

# Free Libraries Zindabad

Quarterly Round up of Network News

Issue 7 | Jul- Sep 23

## Mobilising for the right to read

We mobilized ourselves recently to agitate at the Ministry of Culture's Festival of Libraries. Like all good mobilizations, our aim was to be visible as a collective and therefore more powerful in our demand for the right to read. To achieve this goal we first had to become visible- to ourselves.

Our entire reason for forming an organization is to first find one another, to find solidarity with one another, and to trust one another to act together, to act as a collective. We each might wonder, if I step forward, are there others with me? As we registered for the Festival from around the country we became visible to ourselves and united in our purpose, willing to take risks and ready to act together. We found one another and none of us were ever alone in the risks we took to register, to attend, to speak, to demand.

At the Festival, the Free Libraries Network was the most visible force articulating progressive change. While other organizations talked about "hope" we talked about "action." Without action, hope is an empty promise. Not everything at the festival was a celebration of the right to read and information for all. In fact, the keynote speaker called for the publishing industry to cease "biased" publishing and do the bidding of the government and disseminate books of their choosing.

The right to read will not be won in India without a struggle. Otherwise, we would have already built a public library system by this, our 76th year of independence. The right to read is the right to be equal and this is a challenge to power. And without it, we cannot consider ourselves to have the "liberty of thought, expression, belief..." which is envisioned in the preamble of our Constitution.

Mridula Koshy  
Core Group Member, Free Libraries Network  
Trustee, 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](#) | Insta: [@freelibrariesnetworkfln](#) | Facebook: [@freelibrariesnetworkFLN](#)  
Email: [freelibrariesnetworkfln@gmail.com](mailto:freelibrariesnetworkfln@gmail.com) and for book distribution: [booksforallFLN@gmail.com](mailto:booksforallFLN@gmail.com)



# FLN Events and Workshop

## Fundraising Webinar -Part 1 | July 15



Image: Poster for Fundraising Webinar

In the first of a series of webinars on fundraising, FLN member libraries shared their annual budgets and strategies to raise funds. TCLP, Bansa Community Library and LECIN shared their library experiences in raising funds and their processes and practices and tips to become sustainable - through individual donors, corporate donors, and crowdsourcing. This webinar was for FLN members only. For recorded video -write to [madhumita.rajan@gmail.com](mailto:madhumita.rajan@gmail.com). Other materials: [PPT on Registration and Compliance](#).

## Publishers Connect | Conversation with Muskaan | 5 Aug 23

The Muskaan team (Simran Ukey, Bali Jagat, Brajesh Verma, and Maheen Mirza,) discussed their publishing philosophy, library experience and struggles. Muskaan's books are cherished by FLN Libraries for addressing gaps in publishing, by bringing stories of the marginalised- like dalit communities, adivasis, slum dwellers. Their children's books resonate with FLN library users, because they reflect the child's perspectives and prioritises their autonomy and agency and reflects their



Image: Screenshot from Muskaan Webinar, with covers of some Muskaan's childrens publication

lives back to them. Muskaan expands the meaning of writer, author and literature by empowering all to tell their stories. FLN libraries were treated to two read alouds- "Going to School" by Simran (originally written in Hindi when she was in 5th grade). We also heard an unpublished extract of a book by Bali Jagat. These showed us their publishing philosophy in action. This talk, anchored by Poonam and Rohan was attended by over 80 FLN Libraries and taught us the power of stories and the need to see and hear from everyone.

