

‘Laya Tuut Jaataa Hai’: Reading Routines and Material Conditions

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Abstract

Drawing on an ethnography of reading in an NGO-run community library located in an urban village in South Delhi, the paper proposes that the reading routines and preferences are deeply embedded in the lived realities of the readers. The paper explores two questions: what do we mean by material conditions in the context of reading? How do they intersect with reading habits? I focus on the narratives of four adolescent boys and girls, who are first-generation readers, to show that reading habits are entrenched in the material conditions shaped by class, caste and gender. ‘*laya*’ (rhythm) becomes an important construct to understand how the matrix of time and space produces reading preferences amongst these adolescents. While a Dalit male adolescent reader living in a one-room dwelling unit has lesser chances of reading longer texts, Hindi poetry becomes his ‘natural’ choice. For an upper-caste female adolescent living in a two-room (or more) dwelling unit, longer texts such as English novels become a preferred choice.

Keywords: Reading, literacy, reading routines, library, first-generation readers

Introduction

The phenomenology of reading places the reader in the matrix of time and space. The reader is present at a given place and time, although she/he may be transported to another world through the narrative and the reader’s imagination. Reading does not happen outside of either time or space. This fact becomes important especially when we engage with the

question of readership among children from socially underprivileged backgrounds.

We know that children coming from lowered caste and low-income families with limited resources have lower chances of accessing books in their homes. The paucity of appropriate, interesting and varied texts is a major constraint in the development of reading habits, especially amongst children from the marginalised sections.

Shirley Brice Heath, in an autobiographical account, highlights the embeddedness of readerly journeys in their social, cultural and material realities (Heath, 2011). Remembering her childhood, which was spent in helping out her grandmother in the fields, and which had a very little space for books, Heath observes: 'Childhood reading comes with a price, literal and figurative, in time, space, and commitment by intimates who love their children and value reading as part of the expression of that love' (p. 33). According to her, book reading is deeply cultural, and it is entrenched in the idea of a particular kind of childhood where love is expressed by reading bedtime stories, buying and gifting books to children, and sharing anecdotes as an extension of books with them. Heath confesses that when she was growing up, she did not have access to a library of storybooks. So, when she finally did get books to read, she felt guilty of leaving behind the *should-be-doing* chores and not including her grandmother in the joys of reading. Reading in her childhood was a shared activity with her grandmother, where they enjoyed stories together from the Bible. She reveals that solitary reading for pleasure was a strange idea for many years of her life.

The social and material conditions are important considerations in the discussion of readership. It demands serious consideration and requires unpacking. I attempt to answer two questions in this paper. What do material conditions mean in the context of reading? How do they intersect and influence reading habits?

This paper has emerged from my doctoral work, which tried to understand how social and material conditions influence reader identity. It looked at the children's perceptions of who a reader is, what a reader does, what reading means, and how a library intervenes in and shapes reading habits. The ethnography was located in a community library called Community Library Organisation (CLO) in an urban village in South Delhi. A large portion of the library membership included children who belonged to migrant, low-income and lowered caste families. A

significantly smaller group of library members belonged to upper caste families who owned plots of land and earned their living by subletting rooms as dwelling units or for commercial purposes. All of them were first-generation readers.

The discussion that follows will address how social conditions entangled with caste, gender and economic status produce reading routines among adolescent boys and girls. I present narratives of four adolescents from whom I tried to understand if they considered themselves readers and the reason(s) thereof.

The Readers: Brief Descriptions

Rishabh is around 18 years old. He shares a one-room dwelling unit with three adult family members. He is Dalit. He has had access to storybooks for the past six years, thanks to a community library in his neighbourhood. But it comes as a surprise when he shares that he has not read a single book at home; all the books he has read were in the library. His circulation history shows that he prefers poetry. He enjoys words, and it is again not a surprise that he writes poetry and does hip-hop. I cannot say for sure whether rapping turned him to words or love for words turned him towards rapping.

