

Free Libraries Zindabad

Quarterly Round up of Network News

Issue 5 | Jan- Mar 23

LIBRARIES AND SCHOOLS

Most Government schools (as mandated by state education departments) have 30-40 hours of teaching a week. 4-5 of these hours are for 'extra curriculars' including "library period" that gets one hour. This categorization as "extra curricular" shows our limited imagination. We know libraries are essential to academic excellence and literacy skills, then why only one hour? This confusing caricature of a library is not only because of a poor understanding of what a library is. Controlling who enters a library, for how long and what they read is another way to perpetuate social inequalities that advantage some over others. Children with social and economic capital get access to books, resources, digital literacy at home, schools and elsewhere, while disadvantaged learners have their access limited.

We need libraries in schools because every child has the right to read. The ASER report 2023 says only 43% of 5th graders surveyed can read second grade text. This validates our own assessments with 200 students in Delhi which show that nearly 50% of the 2nd to 8th graders read less than 50 words in a minute. The need for school libraries is urgent.

For our children to access their right to read, derive a real education, they need libraries that are more than an "once-a-week extra-curricular" with restricted choice and closed shelves. We need libraries as part of the curriculum, creating fear-free spaces for children to learn and engage in critical reading, to explore ideas, encourage curiosity and make learning joyful. Libraries can address falling literacy rates and help children build meaningful relationships with books - by providing exposure to a diverse collection of excellent books and allowing children choice of books and of how to spend their time, and most importantly by being accessible and available, ideally, all days of the week. Read in this issue about FLN members working in small ways and big to transform school libraries. They share their challenges and limitations and we are proud to learn from their journeys.

Prachi Grover

Core Member and Library Curriculum Member, Free Libraries Network
Director, The Community Library Project

WE ARE FLN!

FLN members work to build, operate and propagate free libraries that welcome all without prejudice of caste, class, religion, gender & sexual identity, or disability. We strive to ensure free access to books for all and nurture new readers, who may not have the means to do so themselves.

Website- <https://www.fln.org.in/> | Twitter [@FreeLibNetwork](https://twitter.com/FreeLibNetwork) | Insta: [@freelibrariesnetworkfln](https://www.instagram.com/freelibrariesnetworkfln) | Facebook: [@freelibrariesnetworkFLN](https://www.facebook.com/freelibrariesnetworkFLN)
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FLN Events and Workshop

Indian Library Congress, Kannur| 1-3 Jan 23



FLN participated in the Indian Library Congress, organised by the Peoples Mission for Social Development and Kerala State Library Council, hosted at Kannur University. This congress saw over 3000 participants- primarily librarians, library workers, students and professors from library sciences discipline from all districts of Kerala. MPs and MLAs, Civil Service officers and education and library activists also participated.

Majority were from Kerala, with few from other states- Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, etc. The Congress was inaugurated by Kerala's Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, in a large public ground, where cultural events also took place. In the University, academics and librarians presented papers on topics like- Evolution and History of Libraries, Politics of the Public Library, Library and women, children, marginalised groups, Role of technology in libraries. It was heartwarming to see a large gathering of people- library workers, activists, politicians, civil service members, who believed in the transformative power of a library. It was evident that almost all saw access to reading and access to public libraries as a basic human right. There were lessons to learn about "movement building" from Kerala's history and FLN found some new allies. Prachi, from TCLP, presented her well researched paper comparing library legislations across states, with focus on Haryana, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Her paper reflected the shortcomings in legislation and highlighted how legislations have remained static and unresponsive to the growing divide in access to information. Madhumita, FLN Core group member, presented her paper on the National Mission on Libraries, a 400 Cr



mission launched in 2014, with ambition to understand and develop public libraries. The paper presented the current (unsatisfactory) outcomes of the mission and lack of information and transparency. FLN needs to reflect on why policies and missions for free libraries end up in cold storage or get subverted and end up creating institutions (like the

[National Virtual Library of India](#)), that defeats the original mandate of free accessible public libraries. The Library Congress was the first of its kind held in Kerala. It was highly publicised among the public, with hoardings and banners carried into districts and villages. While there was a registration fee to participate in the academic sessions, other portions of the Congress was free. Any member of the public could walk in and hear the Chief Minister, and persons in positions of authority talk about the value and need for libraries, and the right to read and right to education as basic rights.

