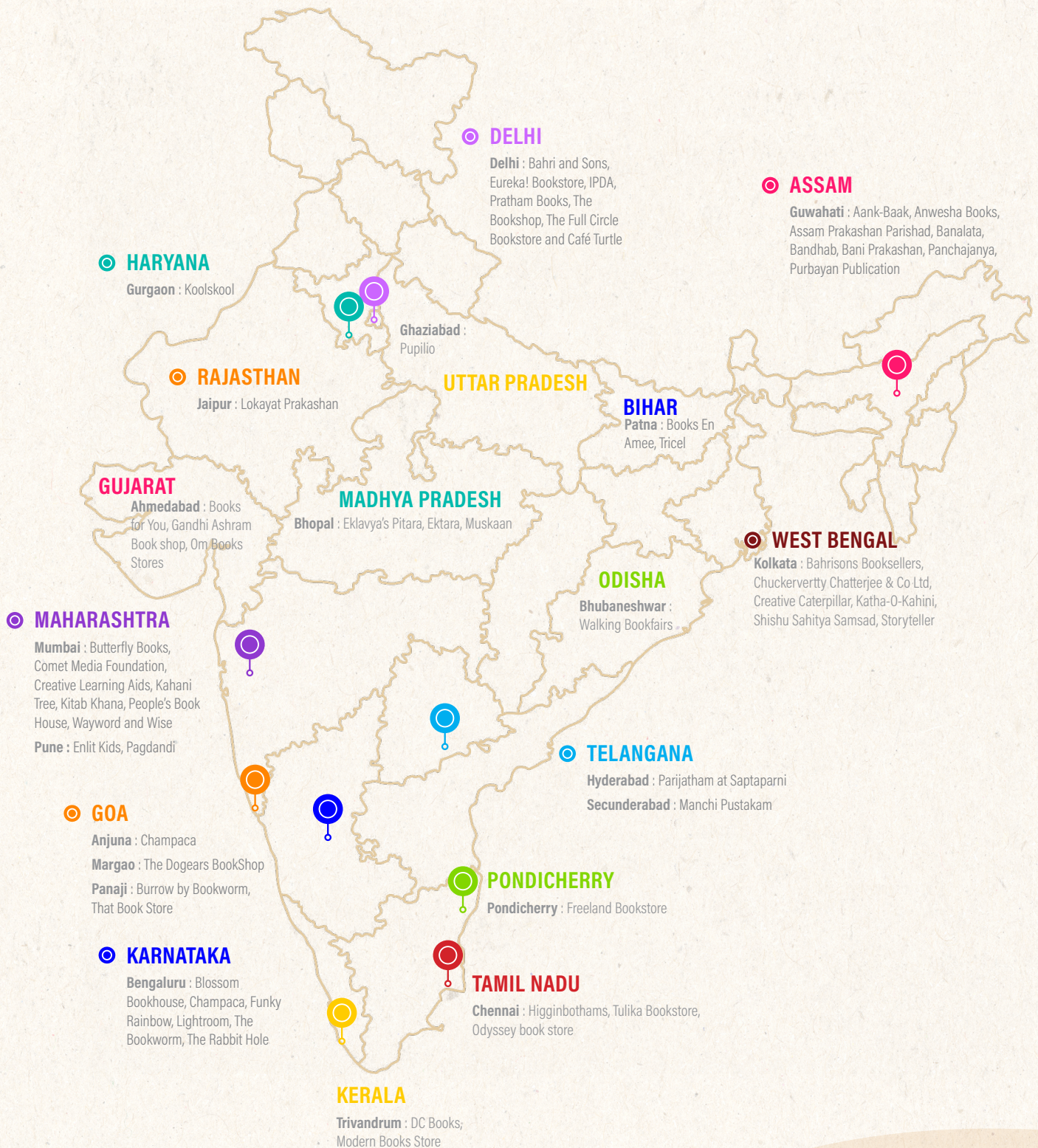






# BOOKSTORES ACROSS INDIA

SOME INDEPENDENT BOOKSTORES FOR CHILDREN'S BOOKS



We are thankful to Amrita Nair (Apnishala), Baidehi Sengupta, Haritha (ASWA), Kushal Dattani, Nayan Mehrotra, Parismita (NEET), Pravin Madur, Radha Gopalan Thejaswi Shivanand, Tolesh (Kalpakta) and [tulikabooks.com/info/where-to-buy](http://tulikabooks.com/info/where-to-buy), [indiebookshops.in/list-of-bookshops/](http://indiebookshops.in/list-of-bookshops/), who helped us a lot with their inputs.