Harsh is Rishabh's friend and rapping partner. He is two years younger than Rishabh. Harsh lives in a two-room dwelling unit in the neighbourhood of the library. He lives with his parents and elder sister in one of the rooms while the other room is occupied by his elder sister, her husband and their young baby. He is from the OBC category. His circulation history shows a preference for English chapter books. Although the constraint of space still operates on his reading habits, he does manage to read at home. He shares that he reads at home at night, but not regularly. Unlike Rishabh, who could not mention stories or characters that he had enjoyed, Harsh is quick with his favourites. Tintin comics and Satyajit Ray's *Feluda* in graphic novel form were on top of his list. According to Harsh, *Feluda*, the fictional detective, was sharp and witty, which made him very endearing and admirable.

Shiksha, a library member for the last six years, lives with her parents and two siblings. She shares her room with her elder sister, who has a good appetite for books. Her family sublets some of the rooms in their house to tenants. Her surname indicates that she belongs to upper caste. Her circulation history reflects a preference for chapter books and

novels in the English language. Shiksha confesses that she loses touch with the world when she is reading. She has picked up this habit from her elder sister. She has an undisturbed space where she can lie around and get absorbed in the world woven through words and imagination. The family members literally are not present in her room, and they can gradually disappear even from Shiksha's mind as she gets transported into another world of the book. Shiksha could name several storybooks (picture books, chapter books and novels) as her favourites. Her all-time favourite is *Mukund and Riyaz*, a picture book about friendship. Shiksha shares that she has enjoyed *Can Jansen series*, Daniel Steele's *A Good Woman*, among others.

Lalita lives in a two-bedroom-plus-one-hall house with six family members. Her elder sister, with her infant and brother, share one bedroom. Lalita occupies the other bedroom with her younger sister while her parents sleep in the hall. Lalita belongs to an upper caste family. Along with her sister, Lalita recites and performs poetry in the silence of their room. Both her parents earn but both of them work in an informal sector. She enjoys reading books in the bed kept by the window. She borrows a variety of books, including autobiographies, Hindi poetry, Hindi storybooks and English chapter books.

Amongst the library members, Shiksha and Lalita have the largest number of books in their circulation history. It is to be noted that most of these library members had enrolled recently in the English Fluency Programme in the library, where they learnt strategies to read English language texts. In the programme, they were expected to read English storybooks which included picture books, comic books, graphic novels, chapter books, novels, autobiographies, and non-fiction, depending on their ability, interest and motivation. Many of the members read chapter books over the six weeks and thereafter, which is reflected in their circulation history.

Who is the Reader?

Nicole Irwin (2003) contends that the self-perception of adolescent readers is significant in their engagement in reading. According to her, self-perception of a reader is closely associated with their understanding of gender, perceived competence, and their understanding of the purpose and nature of reading, as well as parental attitudes and behaviours. In my research, I found that caste, gender and material conditions have a deep connection with readers' self-perception.

Lalita and Shiksha consider themselves readers. Lalita claims to be a reader because she has read several books. Shiksha gives the reason in a few words: *'padhate hain, padhana accha lagata hai'* (I read, I like to read). Shiksha believes that a reader maintains regularity in reading as a habit. She finds time to read regularly, probably every day. Shiksha stresses regularity and consistency as the first reason to call herself a reader. The second reason is related to the enjoyment that she derives from reading. According to Shiksha, a reader is someone who finds reading pleasurable and reads regularly.

Scholars agree that regularity and consistency help in the development of reading and readerly identity. Rosenblatt (1978) argues that reading regularly helps readers deepen interpretive strategies and strengthen reader identity. According to Krashen (2004), free voluntary reading, which is habitual, self-chosen reading, promotes literacy development, vocabulary growth and even academic success. In a longitudinal study, Anderson et al. (1988) show that the amount of time spent on reading daily plays a significant role in reading achievement and growth. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) assert that engagement and intrinsic motivation are the key factors in sustaining reading habits, which in turn are important in comprehension.