Link to Papers: Prachi's paper: [Comparative Review on Library Legislation in India](#), Madhumita's paper on [Public Library Infrastructure in India and National Mission on Libraries](#).

See: [NML Survey In India's Public Libraries](#)

Library Lab and Bhaitak, Bhim Rajasthan | 30 Jan to 1 Feb 23



In the 3 day residential workshop, attended by 25 practitioners from 11 FLN libraries, participants thought collectively and deeply about library work, its potential and its role in creating a more inclusive & informed society. The workshop was facilitated by Prachi Grover (The Community Library Project), Rituparna (Akam Foundation) and Purnima (FLN) with support from School for Democracy(SFD). The first session began with reflection on the history and evolution of libraries and our collective responsibility to create a 'free

library movement'. Participants heard from Shankar Singh- Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sanghatan (MKSS) about the history of the Right to Information movement (aims, philosophy and strategies to mobilise change from the ground up). The second and third day focussed on library practices and how they address existing inequalities which prevent access to reading. Each reflection exercise was underscored with best practices & fun games like read alouds, story telling, book treasure hunt, make-your-own pop-up-library and silent reading etc. The training emphasised as much on reading curriculum as on libraries as a location to deliver basic human and constitutional rights to all. Participants left inspired and committed to building a library that guarantees equity in access to knowledge & information. Learn about SFD and MKSS [Here](#)



Book Curation Workshop and TN Meetup, Chennai | 12 Feb 23



In this one day workshop 6 libraries met at an IT academy- a venue arranged by Ramya- FLN Member, Chalkpiece, to learn from each other and understand the wide variety in children's literature. We spoke about how content must serve the needs and reflect the lives of all. Participants shared their work and mission to make libraries available for all and their best practices. Lead facilitator Banu (Reading Space, Cuddalore) took us through a fascinating session on building our curatorial strengths. She urged us to reflect on what we read & why. She

introduced a range of books that librarians can explore for their communities, including wordless books, number books, alphabet books, bilingual books, translated works, books based on real events and people, books that addressed disability, sexuality, gender expression etc. She demonstrated how to use each book differently in the category of wordless books, alphabet books and number books. She shared strategies for meaningful engagement with books. Participants browsed through collections on other themes as well.

Namita and Kamakshi from Chetana Trust gave us an eye opening session on making our libraries more inclusive for people with print, motor and learning disabilities, by sensitising ourselves as librarians and curating low cost yet high impact library resources. Besides creating books that can be used by first-generation readers with disabilities, Chetana Trust also focuses on creating books that represent the lives of children with disability. Do look at



[their website](#) and download their app ([Bloom reader](#)) to see a collection of simple cost effective and imaginative resources that go beyond providing books with Braille script. They have step-by-step instructions on how to incorporate some aids (like magnifying sheets, book stands) into a library's existing collection. They reinforced that the onus is on us to reach out within our community and welcome readers with disabilities into our space, defying a mindset that believes that libraries are only for those with sight or certain physical & neurotypical abilities.

Follow Banu on Instagram: [@ReadingSpace_freelibrary](#). Read about her library in FLZ in Issue 1 Chetana Trust website: <https://www.chetana.org.in/>

Other FLN News

Literature festivals: FLN has been speaking- at literature festivals- to connect with important stakeholders in the library movement - readers and bookmakers. Project Kiape Katha Koi, NEET, Snehgori, Pothor Puthibhoral Bhogbari. Blue Ladder came together at the Assam Book Fair. Rituparna led the panel discussion on *"Building Free Library Movement: Relationship between Publishers, Authors and Free Libraries"*. She underlined the need to create a public library system for all and the role that civil society, especially authors and



publishers have in amplifying the call. Mridula (representing FLN and TCLP) spoke in the panel *"Building Reading Communities"* in the Jaipur literature fest. She drew the attention of publishers to growing masses of readers that are not acknowledged. As a society, we have excluded certain communities from reading and need to correct this and recognize reading is a right for all. Therefore our content, our libraries, our public spaces need to serve everyone.

