

Read to Rise:

How Reading with Comprehension Unlocks
a Child's World

APRIL 2018



Executive Summary

Despite major strides in education, India faces a quiet but urgent crisis: millions of children are unable to read with comprehension. This foundational literacy gap to grade severely limits their learning outcomes, to thrive, and participate fully in school and beyond.

Reading is not an automatic skill; it must be taught with intention and structure, particularly in the early years. Unlike speaking, which children absorb naturally, reading requires focused instruction—especially in phonics, vocabulary, grounded in the science of reading and comprehension. When these building blocks are missing, children fall behind early, and most never catch up.

For first-generation learners in India, the challenges are even steeper. In many government schools, students have limited exposure to English at home, and few opportunities to hear, speak, or read it in their surroundings. Classrooms are often under-resourced, and teachers are rarely equipped to teach reading systematically. Libraries, if they exist, are typically locked, poorly stocked, or disconnected from what students actually need.

While national initiatives like NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat rightly emphasize the importance of foundational literacy by Grade 3, real change on the ground remains patchy. There is a clear need for local, contextual, and scalable interventions that can bring these policy goals to life in meaningful ways.

Project Pustakalaya flagship initiative by the Anandaya Foundation—was developed in response to this gap. It transforms underused school spaces into vibrant, welcoming reading rooms stocked with carefully curated, levelled books. These aren't just libraries, they are child-friendly ecosystems where reading is joyful, guided, and rooted in how children learn.

At the heart of the initiative is the Learn-to-Read program, grounded in phonics and the science of reading, a systematic and staggered literacy intervention that builds English fluency through decodable readers, a controlled vocabulary, and teacher training. Once fluency is established, the Read-to-Learn module extends literacy into critical thinking and expression. Through guided discussions and meaningful engagement with texts, children begin to apply, analyze, evaluate, and connect what they read, building the foundation for lifelong learning and academic success across subjects.

More than just a literacy program, Project Pustakalaya represents a model for how grassroots solutions can align with national priorities, while being deeply responsive to the realities of underserved classrooms. It shows that when children have access to the right environment, the right materials, and the right guidance, reading becomes not just possible—but transformative.

In a country where nearly three out of four children attend government schools, the stakes are high. Reading with comprehension is not a luxury—it is the foundation for all learning, and a gateway to opportunity. This paper calls on educators, policymakers, and changemakers to put reading at the heart of India's education agenda—and to reimagine school not just as a place for instruction, but as a place where children learn to read, think, and rise.

1. Reading: An Urgent National Priority

Reading skills are the cornerstone of a child's education. They lay the foundation for all other forms of learning. Reading strengthens cognitive abilities, builds vocabulary, and enhances comprehension—skills that are critical not only during school years but throughout life. Reading is not just a skill but a fundamental tool for success in all future education.

Unlike speaking, which develops naturally through exposure, reading is not an evolutionary skill—it must be taught explicitly. While babies learn to speak by being spoken to, reading requires structured and systemic guidance, phonetic awareness, and consistent exposure to print. Without such instruction, especially in early years, children struggle to build fluency and comprehension. Reading is not just a skill—it is the foundation that empowers students in their educational journeys and makes them lifelong learners.

Research has shown that reading is fundamentally a language-based skill. Unlike speaking or listening, reading does not develop naturally; children require a conducive environment with access to relevant and contextual resources that match their reading levels, along with explicit and systematic instruction in phonetics and the science of reading and critical thinking.

2. Literacy Challenges in the Indian Context

2.1 Barriers to Literacy Among First-Generation Learners

First-generation learners often lack exposure to English at home and in their communities, affecting their ability to build foundational literacy. Reading is intricately linked with speaking and listening—collectively referred to as orality—which forms the bedrock for literacy development. In underserved schools, teacher capacity to teach English systematically is limited, contributing to increased reading and learning poverty. Additionally, limited access to libraries and contextual reading material further suppresses motivation to read and explore language.

2.2 The Indian Education System and Structural Challenges

India's multilingual landscape presents unique challenges for building foundational literacy. For many first-generation learners, the leap from their home language to English is steep due to phonetic differences and limited exposure. These differences hinder decoding and comprehension, especially when English is introduced without systematic instruction.

Furthermore, India's education system tends to prioritize rote learning and exam performance, leaving little room for exploratory or pleasure-based reading. This environment turns reading into a task rather than a joyful experience. Without the right pedagogy and support, students fail to build the cognitive and linguistic skills necessary for fluent reading.

2.3 Barriers Faced by Children in Indian Government Schools

Approximately 72.9% of Indian children attend government schools (ASER 2022), with a significant proportion coming from underserved backgrounds. These students often come from households where English is neither spoken nor heard, leading to low orality in the language. Since early reading development depends on hearing and speaking language, this becomes a major barrier.

Government school systems typically rely on centralized curricular resources that don't address the diverse needs of learners from different linguistic or socioeconomic contexts. Libraries, if present, are often underutilized or house books that are neither engaging nor level-appropriate. Without exposure to relevant materials and a stimulating environment to practice reading, children lose the opportunity to develop early reading skills, and most never catch up.