Rishabh and Harsh's narratives complicate the idea of regularity and consistency in reading. They claim that they are not *'professional'* readers. I was intrigued when they used the term *'professional'* as it is usually associated with the domain of work and productivity. Being a professional connotes that one has been trained in the specific domain of knowledge and has achieved a certain level of proficiency by practising those skills for a certain number of hours. How to understand being a professional in relation to reading, which is closely associated with leisure and pleasure?

Harsh explains the reason for not considering himself and Rishabh *professional* readers: *'reader toh maante hain hum apne aap ko kyunki itni saari books padhi hain humne...par ek had tak hain'* (We consider ourselves readers because we have read so many books, but only to an extent). Harsh claims that they are readers because they have read several books. According to him, a reader is someone who reads many books. But Harsh is quick to add that there are certain limits and constraints on them. What are these constraints? How do these constraints act on the reader and the act of reading?

First, let us closely examine the word '*professional*' qualifying 'reader'. There is consistency in what professionals do. By 'doing' the professional work, professionals become better, more efficient and productive. So, did Rishabh and Harsh not consider that they were reading regularly, getting better at it, and becoming 'professional', as it were?

Rishabh explains that by consistency, they mean taking books home from the library, reading and reflecting on the books they have read. The idea of consistency is attached to the constant flow of books and regular visits to the library. It means visiting the library, going through the shelves and flipping through books, borrowing and returning them, and thinking about them alone and sometimes with others in discussion. According to Rishabh and Harsh, a reader has an association with a neighbourhood library, and the act of reading and reflecting, is done privately as well as with other readers in the library space.

By adding the qualifier '*professional*' to the noun 'reader', Rishabh and Harsh draw our attention to the conditions that shape reader identities. Readers self-consciously fashion themselves as a particular kind of readers, but the material and spatio-temporal conditions also impact their reading preferences and impact in fashioning them as a certain kind of readers. It is better understood through the construct of '*laya*', which is closely associated with the material conditions impinging on the readers.

Harsh describes his reading process, which is quite significant in understanding '*laya*' in reading:

book padhne baithtaa hun, mein sochtaa hun..., predict karne lag jaataa hun bahut jaldi, toh mein sochne lag jaataa hun—aage kaun kaise, storyline me aage chalkar kyaa hogaa—toh mujhe time chaahiye hotaa hai thodaa, aise baith ke nahi padh paataa.

(When I begin reading, I immediately start thinking, predicting. I begin imagining what will happen next in the story. So, I need more time. I cannot sit like this and read.)

Harsh uses strategies to read with meaning. Paris et al. (1991) contend that 'Strategic reading reflects metacognition and motivation because readers need to have both the knowledge and disposition to use strategies' (p. 609). According to the librarians of CLO, the strategies are a part of the reading repertoire that they call the 'second voice'. The 'second voice' is a silent voice in the head which guides the reader to

think, predict and imagine. For a child who grows up around books, the 'second voice' develops *naturally* in a family environment. But for a child who does not have such a privilege, the 'second voice' needs to be activated through explicit instruction.

The teacher (librarian) models ways to read with meaning by pausing, asking questions, talking, connecting their experience or something read earlier with the text read, identifying certain features of a text, genre, and so on. Children learn that pausing and asking questions facilitate reading. Readers also learn gradually when, where, how much and how long to pause while reading. This process becomes a part of the reading experience over a period of time. For the first-generation readers, this cultivation of 'second voice' takes a longer time.

