

# Reading in the Walled City:

## A Study on Public Libraries and the Reading Public in Bikaner

Trishna Senapaty and Ujjainee Sharma

Our study was borne out of a desire to study the library in its social setting, how it was influenced by the community that uses it and how in turn it influenced the community. Hence, we decided to focus on public libraries: places that had wide readership and easy access free of cost or at nominal rates. In addition we have looked at reading spaces, which can be defined as spaces that facilitate access to and distribution of literature of various kinds. The ways in which these are imagined and conceived; the relationship of a reading space with respect to different social variables such as caste and gender is the focus of this paper. Bikaner provided an interesting case for study, because of its variety of reading spaces. One finds here community libraries, as well as state and privately run ones. Studying the neighbourhood libraries in relation to the communities that run and used them showed us the particular ways in which each has developed.

We conducted our fieldwork for a month over the summer. Our study was facilitated by Ajit Foundation<sup>1</sup>, which also provided an entry point into different neighbourhoods. We visited various libraries in Bikaner to get an idea of the kind of readership and their location. For a historical account on the development of libraries, we spoke to a number of prominent scholars, writers and community elders. For information on the organizational functioning of libraries and the manner in which they were conceived, we spoke to different levels of management. There were also informal interactions with people who didn't use libraries. While walking through the *mohallas*, we often stopped to talk with groups of people about their reading habits and use of reading spaces. We tried to cover a wide cross-section of readers, including children, adolescents, women and men. Women were difficult to find and speak with as, they were less visible in public spaces. The decline of the library as an institution emerged when we spoke to different generations of readers and non-readers. We also studied the records of all the major organizations (the few that maintained records), to get an idea of who was reading what. As women, our access to and interaction in the traditionally male-dominated neighbourhood reading spaces was somewhat influenced by our unusual presence in them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ajit Foundation is a voluntary organization

Bikaner has two distinct parts, the old walled city and the new city. The old walled city of Bikaner is divided into different *mohallas*, or neighbourhoods, segregated on the basis of caste. The neighbourhoods are usually named after the majority caste which resides there. They are very old and most families have lived there for generations. Each neighbourhood usually has its own chowk, temple and, in some cases, *vaachanalays* or reading rooms. The houses are located in close proximity to each other with no clear demarcations or boundary walls between them. One can see *patas*, or low platforms, outside the houses where visitors and neighbours can sit. It is an important symbol of community life in the old city. The front doors of houses are usually left open during the day and closed during the afternoon when the family sleeps. Within their own *mohallas*, women and children move in and out of their neighbour's homes with relative ease. People are very familiar with their neighbours, and frequently meet at communal spaces, such as the chowk, *vaachanalays* and temples.

The new city stands in contrast to the old because of its broad roads (sometimes lined with trees), parks, multiplex cinema halls and super-markets. Government offices and universities are also located in the new city. The traditional communal spaces that one sees in the walled city are absent here. Neighbourhoods in the new city are scattered over larger areas. Because of the broad streets and scattered housing, there is a lack of spaces that are sheltered from the harsh climate where people can meet or congregate. The neighbourhoods have independent houses that have well-defined boundary walls and are gated. They are divested of the cultural and traditional identity that is a particular to the old city *mohallas*. The residents here are of a more diverse composition in terms of caste; they include people who have moved to Bikaner from outside the city and those who have moved in from the old city in search of better infrastructure and facilities.

In the paper, we use the term 'old city' to refer to the walled city. We refer to the 'new city' in relation to neighbourhoods that have come up outside the walled city in more recent years. Our focus lies on the old city and its neighbourhood libraries.