3. The Critical Window for Early Reading Development

3.1 Literacy in the Early Years

Students primarily learn to read in their early school years. Literacy acquired at this stage enables them to read and understand complex texts in higher grades, laying a foundation for academic success and lifelong learning. Literacy foundation empowers them to read effectively complex text in higher grades and supports their future learning process.

3.2 Cultivating a Habit of Reading

Emergent readers thrive in spaces that provide access to relevant reading materials compatible with their reading levels. A trained teacher plays a crucial role in guiding students to transition from early reading to fluent comprehension. With regular practice, students cultivate the habit of reading, which supports their future learning process across disciplines. Cultivating the habit of reading through relevant resources, in a conducive environment with a trained teacher sets the stage for their future learning process.

4. Government Efforts and Identified Gaps

4.1 National Policy Interventions

Recognizing these challenges, India has introduced major initiatives to address early literacy gaps. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and NIPUN Bharat (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) emphasize the urgent need to achieve foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3, by 2026–27. These policies support phonics-based instruction, early intervention, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy. However, implementation across India's vast and varied educational landscape remains uneven. The success of these programs hinges on localized efforts—tailoring reading instruction to community needs, providing teacher training, and ensuring access to the right learning resources.

4.2 Resource Gaps and Library Utilization

Despite mandates such as the Right to Education, which requires every school to have a library, many government schools either lack functional libraries or fail to utilize them effectively. Books are often stored in locked cabinets, remain unused, or are too complex for early readers. The disconnect between available resources and actual student needs creates a widening literacy gap. In underserved schools, the absence of safe, engaging reading spaces discourages students from practicing their learnt reading skills, reading for pleasure or learning. A meaningful, vibrant library space—not just a room with books—is critical for fostering curiosity and self-driven learning. Without it, children lose access to both the habit and joy of reading.

5. Project Pustakalaya: A Context-Sensitive Intervention

5.1 Purpose and Design

In response to these systemic and contextual challenges, Anandaya Foundation's Project Pustakalaya offers a thoughtful, replicable model tailored for India's underserved government schools. It transforms underutilized school spaces into vibrant, inviting library environments filled with phonics-based, level-appropriate reading resources curated specifically for first-generation English learners. Each book in the Learn-to-Read program follows a systematic staggered approach grounded in the science of reading. The science of reading skills is introduced in isolation through the methodology of encoding and decoding, vocabulary building, and comprehension, empowering children to build fluency with confidence.

5.2 Creating Joyful Reading Ecosystems

Pustakalayas are more than libraries—they are joyful learning ecosystems. With colourful visuals, child-friendly furniture, and inspirational posters featuring the children themselves, these spaces build ownership and dignity. Read-aloud sessions and guided discussions support oral fluency, critical thinking, and expression of thought.

5.3 Policy Alignment and Strategic Contribution

Designed to align with government literacy goals, Project Pustakalaya complements existing frameworks like NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat while addressing their practical limitations. It demonstrates how grassroots, context-sensitive interventions can effectively build the foundation for reading, comprehension, and lifelong learning. Strategic interventions to support development of reading in children in India are key to making these efforts sustainable and effective.

6. From Learning to Read to Reading to Learn

Once students develop decoding and comprehension skills, they transition from learning to read to reading to learn. At this stage, reading becomes a tool to access content across subjects—from science to social studies—broadening their knowledge and deepening their engagement with academic materials.

Children who can read with comprehension become more confident learners, able to navigate India's text-rich academic landscape with ease. They develop the cognitive tools needed to think analytically, solve problems, and express themselves effectively. The more they read, the better they become at it.

7. Empowering Children Beyond Literacy

Reading opens doors not just to education, but to expression, empathy, creativity, and critical thinking. Students begin to analyse characters, explore motivations, and understand perspectives. When guided by teachers in reflective discussions, they engage in deeper thinking—evaluating ideas, drawing connections, and building self-awareness.

Reading's benefits extend far beyond the classroom, laying the foundation for success in all future education. It equips children with the literacy and language skills needed to excel academically and fosters critical thinking and communication. Reading ignites creativity, imagination, and cognitive development, building neural pathways that empower children with focus and concentration for all lifelong learning. Furthermore, reading cultivates empathy, self-awareness, and a deeper understanding of society, creating responsible citizens.

8. Anandaya Foundation's Holistic Approach

Project Pustakalaya seamlessly integrates into the school system as a foundational literacy intervention. Its joyful, inclusive environment is distinct from the typical classroom or home—it's a space children identify as their own.

The room is equipped with relevant, contextual books, fluid seating, and child-friendly visuals. It enables reading fluency, comprehension, expression, and critical thinking. Teacher-led read-aloud and story-based interactions turn books into springboards for discussion and imagination.

By addressing systemic barriers while nurturing intrinsic motivation, Anandaya Foundation creates a robust reading culture that helps students realize their academic and professional potential.

9. Conclusion and Call to Action

Reading is not merely an academic skill; it is a life-enabling one. For children in India, especially those in government schools, early literacy is the key to unlocking opportunity. **Project Pustakalaya** is a strategic, scalable model that fosters not just reading, but also comprehension, expression, and imagination.

To build an equitable and literate future, we must treat reading as the foundation of all learning. We invite educational stakeholders, policymakers, and changemakers to join hands with Anandaya Foundation in making reading a joyful and accessible reality for every child.