

The Case for Pustakalaya:

Transforming Education Through Empowering
Child-Centric Reading Spaces

APRIL 2018



Executive Summary

Across India, government primary schools—particularly in low-income communities—continue to struggle with longstanding issues that have severely affected learning outcomes. Learning remains focused on inputs—attendance, infrastructure, or rote delivery—rather than tangible outcomes like reading fluency, comprehension, and expression.

Despite attending school for years, a large number of students are unable to read with understanding, let alone think critically or express themselves with confidence. This disconnect has led many parents lose faith in the public education that is not aligned to their children's cognitive needs.

Project Pustakalaya was born in response to these urgent challenges. At its core, it reimagines the school library—not as a forgotten room filled with dusty books, but as a vibrant, welcoming space where reading with comprehension becomes joyful and comes with ease. The Pustakalaya is designed to meet children where they are—physically, emotionally, and cognitively. It invites them in with warmth and colour, with fluid seating and a curated booklist within easy reach, creating an environment that feels safe, familiar, and motivating.

The heart of the project lies in a carefully curated booklist, derived from a master booklist of over 5,000 books, selected to reflect children's lives, interests, and stages of cognitive development.

These books are visually rich, age-appropriate, and contextually relevant—available across multiple reading levels to support every child's learning journey. The collection spans diverse genres and themes, including STEM, moral values, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), helping children expand their thinking while remaining anchored in familiar, relatable content.

To bridge the gap from “I can't read” to “I can read and understand,” the Pustakalaya integrates a Learn-to-Read program that has a systematic and staggered approach. Grounded in phonetics and the science of reading, it uses decodable books delivered in a controlled vocabulary environment.

This ensures children develop strong foundational reading skills. Just as importantly, the program upskills teachers with the tools, training, and confidence to lead children through this process effectively.

The initiative goes beyond the physical library. School principals are engaged as key allies, participating in regular dialogues to co-create solutions, promote reading across the school, and ensure that the program is integrated within the school system.

Collaboration with government education departments support the model's institutionalization, ensuring it is scalable and sustainable. Regular reporting and stakeholder updates maintain accountability and perpetuity of the program. Outcomes are tracked through measurable assessments, enabling data-driven decision-making at every level.

Project Pustakalaya is not just a program; it's a vision for what education can be when it truly centers the child. It addresses the literacy crisis not merely as a technical challenge, but as a matter of dignity, equity, and opportunity. By transforming both educational inputs and outcomes, Project Pustakalaya empowers children through reading, fostering human capital development at the grassroots level.

1.Introduction

In the evolving landscape of education, government primary schools, especially in lower socio-economic areas, face numerous systemic challenges that hinder effective reading and learning. The concept of the Pustakalaya (library) has emerged as a response to these challenges, recognizing the need for a shift in how we approach children's reading and learning, particularly in low-income households where resources are scarce.

This white paper explores the challenges faced by government primary schools, focusing on the literacy gap to grade and the role a child-centric library could play in addressing these issues.

2. Background

2.1 Challenges in Government Primary Schools

2.1.1 Rote Learning and Limited Comprehension

In government primary schools, the dominant approach to education is rote learning, which focuses on memorization rather than comprehension. This method prevents students from engaging deeply with the material, particularly in reading and understanding texts. Textbooks developed by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) often fail to align with the cognitive abilities of students, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These textbooks can be irrelevant or too advanced for many students, leaving them struggling with reading with comprehension, particularly when it comes to subjects like English as a second language.

2.1.2 Misalignment of Curriculum and Resources

The educational systems, guidelines, and textbooks used in government schools were established decades ago, based on an assumption of uniformity that overlooks the diversity of student needs across regions. The current curriculum does not consider the socio-economic realities of students, particularly those in marginalized communities. The lack of systematic teaching methodologies for subjects like English, combined with inadequate teaching resources and child-friendly learning materials, further exacerbates the literacy gap. Additionally, English textbooks are often not aligned with any systemic pedagogy or teaching methodology, and there is a noticeable absence of supplementary readers that would allow students to practice and reinforce their reading techniques. This disconnect between curriculum design and practical learning needs continues to hinder effective language acquisition.