Lookout for NBT and CBT bookstores which have a wide network all across the country.



# A Library Campus in Rural Bihar

*Anita Kumari, Kailash Pati and Ragini Sharma*

**P**RAYOG is a library-based organization. Started in 2013, it works in Bihar's Gopalganj district. Its vision is to ensure that every child has access to diverse children's literature. The organization tries to ensure that children are able to understand texts and share the joys of reading. Its outreach is in government schools and community sites.

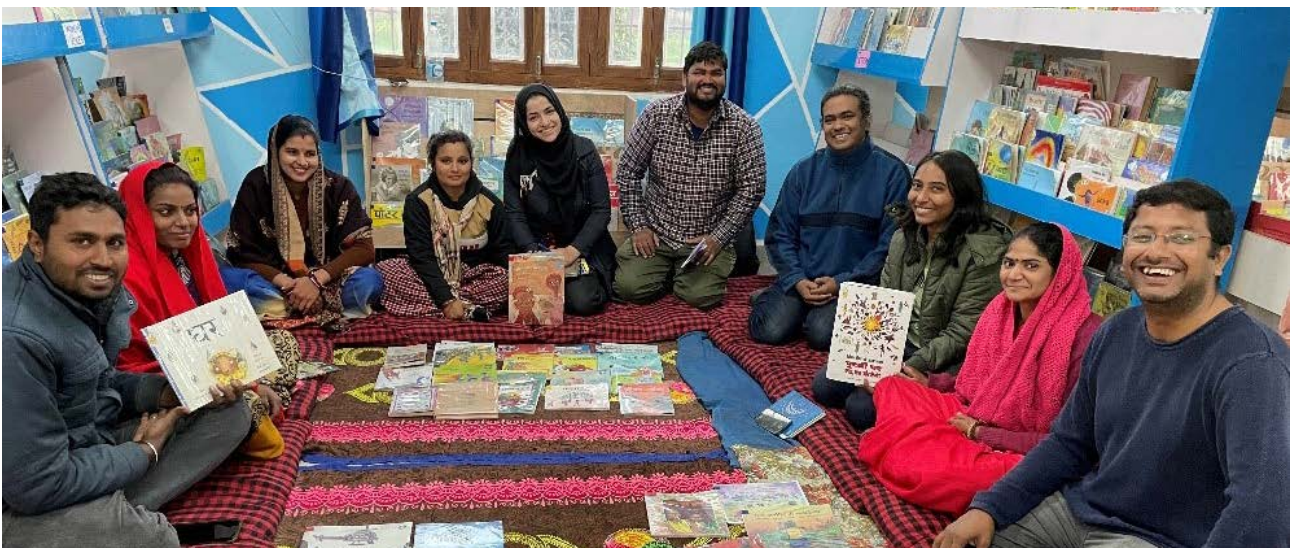
Libraries become what they are, because of the people involved. The way they engage and open up their collection to children are important factors, so are interactions and utilization of spaces, etc. In October 2022, PRAYOG started a library campus that also aims to function as a resource centre. Its goal is to facilitate interactions and engagements, on books and libraries, within and outside the library community as well.

The teams' collective efforts have helped in shaping this up. Children from nearby villages are members of the library. The library as a space, and its collection, is opened to them through engagements in various activities like book displays, book talks, library games and read alouds, etc. Individuals and groups from different organizations and various

geographies of Bihar, and from diverse contexts, visit this space to take away some of the doables for children's libraries in their own sites and programs. Working with children, they are able to see how libraries are helpful in engaging with children right from their early education stage. These visitors also learn and explore ways to start and run libraries of/on their own.