FLN is looking for more events, spaces to talk about why as a society we should all be demanding free public libraries. Whether we are a publisher, author, illustrator, reader, or a resident of India- free and public libraries concern us and we have stakes in this movement. Do write to freelibrariesnetworkfln@gmail.com with ideas on other spaces where FLN should be speaking

Chat on Reading Curriculum: FLN members had an interesting conversation on Library Curriculum and Reading curriculum. Turning Pages- a school library facilitating program, raised a question on libraries' place in teaching the skill of reading i.e. alphabets, words and meaning making. Many libraries find that while there is a lot of engagement from children, many are left behind on the reading journey, because they can't read independently and so miss out on access to books that libraries provide.

Different libraries shared their approach. Prachi (TCLP) clarified that libraries are not just an introduction to a world of books or words, but also a world of ideas. Michael (TCLP) said that teaching to read happens in schools, what falls in the gaps is making them effortless or fluent readers and therefore children don't find the joy in reading. He believes that the library's role is to provide space and room for practice and expression. Children who are exposed to multiple books and read alouds, transition into independent reading. Kamakshi from Chetana trust shared some tools they use- pausing and writing down new words, thinking aloud of what that sound could mean- what it is similar to, where they have heard/ seen it before etc. Nivedita

Beddadur shared the role of rhyme, rhythm and flow in helping children read and suggested incorporating music, songs and ditties. While exposure and repeated practice is key, sometimes there is a need for more direct intervention. TCLP runs an intensive fluency program in Hindi and English and details are available on their website. Next, there was a discussion on partnering with schools. Many school libraries programs have limited engagement, usually once a week. This does not provide the exposure needed. In such cases, other solutions can help- seeking more frequent library periods, training teachers on read alouds, internships for teachers in libraries, supplementing school library with the local or community library to increase the number of books children have access to. This discussion had a lot to offer those who are working with children in their libraries and those who are working in school library programs.

Just a Question



A reflection for us and to think about as we run our libraries.

What do we mean by Free Libraries? Free access, free membership - what else can be free? What about freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination? Who bears the cost of creating such free libraries? Who should be bearing the costs?

Libraries in Spotlight

An introduction to some of the Free Library Network members. Please watch this column to know more about our FLN Libraries. Highlighted in this issue are FLN members who work actively with Government or low budget schools.



Conversation with Shahnaz | Reading Stars India, began with Shahnaz's curiosity to understand if, how and why our education system is failing our children. She had conversations with Principals and teachers and volunteered at a neighbourhood school. Simultaneously she started to educate herself- about teaching philosophies, reading and comprehension tools for first generation readers. She felt libraries are key to solving some problems facing

the education system. She sees libraries as a space that can empower children, that encourages critical thinking and self expression. Improved literacy and comprehension skills follow.

The Classroom Library: RSI currently partners with 4 schools to implement and monitor a Classroom Library Program (CLP). The schools commit 5 hours a week within their syllabus and this is essential for the program to thrive. The CLP begins with an assessment of current reading ability, followed by curating a book collection that serves the grade's needs. Then they create a physical space and process within the classroom to make books accessible and encourage book issue and circulation. Next they train teachers on utilizing this library, with emphasis on methods like read alouds, follow up activities to deepen engagement with the book. At the core of these methods is to make the library welcoming, empowering and find ways to encourage autonomy and expression.



RSI Journey: RSI began in 2018 in Bangalore, with a community library in Jayanagar and the Classroom Library Program. With the CLP, Shanz's biggest challenge is what she calls the "holy syllabus". School heads and teachers focus their time, attention and resources on completing the syllabus and ticking boxes like notes completion sometimes at the cost of real learning. This pressure comes from external agencies like dept of education and board audits. During the pandemic RSI closed the community library and curated book bundles for reading at home. They launched "ComeReadWithMe"- circulating quality low size videos of read alouds with follow up activities. Currently, Shahnaz is



working on reopening the community library. The classroom library programs are thriving in Bangalore and Hyderabad despite pressure to "catch up" to make up for the lost pandemic years. Shahnaz attributes this to teachers and principals' appreciation for their past work and witnessing first hand the library program sparking a joy for learning, which makes children thrive in other areas and subjects and thus making their "catch up" easier.