2.1.3 Teacher-Student Ratio and Quality of Instruction

In many schools, the teacher-student ratio is unmanageable, leading to a lack of individualized attention for students. Teachers, who may not have received quality professional development or training in effective pedagogical techniques, often struggle to engage students meaningfully. This is especially true for English language instruction, where many educators lack the training to deliver systemic and explicit instruction necessary for developing reading fluency. As a result, students receive poor-quality instruction, particularly in foundational literacy skills like reading and comprehension.

2.2 Socio-Economic and Cultural Context

2.2.1 The Role of Education in Low-Income Families

In many low-income communities, education is viewed as a means to escape poverty and improve one's socio-economic status. Parents see education as a tool for securing a job that will help support the family. The students themselves enter school with hopes of breaking the cycle of poverty, but many begin to lose hope as they struggle with the challenges of a system ill-equipped to meet their needs.

2.2.2 Challenges at Home and Low Self-Esteem

Children from low-income families often come to school carrying emotional burdens and struggling with low self-esteem, shaped by challenging home environments.

In many cases, parenting is rooted in strict authority and an emphasis on obedience, leaving little room for the child's voice, individuality, or emotional needs to be acknowledged. As a result, the child's inner world—full of curiosity, imagination, and vulnerability—is often rendered invisible, stifling their sense of self-worth. School, which should be a space for growth, affirmation, and self-expression, instead becomes yet another environment where children feel disempowered and unable to realize their full potential.

2.3 The Teacher-Student Dynamic: A Disempowering Culture

2.3.1 Top-Down Approach

The teacher-student dynamic in many government schools resembles a "zamindari" approach, where teachers hold authority over students and view them as passive recipients of information. This top-down model often leads to a lack of student engagement and discourages critical thinking and self-expression.

One clear manifestation of this is the disproportionate amount of classroom time spent on rote learning and mechanical tasks like copying text from the board, rather than on developing reading fluency, comprehension, or critical thinking skills. The emphasis on obedience over empowerment further stifles students' aspirations, leaving them disillusioned with the educational process and disengaged from meaningful learning.

2.3.2 Lack of Motivation and Critical Thinking and Free Expression

The rigid, authoritarian educational culture discourages students from questioning, thinking critically, or expressing themselves. This results in a lack of motivation, as students fail to see the relevance of what they are learning to their lives. Over time, this leads to growing disengagement from the educational process, with many students eventually dropping out or turning to alternate means of livelihood—often in informal sectors that offer limited opportunities and, in some cases, expose them to harmful or exploitative environments.

2.4 The Current State of Education: Failing to Address Real Needs

2.4.1 Outdated Curriculum and Teaching Methods

The government's education system relies on outdated textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods that fail to reflect the changing socio-economic context in which students live. The education system continues to follow policies and guidelines that are not region-specific, applying a one-size-fits-all approach across the entire country. As a result, the unique cultural, linguistic, and developmental needs of diverse student populations are often overlooked. The lack of real-time revision of educational materials further deepens this disconnect, leading to an education that is misaligned with the lived realities and cognitive needs of today's students.

2.4.2 Inadequate Teacher Training

Teachers often lack training in systemic, research-based scientific teaching methods for literacy instruction. This gap results in ineffective classroom strategies, especially in subjects like English. Without the skills to nurture reading comprehension, critical thinking, and expression, educators are unable to support students in engaging meaningfully with learning materials. Consequently, many students continue to struggle with literacy and remain disengaged from the educational process.