The campus has also become a hub for the organization's capacity building exercises. PRAYOG strongly believes in building its own capacities first. Some of the focus areas now are engagements with children and their contexts, and evolving the library for and with them.

Partnerships are a critical element of PRAYOG's work. It invites different kinds of partners to the campus. Some partners help with technical support. Some others are collaborators. A few others support financially. The organization tries to engage all these different kinds of partners in the library space in a spirit of mutual learning. All this is perhaps reflective of the work of PRAYOG's diverse team. Each member brings in their diverse experiences. The team collectively works together to make this a vibrant space.



The Prayog team works together to make the library a collaborative space to exchange ideas





The library campus cum resource center is imagined as a space where interactions on books and libraries are facilitated



The library hosts a diverse collection of books





Dialogues within the team



Engagement with partners





## Libraries as learning spaces

This page and the succeeding one: Children hailing from nearby villages are members of the library. The Prayog team engages with the children through various activities like book displays, book talks, library games, read alouds, etc.







# Diverse Geographies, Diverse Libraries

*Siddhi Kalbhor*

*What does a library mean for the different children across the country? What has been the role of libraries in creating safe learning spaces in the face of disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other adversities?*

*How does a library take shape in a community? What are the struggles and challenges of libraries across the different geographies of India?*

In this article we try to cover the experiences of different organizations working with children and communities through their library initiatives in distinct geographies. Each of these organizations gives us a different picture of the possibilities that libraries offer.

Libraries run by these CSOs are turning into open, creative and engaging spaces of learning for children. They are collaborating with communities and schools to promote the culture of reading, and to make learning processes child-centred. In this piece, they share what it takes to sustain a library when the community has a major role to play in it.

## **Ayang Trust**

Ayang Trust is a non-profit organization, based in Majuli, Assam. It runs the Hummingbird School, a community based progressive school. The CSO tries to reach as many children as possible through engagements with the community and formal school processes.

However, during the pandemic, the education programs were discontinued, as schools were closed. Children also faced disruptions in their learning.

Therefore, Ayang felt the need to directly engage with the community to create access to spaces and resources for the learning of children. They envisioned a community library as a response. The vision being to bring social change for villages through a mission of Seeding Enquiry, Empathy and Dialogue (SEED) in children, youth and adults by using books as tools.

Ayang establishes community libraries in collaboration with villagers through a participatory approach. Communities provide the space and form a Library Management Committee (LMC). Ayang provides a curated set of books. It also trains a local library educator (Xopun Sarathi) and the LMC members.

The 'Xopun Sarathis,' i.e., 'Dream Charioteers,' are trained and supported in seeding reading as a cultural practice and to meaningfully engage with the children and the youth.

"Taking ahead the concept of a community library initially, we piloted it with four villages in Majuli in November 2021. Based on our observations and learnings, processes and systems to start engagement with another 16 villages were designed. Gradually, over eight months of engagement with these 20 villages, our community library model has evolved," shares Team Ayang.

The democratic and participatory process of setting a community library involves elaborate dialogues and discussions with the villagers. It emphasizes on understanding the context of the village.

This process also highlights the role of a community library in the villages' growth and



A Xopun Sarathi conducting activities with children

development. However, the major challenge that Ayang witnessed in the initial phases was related to the villages' hierarchical social structure.

These hierarchies are based on caste, class and gender. People from the same dominant groups are being selected for various roles in the libraries. Considering the challenges, the Ayang team is trying to make the processes more inclusive in nature. Presently, it is looking forward to experiment with the idea of equal participation of Ayang and the villages in the selection processes, at least in the initial period. It is envisaged that gradually complete ownership will be transferred to the villages.

A Xopun Sarathi engages with the children through a variety of library activities. 'Reading aloud' is the core activity of the library sessions. It enables a space for children to think, reflect and connect to different aspects of stories, and develop an interest in reading.

To introduce children to new titles, themes, authors and vocabulary building, the Xopun

Sarathis engage with children through fun-filled and enjoyable library games. These include treasure hunts, word games, snakes and ladder, and musical books, etc. Based on their understanding, learnings and experience, Ayang has been able to map out four major components of the community library model. They think these aspects are significant for its success. We discuss these below.