Network power: The journey led Shahnaz to question why our governments' don't prioritise public library infrastructure, why schools and education policies don't seriously integrate libraries into curriculums. She believes as FLN, we have a crucial role in advocating for libraries in the public sphere and raising these questions. FLN also can create and consolidate resources for librarians e.g. topic based reading modules, exercises and activities based on popular children's books, creating standards for classroom libraries etc.

Currently through the CLP programs RSI works with over 2800 children. The community library which is currently closed was serving close to 50-60 children in the community.

[Reading Stars India](#) | Facebook: [@Reading_Stars_India](#) Instagram: [@readingstarsindia](#) Email: readingstarsindia@gmail.com Phone: +91 99456 79991 See RSI's Library Readiness Program uploaded on FLN Resources page. [Click here](#)

Conversation with Purna | The Blue Ladders Trust The Blue Ladder Trust is a non-profit initiative in Guwahati conceptualised in 2020 by Purna with a vision to create active thinking spaces for children through access to good quality books and library interventions that supports social-emotional learning and builds joy of reading. They have partnered with government and low budget schools and community spaces such as paediatric cancer treatment ward and rescue homes for children to run library programs.

The Classroom Library: The library program (Project Anubhooti) is a weekly intervention in each school or community space. The engagement begins with pilot read alouds to gauge the grades' reading level and interests. Purna then builds specific book bundles for each grade and creates a physical library space- within the school or classroom. The classes begin with community building games, then moves to read alouds for the whole class and smaller groups, where children read to each other, followed by book discussions, book talks and engagement



through art, craft, role play, and more. Purna's main challenge is dealing with the large numbers of children- to balance keeping all children engaged and paying individual attention, while also providing free space and time for children to engage independently. She relies on establishing agreements for positive behaviours. Simple agreements like paying attention when a peer is reading or waiting your turn to choose a book are done in collaboration with the children who become responsible for making sure the classroom library benefits all.

The Journey: The Blue Ladder Trust also runs a community library in Guwahati, that serves both the schools and the local community, including adults. The school intervention began as an outreach program for the community library. Prerna incorporates activities like nature walks and observing nature closely. They ensure that their book collection reflects the needs of the community. She has seen reserved children now engage in animated discussions about books and express their opinions confidently.



Network power: Prerna is grateful to FLN for the support it renders through peer learning, books and workshops and feels that it's role in supporting libraries is crucial. She feels as FLN, we can create significant impact by providing a vision for a model library, the potential it has, by providing inspiration and mentorship to others wanting to set up free libraries, by creating resources for librarians.

Currently through the school partnerships, The Blue Ladder trust serves nearly 300 children. The Community library sees approximately 10-15 visitors a day.

Blue Ladders Trust | Instagram: [@_theblueladder](#) Email: theblueladder.pa@gmail.com Phone: 943577500

Conversation with Urvashi Upadhya | Principal of P.S Pachokhra 2, a primary school in Tundla, Firozabad, Urvashi, was keen that the school maintain an active and efficient library that serves both the children and the local community. While the education department in UP mandates a school library, Urvashi felt the need to be more pressing - because of the lack of access to good books in the district. There are few bookshops and booksellers and no public library.

The School Library: Urvashi believes that the school library should be a happy place. A place where children will spend time, linger and talk. She has focussed on making the library physically a warm, bright and colourful space. The children visit the library daily, usually after lunch and issue books. In addition each grade also has an allotted 40 minute once or twice in the week, where they engage in activities like read alouds. Teachers read individually to children, encourage children to talk and make presentations of books they have read. The books are mostly in Hindi and Urdu.