2.4.3 Bureaucratic Approach to Education

Education authorities often prioritize meeting numerical targets and fulfilling administrative requirements rather than addressing the genuine cognitive and developmental needs of students. This results in a cycle of superficial reforms, where statistics are frequently manipulated to project an illusion of progress that does not reflect the lived experiences within classrooms. In some cases, new policies and guidelines are crafted based on these fabricated or selectively presented figures, further widening the gap between policy and practice. The lack of responsiveness to the actual challenges faced by students only deepens their sense of powerlessness and disillusionment with the education system.

2.5 The Impact on Students: A Cycle of Disempowerment

2.5.1 Poor Literacy and Comprehension

The emphasis on rote memorization rather than comprehension leads to poor literacy levels. Students often leave school without being able to read and comprehend textbooks or express themselves effectively. This lack of literacy not only hinders academic progress but also limits students' ability to navigate daily life and pursue future opportunities.

2.5.2 Emotional and Social Consequences

Students from low-income backgrounds often carry emotional burdens into the classroom, which significantly compound their educational challenges. In the absence of adequate support systems to address their emotional and psychological needs, many develop a growing sense of hopelessness and frustration. As they continue to struggle academically, their self-esteem diminishes, and they begin to view education not as a pathway to empowerment, but as a barrier—something that delays their ability to acquire quick livelihood skills and access immediate opportunities for survival.

2.5.3 Dropout Rates and Escalating Issues

The combined impact of these pressing challenges has led to a rising dropout rate, as many students choose to leave school in pursuit of work or become involved in harmful behaviours such as substance abuse or criminal activity. When the education system fails to address their cognitive and emotional needs, students often lose hope, feeling trapped in a cycle of poverty and disempowerment with few pathways to a better future.

Conclusion: The Need for Transformation

Addressing the deep-rooted challenges facing government primary schools—particularly those serving low-income communities—requires more than isolated interventions; it calls for a holistic transformation of the educational ecosystem. The systemic issues explored throughout this paper—ranging from rote learning, outdated curricula, inadequate teacher training, and the burden of non-systemic instructional materials, to a disempowering school culture—collectively contribute to a cycle of poor literacy, emotional disengagement, and ultimately, high dropout rates.

The Pustakalaya, as a child-centric library space, presents a transformative opportunity to counter these patterns. It reimagines the role of reading in a child's life—not as a mechanical skill, but as a gateway to comprehension, curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking and communication. A thoughtfully designed Pustakalaya can provide children with a systemic learn-to-read program and access to age-appropriate, engaging, and contextually relevant literature to read and learn, that supports their cognitive and emotional development, especially in environments where such resources are otherwise unavailable.

However, the establishment of such a space must be part of a broader, integrated approach. Reforms must extend to curriculum design, teaching methodologies—particularly for English and foundational literacy—and the creation of accessible, diverse supplementary reading materials. Moreover, a cultural shift within schools is essential: from authoritarian instruction to child empowerment, from passive absorption to active learning.

Through this transformation, education can be reclaimed as a means of liberation—a force that enables children from marginalized backgrounds to rise above their socio-economic limitations, reclaim their voices, and imagine futures filled with possibility. The Pustakalaya is not just a library; it is a symbol of what education can become when it truly centers the child.

3. The Library: A Forgotten Space

3.1 The Current State of Libraries in Government Schools

While 93% of government schools report having a Library, Book Bank, or Reading Corner (UDISE 2023–24), the reality is that these spaces are largely present but not functional.

In practice, school libraries suffer from:

- **Poor infrastructure:** Many are housed in physically deteriorated rooms with broken furniture, inadequate lighting, and uninviting layouts that discourage regular use.
- **Non-conducive environment:** The atmosphere in many school libraries fails to inspire engagement or support joyful reading. These spaces often feel static and disconnected from students' daily learning experiences. Instead of being warm, welcoming, and child-centric, they are frequently uninviting—lacking comfort, vibrancy, and the sense of discovery essential for nurturing a love of reading.
- **Inaccessibility of resources:** Books are frequently locked away, disorganized, or shelved without a system, making it difficult for children—especially early readers—to explore or access them independently. Teachers find it tedious and time-consuming to locate books that match the students' reading levels. Materials for students are often mixed with textbooks, teacher guides, and other resources, rendering the library an underutilized space.