**Accessibility to the library:** A village library should have adequate infrastructure and reading resources such as books and other stationeries. The library should be open for at least 20 days a month. This functioning should be supported by trained Xopun Sarathis and LMCs members.

**Usage of the library:** Children must be able to borrow at least two books a month. They should also be facilitated to share their experiences with their peers. Also, 70% of the registered children should visit the library at least 15 days a month.

**Community ownership and sustainability:** Ayang believes that a village's reading culture





Stakeholders' engagement in a village

can only be developed when villagers come together and run their library instead of an organization running it. So, in their two years of engagement with the village, they try to develop this sense of ownership in the village. The goal is that when Ayang gradually terminates the support, the library can still function on its own. The visible indicators of community ownership and sustainability would be financial ownership of the library by the village and active engagement by the youth and LMCs members with the library.

**Merits of reading:** Ayang believes that a reading culture will develop when the village understands the merits of reading. This can be observed from community participation and support in the library's processes. One indirect indicator can be financial contributions made by families to sustain the library. A family would contribute money only when it thinks that it's an important activity.

Currently, twenty community libraries have been established by various communities in Majuli. By the end of February 2023, 20 other villages were preparing to start their own community libraries.

However, the journey of reaching out to these number of villages has not been easy. Ayang has developed the whole process in a two-year project with clear objectives and activities. They are continuously learning and innovating through these processes and structures.

Through their SEED project, AYANG aims to establish 200 libraries in rural Assam. These are envisaged to be owned and sustained by the villages themselves. The team expects that this will create a ripple effect. The goal is to inspire more and more rural communities across Assam to establish and own the functioning of, thriving community libraries. These institutions are envisaged to be at the forefront of social change. Further, the successful practices that come out of this endeavour could be a guiding model across rural India.

### North East Education Trust (NEET)

North East Education Trust (NEET) runs a community library in Guwahati for children, youth and community members. The goal is to make children and other people to come together to engage and express through their heads, hearts and hands.

As the entire world went through upheavals during the COVID-19 pandemic, children were affected as well. The pandemic gave access to mobile phones and internet to many children. However, it ended up keeping them over-involved with phones. It also made them habitual to stay indoors. Post-pandemic changes in children's behaviour and choices are something the NEET team is still struggling with.

Saradi, a team member shares her recent experience with young readers, "After the re-opening of the library, we could observe a kind of growing gap among the children



and the library. They were losing interest in reading books and in taking part in library activities. Earlier, they would come to the library without any fear of judgement. They used to share about their worries and problems directly with their educators. Even though they never expected anything out of their educators, they had a certain faith and a feeling of friendliness. Due to this, they openly shared what they had to.

However, after the pandemic, children started using cell phones as an escape from problems and the issues they faced in their day-to-day life. They started maintaining a distance in the library. The same set of children who were active participants earlier, started being irregular.”

On realizing this issue, we started taking extra interactive sessions. We also went on regular community visits to invite children. We started interacting with their parents on a regular basis as well. Throughout this process we added a new rule of ‘no mobile during library sessions’ for the children. With the passage of time, we now observe a positive change among regular library participants. However, we still have a lot of work to do.”

## **rZamba Trust**

rZamba Trust started in 2015 as a volunteer group of friends and began working in government schools. While doing this work, they got to experience what it is like to work in a place like Kargil. This remote region is on the country’s border. Here climatic conditions are difficult with respect to terrain. The socio-political conditions are also different. All these factors affect people’s lives.

To address the region’s issues, rZamba began intensive engagement in education since 2018-19. Saldon, from the rZamba team, shares that their program is currently called ‘Wholistic Child Wellbeing Program.’ As a part of this initiative, they try to bring in all the stakeholders on a common platform. The goal is to develop a common understanding of

educational leadership, as a collective. They also want to move towards ensuring a better future for their children.

As a part of this program, they have had intensive engagements with government schools in terms of pedagogical intervention. As a part of this process, project-based learning is encouraged into classroom curriculum.