Urvashi's Journey: Urvashi became Principal in 2018. While there was a library prior to that, it was understocked and physically small. Urvashi said the launch of "[KayaKalp scheme](#)" by the UP Government helped her school and many local govt schools get budgets for infrastructure development. This gave their library a face lift and now it is bright, colourful and welcoming. Urvashi roped in support from the community- and named them "Prerna Saathi". This includes alumni from the school, parents of enrolled children and other supporters from the community. During the lockdown, this group arranged for distribution of books at home for children, so they were not cut off from the school or library. Urvashi has also focused on stocking the library with a larger collection of books and those of interest to the children and stories that are relatable to them. She makes trips to Agra and other larger cities nearby to purchase books for the library.

Network power: Urvashi joined FLN so she could stay updated on library practices, on information on how to source books, activities that will deepen engagement with books. She feels being part of the network exposes her and her teachers to many aspects of librarianship. She feels as a collective, FLN should be creating a common pool of resources, training and information on book curation and purchase.

Urvashi feels with the introduction of government schemes, especially those that empower local self help governments, there is a greater sense of ownership in developing and maintaining public spaces like libraries and even other public facilities- like schools and hospitals.

P.S Pachokhra 2 School| Address: Srinagar Pachokhra Tundla Firozabad Email: urvashi.agra@gmail.in

Conversation with Debashish | Katha Kanan (Initiative of Satirtha) in Nagaon, Assam works with two Government primary schools- one Hindi medium and other Assamese. Debashish believes that every school or educational institution should have a library program that gives children an opportunity to express themselves and encourages critical and creative thinking. It should also serve as an inclusive space reflecting the diversity we see in our society.



The Classroom Library: Currently, in one school Debashish has set up a common library for grades 1- 4. In another they set up reading corners within the classroom. The schools are small and one of the schools reached out because of this challenge of how to creatively use the space. The schools are also keen on continuous engagement and value Katha Kanan's ability to bring in high quality children's literature. Katha Kanan curates books - reflecting the interests, needs and abilities of the children. Currently Debashish's challenge with the school libraries is to keep up a continuous and sustained engagement with books, something they do easily in their community library due to daily engagement. In the school libraries, there is less frequent interaction and larger batches. They rely on energiser songs, action songs to keep all children engaged, and are working on other methods to deepen engagement with reading.

Debashish's Journey: Satirtha also runs a community library which serves close to 100 children. For Debashish, one special moment was when one of the library members, who was hesitant to even read books, started writing reviews of books. He remembers that the turning point was when the child picked up "My name is Gulab" - and immediately resonated with the themes of injustice of caste based discrimination, and from then on became an avid reader and also expresses himself.



Network power: Debashish biggest challenge is availability of high quality books. One issue is lack of bookstores. The other problem is the lack of quality content published in Assamese or Hindi. He relies on books published by NBT, but believes this is where as a collective FLN can come in- by building ties with publishers, by advocating for more content in vernacular languages, by representing the large readership base that does not have stories addressed to them.

Currently through the school programs around 150 children are served and the community library sees close to 30 visitors a day.

Katha Kanan and Satirtha | Facebook: [@satirthainfo](#) Instagram: [@satirthaofficial](#) Email: debasish.bunyan135@gmail.com Phone: 7002245376

Conversation with Priti | Share a Book India (SABIA), began as a campaign to introduce reading (for fun!) in schools. It is now a registered Trust in Rajasthan, but working with 175 schools across 16 states. Many partnerships were curtailed by lockdown and SABIA's activities are now dominant in Rajasthan, Delhi, Kashmir and Maharashtra. They have impacted over 30,000 children.



The Classroom Library: SABIA begins engagement with schools with an introduction or recommendation from the Dept/Directorate of Education. SABIA is allotted specific library periods in which volunteers do read alouds and follow up activities with a focus not just on reading but socio-economic development, encouraging students to express themselves, hold discussions around specific themes, values. The SABIA team also works on creating a physical library space in schools- by making warm reading corners, providing

and building book collections. Priti believes the library should be a colourful, warm and inviting place.