As a result, libraries exist more in name than in function. Rather than serving as vibrant, meaningful spaces that nurture joy for reading, curiosity, imagination, and cognitive development, they often reflect broader challenges of the education system—underutilized, overlooked, and unable to meet the emotional and developmental needs of young readers. Without purposeful design, access, contextual reading resources, and engagement, these libraries risk remaining symbolic structures—present, but unable to fulfil their transformative potential.

4.The Role of Books in a Child's Development

Books are powerful supplementary reading resources, capable of nurturing joy for reading, learning skills, imagination, curiosity, empathy, critical thinking, and expression of thought. However, in many government schools, this potential is lost. Though books are present, they often exist as redundant resources—available but unused, disconnected from children's cognitive needs.

In government school libraries, books are frequently:

- Outdated, with worn, irrelevant titles that fail to engage or inspire.
- Not child-friendly, lacking age-appropriate language, illustrations, or relatable content.
- Poorly organized, making independent access difficult for both students and teachers, diminishing the relevance of libraries as learning spaces.
- Missing digital aid, which could otherwise support diverse learning needs.

Rather than serving as meaningful supplementary resources, these books often intimidate or alienate students—reinforcing reading as a task linked with failure, not joy. When books fail to reflect children's realities or support their reading levels, they become symbols of frustration rather than tools for growth. The child develops an "I can't read" psychology that hinders both confidence and learning.

5. The Birth of the Pustakalaya: A Vision for Change

5.1. The Need for a Child-Centric and Child-Friendly Library

In response to the inadequacies of government school libraries, the Pustakalaya was conceived as a vibrant, functional, and meaningful alternative. It reimagines the traditional library—not just as a room filled with books, but as a dynamic space designed around the cognitive needs, interests, and emotional realities of the child.

The Pustakalaya is envisioned as:

- A vibrant and motivating environment, visually rich and inviting, that encourages children to spend time and engage joyfully with books.
- A space with wall-to-wall carpeting and fluid seating, allowing familiar and comfortable postures—enabling children to move, sit, lean, or lie down while reading.
- A safe space with minimal adult intervention, encouraging independence and decision-making.
- A library with books displayed openly, front-facing and within reach, inviting children to browse freely.
- Decorated with motivational posters, maps, and character cut-outs from similar backgrounds, fostering familiarity and emotional comfort.
- Supported with digital aids, offering blended learning experiences that enhance literacy through audio-visual and interactive elements.

Together, these elements transform the library into a joyful, empowering space—a philosophy in practice that nurtures reading with autonomy, purpose, and joy.

5.2 A Specially Curated Booklist for Empowerment

The Pustakalaya's book collection is thoughtfully curated from a master list of 3,000 books, designed to foster a love for reading and learning among children. Built over a decade from on-ground experience, the collection ensures every child can engage meaningfully with the material.

Key Features of the Collection Include:

- **Engaging & Colourful Illustrations:** Each book features vibrant, age-appropriate illustrations that capture the imagination.
- **Contextual Relevance:** Content aligns with local culture and curriculum to make stories relatable.
- **Age-Appropriate Language:** Clear, simple text matches children's reading abilities.