Learn more about Muskaan and find more books by Simran and Bali, and other such stories - Website and Store ([www.store.muskaan.org](http://www.store.muskaan.org)). Contact: : [publications@muskaan.org](mailto:publications@muskaan.org)

Click [here](#) for full talk on Youtube. ( See Free Libraries Network Channel FLN on You Tube)

## Author Talk| Beti Kare Sawal and Beta Kare Sawal | 16 Sep 23



Image: Screenshot from Webinar. Comic excerpt in Hindi showing a young boy asserting his autonomy

Author Anu Gupta and Saket along with visual artist Karen discussed the creation of the two books- *Beti Kare Sawal* & *Beta Kare Sawal* - with FLN. *Beti Kare Sawal* emerged from workshops on reproductive health, with girls in government schools. It incorporates the girls' questions, stories, and even illustrations. *Beta Kare Sawal* followed to engage boys in conversations about gender, sex, sexuality and health. The bookmakers said that the 'Beti' book developed in context of

women's movement in the 1990s, and acknowledged that today, having separate books for boys and girls did subscribe to a binary view of gender. This can be challenged, addressed or improved if subsequent books are developed. FLN libraries highlighted how the books continue to be valuable resources for libraries to initiate conversations with children about sex, gender, reproduction, health and even issues like addiction within the Indian context.

Click [here](#) for full talk on Youtube. (See Free Libraries Network Channel FLN on You Tube)

# Festival of Libraries 5-6 Aug 23 | Delhi

The Ministry of Culture organised a "Festival of Libraries 2023" at Pragati Maidan Delhi. Inaugurated by the President of India, Smt. Droupadi Murmu, this festival saw many ministers and senior bureaucrats and technocrats deliberate on public libraries. Publishers, authors, other civil society groups working to build access to libraries also participated. Free Libraries Network was an active participant and audience agitating for and advocating for a free libraries movement.

**FLN on Panels | Reading is a Right and is for all**  
Jatin, (Bansa Community Library) participated in a session on "Best Library Practices". He shared the library's birth story and the practices developed to reach all members of the community and include them in library management and ownership. He introduced the Free Libraries Network - what it does & the need for it. He advocated for free, inclusive libraries. Despite push back, he called for support for public libraries in the form of a national policy. Prachi, (TCLP) participated in a session on Libraries From Around The World. This session introduced libraries in Gambia and Russia and their practices. It also introduced various (non state) library models in India like those linking government schools with reading programs, or that funnel volunteer energy into creating libraries. Prachi also spoke for the Free Library movement and highlighted the role a public library should play, the people it should serve, its importance in a democracy and underscoring the need for access to libraries being a right, a state provided public good. Both Jatin and Prachi made a very necessary intervention amid celebration of individual efforts to create public libraries.



Image: Image of Prachi, in Bhim Blue T shirt with FLN Logo speaking on stage, projected on large screen



Image: Image of Jatin, in Bhim Blue T shirt with FLN Logo speaking, projected on large screen

*Individual and community efforts to build libraries are transformative to their communities. However, they need sustained public support and fostering. Isolated civil society efforts will be scattered, ad hoc and not conform to uniform library standards. Jatin and Prachi stressed the role of libraries as a public good and drew attention to the need for state support and intervention through national policy in creating funds, resources and common standards for libraries.*

## READING IS A RIGHT

### Bringing the Festival to Libraries

FLN with TCLP leading the way made the conference a real festival. Many FLN libraries attended both days. FLN spread the word by inviting all Authors and Publishers in its compact to attend. Free Libraries Network in bright Bhim Blue shirts were unmissable - on the stage, in the audience and outside the venue.



Image: Three photos of FLN members distributing stickers, offering hand painting and engagign with public

They distributed badges, stickers and leaflets to the public, engaging & creating awareness about free libraries. FLN members also brought the fun by offering face painting, staging short natakas and song performances - all to spread the word about free libraries and the need for public libraries. It was a joyful & empowering coming together of FLN members and supporters and to finally see ourselves as part of a group collective movement. FLN used the moment to ask questions, to agitate and to demand.



Image: Three photos of FLN members distributing staging short performance/show, being spokespersons for free libraries, with bright smiles and Bhim Blue t-shirts with FLN Logos.

### FLN LOVED:

- Meeting book lovers and library supporters - making allies and finding champions
- Committed civil servants efforts to foster and champion libraries in their states and districts. Getting shout outs and recognition for FLN's work on stage from other panellists.
- Hearing senior ministers (Like R Bindu, Minister for Higher Education and Social Justice) echo FLN's beliefs and convictions: "Reading is a right", "Free Libraries break barriers to reading", "Robust public library infrastructure boosts community participation in society building".
- Seeing FLN emerge publicly as a true collective-driven movement.