Apart from that, they are also focusing on creating good library spaces. They want to foster libraries as places of growth, and develop the involvement and appreciation for libraries among all the stakeholders in the communities they work with.

rZamba’s current focus is on foundational learning years. A library space is introduced to the children studying in nursery to class 3. The objective is to be able to generate their interest in books and reading so that they become life-long learners. rZamba ensures the inclusion of books catering to their learning needs. For example, some might contain more pictures and less words, depending on the children’s class, age group and learning levels. Currently their focus is mainly on bringing more and more learning material for children up to Class 3.

While speaking about the challenges, Saldon shares, “Unfortunately, there is very less contextual children’s material when it comes to Ladakh, especially in terms of story books. We don’t get a lot of stories from Ladakh. Most of them are in oral form. We try to get diverse books, which may not exactly be related to Ladakh’s context. However, the story and the background does help in relating, connecting the children, as a mirror at times.”

Community youth facilitators work in schools for the entire day. With the help of teachers, they are trying to ensure that a library period/library session happens in every class. They also work to enable various kinds of library activities. They engage with the teachers

through library sessions. They also try to build their own capacity and figure out how to pass this on to the community after three years of intensive engagement.

What really works for rZamba is the value of co-creation that they emphasize on, be it with communities, the children or with the teachers. For example, they develop a sense of ownership when they cover a library book or make their own library card. Another thing that has helped to draw children towards books is by introducing simpler books at first. These may be picture books or books with very few words. Children can relate to such texts.

rZamba's team helps the children read, letting their peers listen to them and feel appreciated for what they are doing in the library. All these things have created a shift. Children now feel confident about themselves. They may or may not be doing very good right now. However, they have the ability to become good readers in the future.

Saldon shares that they face challenges related to resources, connectivity and funding, as they live and work in remote areas. Current education structure also stands as one of the barriers in reaching out to children through libraries. The way schools and education are structured, these do not give much importance to libraries.

The rZambateam struggles with seeking cooperation from teachers. Even though they are convinced that libraries are important, they are also stuck in loops. It needs a lot of motivation for them to go beyond their comfort zone and pick up a library book or use library sessions as a way to teach something from the curriculum.

Library practices used by rZamba have the potential to make the curriculum interesting and engaging for children. However, the main challenge remains as to how to make this method a part of the curriculum.

Saldon further shares that there is a need for systemic interventions in order to achieve this. The rZamba team is also engaging with the Directorate of School Education to sustain this intervention. Currently rZamba works with 10 village communities. Here they have signed MoUs with the Village Education Committees. They are also collaborating with the local administration for a more systemic approach.

## LECIN

Let's Educate Children In Need (LECIN) is a non-profit organization, started in 2015. Their work focuses on early childhood education and free library programs. They first began their library work in 2019 in Baalwadis. However, later due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they began setting up pop-up libraries in different villages. This was the beginning of their community library program.

Since 2022, LECIN has been able to reach out to 800 children through the Free Community Library Program. This initiative serves communities along the Yamuna River in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh (UP) and a village in Shamli district in the latter state.

Although LECIN works in and around the National Capital Region (NCR) Delhi, the communities it works with are highly secluded from the rest of the world. They live in difficult riverine catchment areas of the Yamuna. Many children in these communities hadn't seen picture books before the organization started its interventions.

At present, 150 to 160 members are connected with the library in the villages. Out of this, 90 -100 children (2.5 - 18 years old) come on a daily basis. On an average, 50-60 books are issued/returned daily.

LECIN's Khoj program (free community library) aims to include people of all classes, castes, religions and genders. Its goal is to promote 'Reading Readiness' and 'Joys of Reading' through the library, a library which





Read aloud session by Ms. Kanchan in LECIN's Free Community Library

is run by and for the community. Library activities like read alouds, storytelling, games, book talks, events, songs, poems, drama and other physical, cognitive, art, and language activities are included in the library sessions.

Ankush, a team member, shares that once they asked the children in a library session, "What is a library for them?" So, a child said, "The library gives them a place to say what we have to say." Another said, "Here we study, dance and sing." An older child said that he gets information about the world in the library and that it is fun to listen to stories.

Another team member, Nupur, shares about two of the biggest challenges that have come to the fore. "As the houses in the communities were not owned by them always, getting a closed, covered space for the libraries is difficult. During the rainy season, the water level of River Yamuna rises. Due to this, many people migrate upstream. So, running our libraries in such an environment becomes very challenging. We have had to keep the library closed during the monsoons."