- **Child-Friendly Fonts:** Large, legible fonts enhance reading ease for early learners.
- **Ideal Book Sizes:** Designed to comfortably fit young hands.
- **Reading Levels:** Books range from wordless stories to full paragraphs, providing progressive reading challenges.
- **Premium Quality:** High-quality paper and durable bindings ensure longevity.
- **Genre Diversity:** Includes fiction, non-fiction, humour, poems, fantasy, folklore, mythology, heritage, adventure, mirror books, and window books that offer knowledge and global perspectives.
- **STEM and Concept Books:** Introduce scientific and mathematical concepts through accessible, engaging narratives that build foundational knowledge.
- **SDG-Themed Books:** Promote awareness of global goals and social consciousness.
- **Tactile Books:** Include sensory features that enhance engagement for early readers and children with diverse learning needs.
- **Annual Expansion:** 150 new books and digital resources are added each year, keeping the library dynamic and aligned with students' curiosity. Popular titles are replaced to maintain relevance.

This curated booklist ensures that reading becomes an enriching experience—one that supports both cognitive and emotional growth, while also introducing concepts of science, sustainability, and sensory learning in an inclusive, joyful way.

6. A Reading Solution Designed for Impact: Learn-to-Read, Training of Teachers and Digital Aids

6.1 Empowering Readers and Educators: The Learn-to-Read Program

Building on the foundation established by a curated booklist designed for empowerment, the Learn-to-Read Program strengthens children's literacy through a structured, systematic, and developmentally appropriate approach. It not only ensures that children become confident, fluent readers but also provides essential training for educators to deliver effective and consistent reading instruction both inside and beyond the library.

The Structured Approach of the Learn-to-Read Program

To address the fundamental barriers to early literacy, the Learn-to-Read Program adopts a research-backed approach grounded in phonological pedagogy. Its key elements include:

- **Decodable Readers with a Rich Phonics Base:** Grounded in phonemic awareness and the science of reading, the program introduces reading techniques progressively through decodable readers. This approach ensures that children internalize strong foundational reading skills. Once a child learns to read systematically, those skills become permanent and cannot be unlearned.
- **Systematic & Staggered Approach:** Reading techniques are introduced in isolation and in a sequenced manner, allowing each child to progress at their own pace and build mastery step-by-step.
- **Carefully Created Books for Each Reading Level:** A diverse set of books is available across reading levels and sub-levels, providing enough material for children to practice each reading technique in isolation. These books are developmentally aligned to children's reading proficiency.
- **Contextual Vocabulary:** Vocabulary is drawn from high-frequency and contextually relevant words, helping children build word recognition and apply learning in real-life contexts.

The Impact of Learn-to-Read: Empowering Educators & Enriching Readers

The Learn-to-Read Program brings measurable impact to both teachers and students:

- **Teacher Empowerment:** Teachers receive specialized training in phonemic awareness, phonics, and the science of reading. With structured teaching aids and strategies, they are equipped to facilitate effective reading sessions across different student levels and classroom contexts.
- **Uniform Teaching Methodology:** The program standardizes English language instruction across participating schools, ensuring all children benefit from consistent, high-quality pedagogy, regardless of their background or geography.
- **Increased Confidence and Fluency in Students:** As students move through the program, they transition from "I can't read" to "I can read with understanding," leading to increased fluency, self-esteem, and enthusiasm for books. The journey from rote learning to joyful reading marks a pivotal shift in how children interact with texts.
- **Moving Away from Rote Learning:** Once children gain basic reading skills, they can focus on comprehension, expression, and critical thinking. The program supports meaningful engagement with content and fosters independent learning.

6.2 Training of Teachers: Strengthening Instructional Capacity

The success of the Learn-to-Read Program is anchored in the training of educators. Through sustained professional development, teachers are empowered to lead effective reading sessions during library periods and extend these practices into the classroom.

Teacher Training Curriculum:

- Orientation to Project Pustakalaya
- Enhancing Reading Skills through Primary Library Activities
- Developing a Habit of Reading through Extended Library Activities
- Fostering Critical Thinking
- Learn-to-Read Program: Focus on phonological awareness and the science of reading
- Demonstration & Observation of Library Classes

Through this combination of rigorous pedagogy and consistent mentoring, teachers are positioned not merely as implementers, but as champions of literacy. They become key agents in transforming libraries from passive storage spaces into dynamic centers of learning and imagination.