Image: Jatin, Mridula and Purnima (in Bhim Blue shirts with FLN logos) with R Bindu (Minister for Higher Education and Social Justice, Kerala)

### NOT SO ROSY

While the conference did put the spotlight on libraries (often overlooked as a public institution), FLN was disappointed about

- Missing Discussions: There weren't enough discussion or reflection on : why don't we already have a robust public library infrastructure? How do existing inequalities keep people away? Why did past policies for free libraries not come to be?
- Negating access to Libraries as a Right: Celebration of individual and community efforts without addressing systemic inequalities frames access to reading as "benevolence" or "charity", and not as a right we should demand.
- There were calls for publishers to publish "good" content that promoted "national behaviour", rather than encouraging a diversity of literature representing all views.
- Seeing libraries playing a role in neutralising certain narratives rather than seeing them as a hub for all narratives, a hub for questioning and critical thinking.

FLN learnt a lot, especially about existing government and civil society efforts to revitalise public libraries and the perspective of states like Karnataka and Kerala. FLN learnt about diverse library practices (national and international) and mobilisation efforts. FLN learnt more about school libraries and their needs. We reinforced our belief in free, accessible and inclusive libraries and that the movement calling for free libraries needs to keep growing.

# Public Libraries Must Be Free!

## India Needs A Free Library National Policy!

**A library is a space in the physical or virtual domain that guarantees access to information and knowledge to all without prejudice.**

To quote IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022: *“The public has trust in their library, and in return, it is the ambition of the public library to proactively keep their community informed and aware. The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, language, social status, and any other characteristic.”*

In India, public libraries do not uniformly provide access to knowledge and information to all. Hence, it is important to use the word ‘Free’ to define a public library i.e. a library that charges no fee for membership or any of its services and proactively, as a matter of policy, programming & best practices, invites all people regardless of caste, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability to use its knowledge & information resources.

### **The Free Public Library ensures for all people:**

- Access to information & knowledge through free membership, zero fines or caution deposit, ease of admission with no document proof
- A space to socialise and practice culture
- Free access to books, literature and reading through member-driven library curriculum
- Support and guidance for educational needs and opportunities
- Freedom to exercise democratic and social rights

### **It creates an inclusive and welcoming space for all by:**

- Serving the needs of the public through an anti-caste, gender-inclusive, disability-inclusive and anti-hate policies and best practices
- Abiding by the constitutional values of justice, equality, fraternity and liberty
- Imbibing the principles of love, ensuring respect & dignity for all
- By encouraging reading with thinking and joy
- Building a diverse collection of books, reading material and digital resources in the languages of the people

### **It is:**

- Financed from public funds

### **It is not:**

- Influenced by commercial, private or government pressures
- Subject to censorship
- Meant to serve the ideals of any political party

# FLN in Spotlight

**An introduction to some of the FLN Libraries. Please watch this column to know more about specific libraries.**

**Conversation with Namita | Chetana Trust**, founded in 2004 is dedicated to creating inclusive environments and opportunities for people at risk, including those with disabilities and first generation learners in Kotturpuram Chennai. They specialise in crafting assistive resources for people with special needs, operating the ARM Library (Accessible Reading Materials Library) serving around 100 children with print disabilities monthly, and many more through activity and awareness programs in the community.

Chetana's mission is to raise awareness, to get communities to see those who remain unseen and include them in community activities and growth. Namita, founder of Chetana Trust says "Literacy remains a concern area - across children, - regardless of visual or intellectual status and this is a problem of access, access to resources. Due to lack of access to adapted story books, to adapted toys, children were not introduced to the joy of reading and self discovery and development of play"



Image: Range of Chetana Trust accessible story books

**Reading Resources:** Chetana Trust adapts and creates storybooks with tactile images, large text, simplified text, page turners and other features designed to give more independence to children with various difficulties including attention, vision, motor or intellectual impairments. Most importantly Chetana Trust books are fun! They are bright, joyous, and infectious - making children want to pick them up, explore them, and share them with friends. [Click [here](#) for book of the month]

The other critical value of Chetana Trust's own publications is - they are reproducible. These books can be recreated at very low cost in most libraries. They don't need special technology or special printers. They need a commitment to think about those who have special needs, those that have trouble accessing the existing resources in your library and to build a collection in your library that serves all. Their website will guide you on finding books, making your own books, even making toys and creating games that invite all to play.

