

A 12-year-old girl in Hyderabad, a law student in Hardoi and a teenaged maths whiz in Texas have found unique ways of bringing books to those who can barely afford them, one library at a time

THEY ENSURE HAVE-NOTS CAN READ AND GROW

Books 'pop-up' in a Hardoi village

It may be easier to find books these days than those that read them. But there are also places where it may be difficult to find either. Places like the small village of Bansa in UP's Hardoi district. Places that could do with Jatin Lalit. Unlike the popular Bollywood music composer duo of the '90s, their namesake is one young man with a mission, to bring books to people.

It was during the Covid pandemic that the 25-year-old Lalit was struck by the problem of students without access to books owing to the closure of schools, colleges and coaching centres. "Senior secondary students of our village used to travel to cities like Kanpur, Lucknow, and Allahabad for coaching in hopes of securing govt jobs. When the lockdown forced them to return home, I recognised the urgent need for a local resource where they could continue their studies," said Lalit, a law student. Without much ado, he started the Bansa Community Library. Of course, he had help

The land came from the local temple authority, which readily agreed to lease a parcel at a nominal rate of Rs 1 for

99 years. Then there was the cost of construction and procurement of books. The library began with just 50 books, donated by local youths. A sustained campaign to gather more books followed, using an Amazon Wishlist to source updated volumes covering competitive exam syllabi.

Books poured in from across India — Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai and Ahmedabad.

The problem of reading material solved, Lalit turned to the question of reading culture. That led to the plan for the recently launched 'Pop-Up Library' initiative. "The idea is that if you can't bring them to the library, get the books to them," Lalit said.

"We're setting up pop-up libraries in areas where women frequently gather. These will operate twice a week," Lalit explained. Trained volunteers will transform these spaces into mini-libraries, offering curated book selections and hosting readings and interactive discussions. Not stopping there, Lalit's team — comprising the library's co-founders Abhishek Vyas and Malvika Aggarwal, and his sisters Srajal and Sakshi — is introducing 'book packets'. These will



JATIN LALIT
BANSA, HARDOI DIST, UP



The Bansa library came up on land given by the local temple

be curated collections for delivery to women who cannot visit the library or pop-up locations.

The son of a farmer who's well aware of the "impact of reading on individuals' lives and personalities", Lalit has also found a chance to take his message to a bigger audience. He was called by the Union ministry of culture to deliver a lecture on best library practices in Delhi during the 'Festival of Libraries' last year while PM Narendra Modi praised his efforts in the 95th episode of his Mann Ki Baat programme.

Today the library boasts over 5,000 books in Hindi, English, and Urdu and serves as a study hub for around 80 children, who can borrow books for free for up to 21 days. It also supports 150 students preparing for competitive exams, providing all services free of charge. The library also hosts interactive sessions and workshops led by experts and has a Twitter (now X) page that has 1,600 followers. It has launched a new initiative to provide free stationery — pencils, notebooks, pens — to students.

Age 12, libraries opened 15



Children at one of the libraries opened by Akarshana

There's much you can do after getting bitten by the book bug. Just ask Akarshana Sathish. The 12-year-old just can't stop starting libraries. PM Narendra Modi has promised to inaugurate the 25th one that she opens and she has also earned praises from President Droupadi Murmu.

A student of Hyderabad Public School, Akarshana's journey into the world of libraries began in 2021 during a visit to MNJ Cancer Hospital. "I saw children asking for colouring and poem books. That's when I thought, 'why not collect books and donate them here,'" she said. The 1,036 books she gathered for the hospital ignited a passion that has since fuelled a movement of sorts.

Over the past three years, Akarshana's initiative has snowballed. More than 10,000 books have been amassed and 15 libraries set up in diverse locations: from hospitals and orphanages to police stations across

Telangana, Andhra and Tamil Nadu. What began with used books from neighbours, classmates, and relatives now features an impressive range of titles in Hindi, English, Telugu spanning genres from fiction to general knowledge. Her efforts have now been acknowledged with a mention in the India Book of Records 2024.

"Initially, we thought we could start libraries for orphanages and slums where kids don't have access to books. But, then, we noticed that other places like police stations and juvenile homes

lacked this basic facility, too," said Akarshana's father, Sathish, who helps out with her initiative.

"We identify govt schools, public spaces, orphanages and write to them. Sometimes, we even receive requests to set up a library. For govt schools, we coordinate with the department of education, connect with the principal, and assess the need — how many books, what languages, genres, etc. Based on that, we start collecting books, many of which are donated," he explained.

And what's next for Akarshana? A revolutionary project: a metro station library in partnership with Hyderabad Metro and National Book Trust. It will allow commuters to borrow a book at one station and return it at another.



AKARSHANA SATHISH
HYDERABAD

Writing a book to start a library

Writing a book is an achievement. Finding that book as part of the collection of libraries is even better. Writing a book to use the royalties to start a library in places where people may not have seen one before is dedication of a different magnitude. But it's something that comes naturally to Alisha Madhuvarshi, a US-based NRI who's studying computer science at the University of Texas.

Alisha's mother, Shama Arya, said this is nothing new for her Delhi-born daughter. "From an early age, she's had an inclination for helping the needy. Back in 2015, she had raised \$500 with the help of her school vice principal as relief funds for earthquake victims of Nepal."

Active in social causes, "especially in the education of children", Alisha said it was on a visit to India in March 2020 that she came across a Facebook post by CISE officer Rakesh Nikhaj and learnt about how he was already pitching in to educate and provide a better life to underprivileged children in Telangana and Delhi.

"So, after returning to Houston, during the (Covid) quarantine period, I taught maths tuition for three months virtually to junior students and raised \$800 to buy books, hygiene products, school bags, and sports kits for underprivileged and orphaned children of Polampalli village in Mancherial district of Telangana. Nikhaj was posted there back then," she said.

Before long, a cross-continental campaign took shape. Called "Tool-

box", it's run by Alisha in association with Nikhaj. In the past four years, they have opened 12 chapters of 'Alisha's Library On Wheels' across UP, Haryana, Bihar, Telangana, Rajasthan and Jammu. Recently, a library was opened in MP's Raisen district, a first for the local tribal Gond community. By the end of 2024, the duo are aiming to open up to three more libraries for children who lack access to basic learning resources.

Some of the funding for their projects is taken care of by royalties from a book Alisha wrote, called 'Number Sense Workbook', on tricks that aid in performing mental calculations in the shortest possible time. That's not all. Since 2023, Alisha and her college mates Vikram Mahalingam, Pranshu Bhardwaj, Kush Phatak, and Hunter Hoinkes, have raised \$4,000 via three back-to-back virtual coding camps for elementary and middle-school US students.

Nikhaj uses social media to connect with schools or organisations that require a library. "I had first opened a library in Delhi's Mukherjee Nagar in 2019, where a civil servant aspirant, Amit (32), teaches students from underprivileged colonies. I had used my travel and dearness allowance to buy books. Since then, I allocate 10% of my annual salary for the education of underprivileged children. With Alisha's fundraising, we are able to cover more children across India," said Nikhaj, who is currently posted in Jaipur.



ALISHA MADHUVARSHI
US BASED NRI



Inputs from Pathikrit Chakraborty and Arvind Chauhán in Lucknow, and Amisha Rajani in Hyderabad