6.3 Digital Aids

Digital aids offer free access to carefully curated decodable books and teacher training videos, helping to extend the program's reach across more schools and educators. These resources complement physical libraries and building teacher capacity.

7. Strengthening Implementation through Deep Intervention and Stakeholder Engagement

To ensure the long-term success and sustainability of the Pustakalaya, a strong and deep intervention strategy must be implemented, with robust capacity-building efforts targeting teachers, librarians, principals, and the government education apparatus.

7.1 Capacity Building for Teachers

Teachers play a pivotal role in the success of the library ecosystem. Comprehensive professional development sessions are conducted to:

- Build capacity in phonics, phonemic awareness, and the science of reading.
- Shift the student mindset from "I can't read" to "I can read," thereby instilling confidence and a joy in reading.
- Introduce Bloom's Taxonomy as a tool to foster critical thinking—supporting skills of remembering, understanding, analysing, evaluating, and creating.
- Share best practices for using library resources as teaching aids within the classroom and conducting both primary and extended library activities.

By equipping teachers with the skills to integrate library resources into their pedagogy, students benefit from more engaging, effective instruction that encourages reading with understanding and pleasure.

7.2 Engaging Principals for Ownership and Integration

The active involvement of school leadership is critical to sustaining library usage:

- Regular Pustakalaya Principals' Conferences provide a platform to discuss challenges and solutions for integrating the library into the broader school system.
- Principals are oriented on the goals of the program, with emphasis on the importance of increasing designated library periods in school timetables.
- Leadership is encouraged to support teachers, promote reading among staff, and maintain library spaces.
- Schools are encouraged to introduce books during assembly, motivate peer reading, and use the library as a daily engagement space.

As the principal's investment increases, so does their sense of ownership, which directly contributes to the sustainability of the library ecosystem. Teachers supported by invested principals are demonstrably more active in conducting library-based learning activities.

7.3 Government Collaboration for Systemic Sustainability

For libraries to be meaningfully embedded into the school system, collaboration with the government is essential:

- Work with education departments to draft state-level guidelines that institutionalize library periods and make principals accountable for implementation.
- Submit monthly Library Rating Reports that assess the degree of library integration in each school and solicit action and accountability from district-level officials.
- Present case studies and research on the impact of libraries in improving reading outcomes to guide evidence-based policymaking.

Through the Pustakalaya Perpetuity Program, monthly updates are provided to the Education Department not only during the three-year intervention but also post-intervention, ensuring continuity and transparency. As government investment and interest increases, it significantly boosts the sense of ownership, allowing libraries to be seen not just as temporary projects, but as core, indispensable parts of the schooling experiences.

Pathway to Reading with Purpose: Reimagining Libraries, Books, and Learning

Project Pustakalaya is not merely an intervention—it is a reimagination of what a library can be, and what reading can mean for a child. It responds to the deep-rooted challenges in government school libraries with thoughtful design, child-centric philosophy, and evidence-based pedagogy.

By transforming underutilized libraries into dynamic spaces of learning, introducing a specially curated and evolving booklist, and embedding the Learn-to-Read Program with structured teacher training, Project Pustakalaya addresses literacy as a developmental journey—not a checkbox of content delivery.

It empowers children to engage with books joyfully, confidently, and critically. It enables teachers to become skilled facilitators of reading, equipped with both the philosophy and tools necessary to foster true literacy. It brings coherence and consistency to reading instruction, while honouring the contextual and emotional realities of children in low-income households.

In essence, Project Pustakalaya is a solution rooted in dignity, equity, and imagination. It views reading not as an outcome, but as a foundation for lifelong learning, agency, and empowerment. As it continues to grow and evolve, the Pustakalaya holds the promise of transforming not just how children read—but how they see themselves in the world.