**Co - creation with Users:** Chetana Trust works in collaboration with end users, community members and organisations in creating books. It is an excellent way to raise awareness and skills and to work toward a future where children with print disabilities have equal access to high quality, engaging books. Partnerships with IIT Madras, Enability Foundation and ToucheTech have resulted in technology that helps create tactile elements in books. Bloom Reader app provides an accessible reading experience for online books. Many authors and illustrators help co-create stories. Children with disabilities are often



Image: A child explores Chetana Trust's adaptation of The Giving Tree, Shel Silverstein.

the authors of the books. Some voice the stories for Chetana's stories online. People with disabilities for various ages are on the professional advisory committee and give feedback on assistive elements as they are developed.



Image: Story telling sessions with Chetana Trust's accessible story books

**Awareness:** Chetana conducts workshops in schools, colleges and institutions to raise awareness about disability and develop knowledge and skills to enable greater participation of people with disabilities in our society. Chetana conducts workshops on creating accessible materials, making inclusive library spaces, braille and sign language etc. Chetana Trust's mission is for everyone to grow together and for each of us to be able to direct our own learning and growth. Their books are one way to allow children to take control over their own reading journey.

The dream is to have more libraries equipped to include children with disabilities in their spaces and for publishing houses to begin creating accessible story books.

**Chetana Trust | Website:** [www.Chetana.org.in](http://www.Chetana.org.in) | **Insta:** [@chetana\\_trust](https://www.instagram.com/chetana_trust) | **Email:** [team@chetana.org.in](mailto:team@chetana.org.in) Phone: 9840509739 / 7305099749 | **YouTube:** [Team Chetana](https://www.youtube.com/TeamChetana)

**Conversation with Pinky Biswash | Chandraprabha Saikiani Feminist Library,** in Dibrugarh, Assam was founded in 2023. This feminist library aims to provide a safe and inviting space for all - in particular women, trans people, queer community and anyone not conforming to traditional binary gender norms. The Library's larger mission is to create awareness around gender inequalities, to make visible those challenging traditional gender norms, to provide a space and a judgement free zone for all to be themselves and be accepted by themselves and society. Dibrugarh has a good university library. While it is open to non university members also- by its very nature as an academic library, its resources caters to scholars and academics, and its rules and regulations limits its uses. Pinky and other members of the Drishti Queer Collective felt a dire need for space that welcomed them, held relevant literature for them, and also served the larger community of Dibrugarh- children, women, farmers, shopkeepers etc and so this feminist library was born.

**Reading Resources:** This library houses a collection of over 2000 books, with a high quality children's book section, which includes books on gender norms and roles and sexuality. There is a collection of fiction and non-fiction books for Adults, and a section on gender studies in English, Assamese and Hindi.

**Library Programs:** The Library is open to all from 11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. The children's section sees regular read-alouds. The Library has collaborated with local government schools in the neighborhood, to supplement the children's reading needs. There are theme based discussions, held on the first Sunday of every month. These are widely publicized through posters and word of mouth and is open to all. The library also holds film screenings



Image: Library's well stocked bookshelf under cheerful rainbow umbrella



Image: Library's bright wall, with artwork stacked against it and msgs of pride and empowerment

,book discussion groups and workshops on gender and sexuality. All these programs are to make the library visible and inviting. However, the library has a clear vision and all programs are devised to further the aim of creating a safe, free space where all are welcome. The thematic discussions invite the community to dive deeper into who we include and who we exclude and why. The film screenings spark debate and discussion. The workshops raise awareness and provides much-needed information on gender, sexuality, gender roles etc.