### **AN OVERVIEW AND SOCIO-HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF LIBRARIES IN BIKANER**

Community reading and public libraries have a long and rich history for the people of Bikaner. In part, these are seen as a legacy of the much revered erstwhile royalty of Bikaner. Srilal Mohata <sup>2</sup> told us one of the popular legends surrounding Bikaner's libraries. It is believed that Anup Singh, one of the rulers of Bikaner who served under Aurangzeb, was instrumental in the Mughal victory in the battle of Aurangabad. The Emperor asked if he could fulfill any of Anup Singh's wishes. Saddened by the burning of many valuable and rare books that followed the

---

<sup>2</sup> Shree Lal Mohata is the director of Maruparampara and Siddhanta Foundation. He is a writer and also works on the revival of folk-art.

victory, he asked for the books to be spared. This is seen as a testimony of his devotion to literature as thousands of books were carted on camel -back to the city of Bikaner. Years later under the rule of Ganga Singh, one of the most respected of Bikaner's kings, the Anup Sanskrit Library was established in Lalgah Palace, wherein these manuscripts were classified, catalogued and subsequently opened to the public. The city has a very proud literary tradition. One of the librarians at Nagri Bhandaar told us that he thought Bikaner was special because of its many artists, writers, its collection of literature on different religions, and literature in many languages that one cannot find in other places. This sentiment was echoed by many others.

The city has many public and neighbourhood libraries which are associated with the Independence movement. During this period, the library was viewed/used as a space for discussion through which the spread of social and political awareness could be facilitated. This was also the case in other states such as Kerala where pamphlets on the movement were distributed through the library system. These histories form an important part of the collective imagination of Bikaner's reading community as many old readers see themselves as partakers of this tradition.

Many of the old libraries are still functioning today in Bikaner. One of them is the Abhay Jain Granthalaya in Nahata Chowk in the walled city, next to the Jain Mandir. Maintained as a personal collection of Agar Chand Nahata, it houses very rare manuscripts. It is an important repository of the history of the Jain families and maintains records of their marriages and birth. The State Library in Town Hall in the centre of the new city, which was started by Ganga Singh, has one of the largest collections of books and various kinds of literature in Bikaner. It has books on a variety of subjects like History, Philosophy and Sociology, and has more than a thousand members. It also has a small section for children.

**Vaachanalays:** In Bikaner, rich and influential men have traditionally funded *vaachanalays* in their neighbourhoods to foster a spirit of learning and culture. In later years, some of these were taken over by the community which now pays for their maintenance and, on occasion, also contributes books, magazines and newspapers. The *vaachanalay* is usually located in a central and visible place within a neighbourhood. For instance, in Acharyon ka Chowk, the *vaachanalay* is located in the square, while in Lakhautiya ka Chowk, it is located in the temple complex. Outside these *vaachanalays*, one can see rows of long benches called *patas* where men gather and sit in the evenings and a variety of discussions ensue. From our individual interactions with these men, we heard accounts of what was discussed but were never able to participate or sit-in on these discussions.

Trying to see how these *vaachanalays* function with respect to the different *mohallas* that they were situated in, was one of the main focus areas of the study. Of the *vaachanalays* within individual *mohallas*, the two mentioned above are very active. They open on a regular basis and

are well stocked with newspapers of different kinds. While these *vaachanalays*, enjoy strong participation there are others which have not fared so well. The *vaachanalays* at Mohata chowk remains empty for most of the day, occasionally being used as a place to sleep. *vaachanalays* in other neighbourhoods like Bhatron ka Chowk and Uston ki Bari too have closed down. According to some people we spoke to in these neighbourhoods, the government had taken over the funding of many of these *vaachanalays* under the Prodh Shiksha (Adult Literacy) Programme. However, in the last few years, funding for these has been drastically cut, either forcing them to shut down or in the case of Uston ki Baari, where it was unable to open at all. This has not always been the case and the older men we talked to spoke about a time where every *mohalla* had at the least one *vaachanalays*. The count has now reduced from around fifty to a mere handful of *vaachanalays*, with a particularly high drop in number in the last two years. However, it must be clarified that the *vaachanalay* culture was never uniformly distributed among all the neighbourhoods of Bikaner but had developed and thrived among certain communities.

Located outside the gates of the walled city, is a different category of more 'public' *vaachanalays*. They are not associated with any particular *mohalla*. The largest of these is located in the crowded market area of Kote Gate and is called Jubili Nagri Bhandaar. A small and very popular temple had been built at the far end of the main reading hall. It also houses a gallery for exhibitions and an auditorium. A very diverse composition of readers visit Nagri Bhandaar, ranging from shopkeepers and people employed in the Kote Gate market area, to those who live further off in the new city, as well as from the old city. This includes students, young government employees as well as old men who have been associated with the library since their youth and continue to do so out of a sense of loyalty to the institution and because of the bonds they have formed with other readers.