Also, seeking the support of the parents in the community was a bit tricky. As instead of going to a library, if their child helps in the field, it would be more of more immediate

financial benefit for them. To tackle this, the organization also started taking sessions with parents for raising awareness among them.

This has led to many elder participants to also enter the library. These often did not know how to read and write. They started attending the sessions. This generated their interest in libraries. They have now begun to understand stories through pictures. Sometimes they would start narrating the whole book by themselves. After this, the libraries have become more inclusive to include all age groups.

Taking these learnings and engagement with the community further ahead, LECIN has had a series of discussions and meetings. They were mainly based around questions like - What kind of library do they (the villagers) want? What all should it comprise of? From these conversations they came to know about their expectations from the library. These include games, newspapers, activities for children, including the older ones, due to which other members could also join the library. The main learning has been that more the number of people from the community who join the work, the more meaningful and effective is the change that can happen.

At the same time, there should be something for everyone in the library. If the solution to the problems of the community also comes up during discussions of the community library, then it becomes a process filled with fun, love and ownership.

### **Makkala Jagriti**

Makkala Jagriti (meaning ‘Awakening of Children’) is a Bengaluru-based organization founded in 2003. Its goal is to create a value-based social movement to empower children and their communities. Libraries are one of the critical components of its holistic development and learning program. Their library is aimed at all children in the 6-14 years age group. They strengthen school libraries with creative ideas, activities, and methodologies, where school teachers are involved in the library activities. Key components of their library work include the following.

**Reading for pleasure:** Children have ‘Reading Time’ where teachers/facilitators and children sit with a book of their own choice and read it for half an hour or so. Teachers/facilitators could see that this activity impacts students’ focus. It also helps to imbibe the habit and love for books.

**Foundational literacy:** The organization tries to bridge gaps in children’s foundational literacy skills. It tries to do so through access to books at different levels and support from facilitators. Diverse books help children improve foundational literacy skills like identifying letters, the alphabet, spelling, orthography, word writing and sentence formation.

**Read aloud:** Teachers engage with children through read-aloud activities, where they read stories aloud to children.

**Building interest in science and mathematics:** Efforts to generate children’s interest in science and math are made through attractive and easy-to-use books.

Beyond these, libraries are also spaces where children learn different skills and positive behavioural traits such as trust, collaboration, concentration and reflection, etc. Participation in library activities nurtures children’s sense of wonder and curiosity as well.

Like many other library initiatives across the country, the Makkala Jagriti team feels that there are struggles when making teachers feel the importance of library activities for children. In the conventional school set-up, libraries are often thought of as spaces for quiet reading.

However, at the same time, they see some hope and opportunities for breaking the myths around libraries. They are trying to recreate libraries as interactive spaces full of engaging activities centred on books and children. They are also working toward creating libraries as a medium for children’s holistic development. This involves creating model library activities to inspire school teachers and showcase it in the process.

### **In Conclusion**

Organizations working through libraries have realized that this journey of starting a library and sustaining it in a visionary way needs much ideation, constant remodelling and persistence. The COVID-19 Pandemic pushed them to explore ways to engage with children and keep going.

They have exemplified how an initiative takes good shape and flourishes, when the community is actively involved and takes full ownership. Their stories give us hope and inspiration to keep imagining and exploring the myriad possibilities libraries offer to children and their communities.

You can reach out to the organizations featured in this story at: [Ayang Trust- deendayal.ayang@gmail.com](mailto:Ayang_Trust-deendayal.ayang@gmail.com); [NEET- parismitagogoi@hotmail.com](mailto:NEET-parismitagogoi@hotmail.com); [rZamba Bridge- rzambajkl5@gmail.com](mailto:rZamba_Bridge-rzambajkl5@gmail.com); [LECIN- ankush.lecin@gmail.com](mailto:LECIN-ankush.lecin@gmail.com); [Makkala Jagriti- vivekss@makkalajagriti.org](mailto:Makkala_Jagriti-vivekss@makkalajagriti.org)





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