Currently physical space is a challenge. The library was set up as Dibrugarh did not offer many public spaces for communities to gather and organise. To add to this the few existing public spaces were deeply suspicious and even hostile to the queer community. While the library now exists in a building close to the university, they may be forced to move again

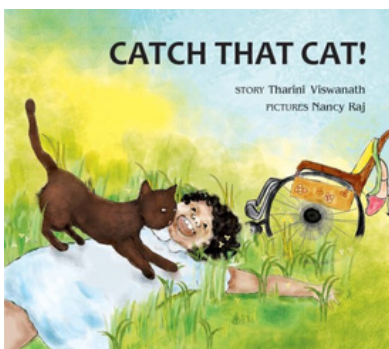
**Chandraprabha Saikiani Feminist Library, | Website:** <https://akamfoundation.org.in> **Insta:** [@kitape\\_katha\\_koi](https://www.instagram.com/kitape_katha_koi)  
**Email:** [akamfoundationassam@gmail.com](mailto:akamfoundationassam@gmail.com) **Phone:** 91 93659 52412

# Book Nook

FLN Libraries Recommends

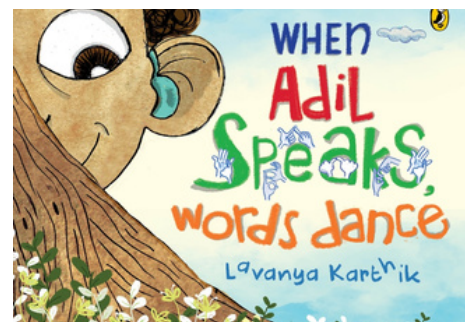
## Chetana Trust Loves

Chetana Trust Online stories : <https://chetana.org.in/armonlinelibrary> - These stories can be printed too! Find stories in multiple languages and themes.



**Catch that cat by Tharini Viswanath, illustrated by Nancy Raj  
Publisher: Tulika Books**

When Kaapi, the cat goes missing a spirited little girl Dip Dip will do everything to find her cat.

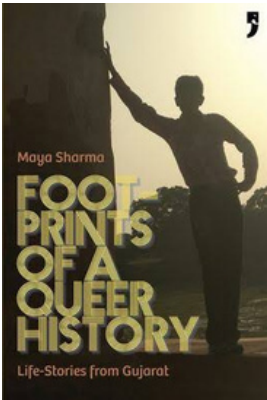


**When Adil Speaks, Words Dance by Lavanya Karthik  
Publisher Puffin (Penguin)**

A heart-warming tale of empathy, inclusivity and the surprising superpowers of friendship.

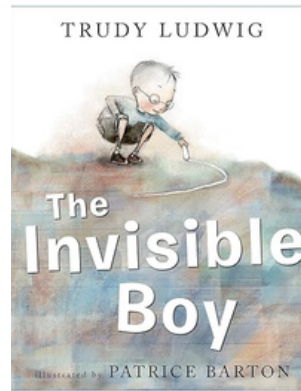


## Chandraprabha Saikiani Feminist Library Loves



**Foot prints of a queer history by Maya Sharma**  
Publisher Yoda Press

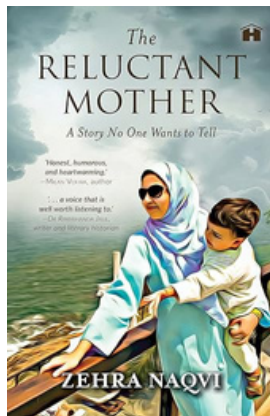
Narratives of queer stories marked by personal journeys, political consciousness, socio-legal struggles, friendships, and love.



**The Invisible Boy by Trudy Ludwig, illustrated by Patrice Barton**

**Publisher: Knopf Books**

A gentle story that teaches how small acts of kindness can help children feel included and allow them to flourish.



**The Reluctant Mother by Zehra Naqvi**  
**Publishers: Hay House**

The story of a young woman who seeks to find herself in a world that constantly tries to define her and who she should be. It is the memoir of an anti-mother.