SABIA's Journey: SABIA began as an idea in 2017, when Priti and Srishti, two friends, were speaking to schools to understand the implementation of RTE (Right to Education). That journey led them to reading in schools and from there, libraries in schools. They started by visiting principals and school heads for partnerships. They found doors opened more easily if they also found an ally in the Dept of Education. In 2020 they formally registered as a Trust. SABIA has used social media most



extensively to form useful partnerships and allies as well as to source volunteers and books. They ran a campaign "Mission 100" - partnering with hundred schools. Here too they put out their vision on social media and made connections with various school heads, principals, other organizations like Teach for India, Varitra foundation etc. They have attended seminars for principals and school heads and through these avenues found more partner schools. Srishti said that their priority is to work with schools in rural or remote areas where there is severe lack of access to books/ reading resources/ information.

Network power: Priti believes that FLNs role in advocacy is critical. In asking questions like, why is reading not accessible to all, in demanding public libraries, in modelling, writing, talking and preaching about the true potential of libraries and its role in a democracy. Priti said SABIA's journey has greatly benefited from training, workshops and resources shared by other FLN members, but believes as a collective our focus should be on advocacy, inspiring and bringing in others into the Free Library Movement.

Share a Book India Association (SABIA) | Website: <https://www.shareabookindia.org> Facebook: [@Share A Book India Association](#) Instagram: [@shareabookindia](#) Email: shareabook.in@gmail.com Phone: +91 9654322891, +91 9116899611

Book Nook

FLN Recommends

Books from Chetna Trust - order [here](#)



Python! Illustrator Harini Aiana Publisher: National Institute of Speech & Hearing [NISH]

Ramu's holiday begins with a python in the house! He gets clues, but nothing prepares him for what he will see. With vivid illustrations, simple text and incorporation of common signs, this book represents and takes into consideration the needs of the hearing impaired, but is fun read for all children and adults!

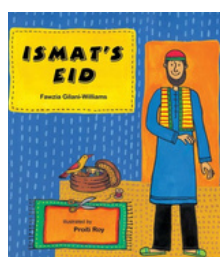


A Game of Sticks, Publisher : Chetana Charitable Trust

The wind blows Maya's sticks into the air. Join her in feeling and finding the sticks in each page. This 'Touch to Read' book has invisible textures to help children with attention difficulties or vision impairment perceive pictures, stay engaged and follow along. (On request you can also get tactile cards introducing main people and objects).

Blue Ladder Trust Loves:

Ismat's Eid, By Fauzia Gilani Willams
Illustrator: Proiti Roy Publisher: Tulika Books



A favorite with most FLN libraries- What happens when Ismat the shoemaker buys too long trousers when shopping for Eid? Crisp adaptation of a Turkish tale, told and illustrated with love.

Gajapati Kulapati, written and illustrated by Ashok Rajagopalan Publisher: Tulika Books



Everyone loves this gentle friendly elephant. Choose from various adventures -Achoo- Gajapatis cold, or Kalabaloosh- his dip in the pond, or his Gurborrom stomach. This series is loved by almost all children with its funny words (Blish Blosch Glish Glosch!) and bright illustrations.

Primary School Pachokra Loves

Chai, Publisher NCERT



Madan makes his friend Jamal a cup of tea. Will he like it? Read this brightly illustrated book with short sentences in Hindi to find out

Nani ka Chashma, Publisher NCERT



Short sentences and bright pictures tell the tale of Rama looking everywhere to find her Nanis glasses. A great book for beginner readers

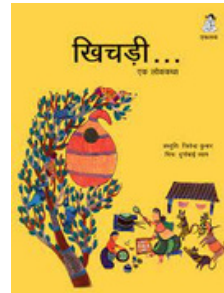
KATHA KANNAN and SABIA Loves

Red Raincoat written by Kiran Kasturia,
Illustrator: Zainab Tambawalla.
Publisher Pratham book



Manu has a new raincoat.
But the rain makes him wait
and wait and wait...

Khichadi....Ek Lok Katha, Retold by
Jeetendra Kumar, Illustrator: Durgabai
Vyam. Publisher :Ekalavya



Read this folk tale of Birju and
his love for Kichidi. A great
classroom read aloud resource
for story and form.

Nani's walk to the Park, written and
illustrated by Deepa Balsawar.
Publisher Pratham Books



Join Venki as he joins his Nani for a walk
and watch it turn into an adventure!