For the first-generation readers, coupled with social and material disadvantages, it is a tedious and longer journey to learn to activate and assimilate the 'second voice'. While Harsh could activate the 'second voice' when he read, it slowed his pace. Harsh says, '*laya tuut jaataa hai*' (the rhythm breaks) when he cannot read in continuity. As reading from one day to the next is not a certainty. Harsh shares that he picks up a book only when there is ample time in hand: '*jab bhi bahut zyaada phursat main rehtaa hun tab jaakar mein book padhnaa shuru kartaa hun*' (Whenever I have a lot of time and I am not preoccupied with something else, then I begin reading). As per the National Youth Readership Survey (Shukla, 2010), many young readers prefer to read leisure books mostly on holidays (36 per cent) while only about 4 per cent read on working days.

Heath foregrounds the constraints of time and space in shaping reading practices during her childhood. Recalling that 'our tiny house offered no well-lighted spaces for escape with a book at night' (Heath, 2011, p. 35), she highlights how material conditions limited her literacy experiences to the daytime. This reflection underscores the broader argument that access to reading is not merely a matter of individual motivation but is deeply contingent upon environmental and socio-material factors.

For Harsh, daytime is not a good time for reading as the room he inhabits is always brimming with activities. He prefers reading in a silent space. Therefore, he chooses to read at night. As Harsh shares the room with three other adults, he can find time only after midnight once the others have gone to sleep. But that means the light in the room is kept on till he keeps the book down, disturbing the rest of the family members who are resting after a day of hard work. As he cannot afford to disturb his

family every night, it interrupts his flow of reading. These interruptions sometimes last for a day or two to a week or several weeks. Whenever Harsh picks up the book from where he had left off last, he has to start with some paragraphs or pages earlier. This means getting to read a small number of pages every time he begins reading the book after an interruption, inadvertently resulting in a loss of interest in the book. This leads him to pick up a book to read only when there is a long stretch of time where he is not preoccupied with any other task. It also results in choosing shorter texts unconsciously. Shorter texts are to be taken to mean poetry or short stories. For example, Mangalesh Dabral and Gulzar's poetry collection, and short stories by Manto and Premchand figure in many of the library members' circulation histories. Poetry and short stories are shorter in length but offer enough mental stimulation and pleasure to sustain the interest of adolescents. Moreover, they can be finished over a shorter span of time.

Discussion

Reading regularly, exploring different genres and lengths of texts, and responding to texts are not simply individual choices and efforts. The choice of reading as an act is intimately linked to the material conditions and identities that the reader inhabits, which shape their reading habits. The need for negotiating between their own pursuits and the collective rhythms of the household underscores how reading, for those in working-class contexts, is often contingent upon limited material resources and competing demands on shared space and time. '*laya*' is the key to understanding why some children 'choose' to read and actually read varied genres and lengths of texts.

The material and social conditions shape, to a significant extent, reading routines and preferences, which, on the face of it, are personal and individual choices. A Brahmin girl living in a house with a room entirely to herself or shared with a sibling with similar interests has greater chances of reading at home for a longer duration. As the reader has undisturbed space and time, there is a greater possibility that she reads varied and longer texts. On the other hand, if the youth happens to be a male Dalit, sharing space with other family members, the chances are higher that he will never read at home, and if he does, he will explore texts which are shorter in length, and his reading preferences will not vary.

This has direct implications for libraries and reading teachers. Some children do not read (enough) due to factors which are beyond their

ability, interest and motivation. We cannot blame children for not reading books at home. A reading teacher should not be disappointed when a reader does not pick texts that may not be age-appropriate in terms of difficulty, length and genre, as the choice of texts may, in fact, be guided by the reader's social and material conditions. The home conditions may not be conducive to reading, especially reading for long stretches of time to maintain the 'laya' in reading. Furthermore, apart from big public libraries, first-generation readers need community libraries in their neighbourhoods for easy access to books. The library's design must accommodate the different needs of its members. Some spaces can double up as classes for literacy programmes, workshops, and so on, to encourage collaboration and conversations, but some spaces must be separate, enclosed and silent so that library members can spend long hours reading, studying, and doing other tasks that they otherwise cannot do at home due to space and resource constraints.

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