Close to the structure of the gate leading out of the walled city is the very old Gun Prakash Sajjanalay. It is a broken down, dingy building and is not easy to spot in the crowded market area. This once very popular institution began as a trust to promote education among the youth of Bikaner. It provided students with course books and reading material to help them with their formal education. However, the students we met complained, this has long been discontinued. The books now lie locked in the cupboards running along the walls of the room. Even though the boys we met were dissatisfied with the present condition of the *vaachanalay*, like the state of the water tank, some of them have been coming here for 4–5 years. They have made friends and like to study and discuss their academic problems with the same set of people. The *sajjanalay* is thus a part of their daily routine.

Another place popular among students is the Dak Bungalow – a place where government news is disseminated to all the local newspapers and a place where Census and other administrative

data can be found. It is also used as a guest house for government officials. The librarian's room contains very old books, some of which we were told belonged to the Gandhi family and could be accessed with permission. There are about 25 newspapers available there and a collection of magazines both from within and outside Bikaner, such as *Frontline*, *Svar Sarita*, *Vigyan Pragati*, etc. which are popular among the students who visit the library. The Dak Bungalow maintains an archive of newspapers, both English and Hindi, dating back to 1986. The librarian said these were called upon sometimes by people who needed to refer back to a particular incident, say with respect to a court case. The Dak Bungalow *vaachanalay* is used primarily by male students and some teachers, many of whom are women. It provides an alternative place to study when the State Library is out of seating space.

**Ajit Foundation:** The Ajit Foundation (AF) which was founded in 1994 is a voluntary organization. Their manifesto is to “provide spaces that nurture creativity and foster a sense of social responsibility and attempt to transfer a library from a passive place that lends books to an active place providing a space for a number of creative activities”. It provides books, magazines and journals to its members. Women and children—two groups with limited resources and restricted mobility—form a focus group for the organization whose *mohalla* libraries facilitate access to a wide range of reading material.

The main AF library is located near Archaryon ka Chowk in Sevgaon ki Gali. There are currently 200 members, some of whom have been users of the library since it was started. Members, who we spoke to, mentioned their deep and personal relationship with the library and its staff. Many also talked about how the library provided not only books, but new opportunities to them that they would otherwise not have had access to. There are activities, seminars, lectures and discussions that are periodically organized. The library also has a many ‘hobby-clubs’ that members start on the basis of mutual interests.

The AF libraries started out with *tanga* (a horse-drawn carriage) libraries or mobile libraries, which was an innovative way of capturing people's attention and establishing itself as a regular presence in these neighbourhoods. Children, and occasionally adults, would gather around the *tanga*, play games and borrow books. After a few years, the organization started libraries in various *mohallas*. Some of these have since shut down, but eleven are still functional today. The *mohalla* libraries are located in the houses of people from the neighbourhood who volunteer to let out a room in their house where users can come and read. These library coordinators are expected to maintain records of the number of members, what they read and which books they borrow. To sustain interest, various activities are also organized by them.

The AF libraries have now had a long and well-established presence in these neighbourhoods. We sought to answer the questions of caste and gender through these *mohalla* libraries.

## THE COMMUNITY AND THE LIBRARY

The afternoon heat drives everybody indoors in Bikaner. It is only towards the evening when the winds turn cooler that people emerge. Children run around the sloping streets playing various games, men and women visit the temple, go to the markets and meet their neighbours in the neighbourhood square. One is also immediately drawn to the groups of men congregating in certain key areas in these neighbourhoods. They are usually seated on large wooden benches called *patas* that can accommodate almost ten-fifteen men. In one of the neighbourhoods, a brightly coloured *pata* has the poem, '*Heena rang lati hai pathar par ghisne ke baad, zindagi savarti hai pate pe baithne ke baad*' (Heena assumes its true colour on being rubbed against stone and life blossoms after one has sat on the *pata*). Speaking to people in the old city, one gets a sense of how the *pata* is closely associated with the cultural history of Bikaner. We heard the term '*pata culture*' often, and sometimes parallels were drawn with the '*adda culture*' of Bengal. There is a strong belief that the *pata* relates to an intellectual environment, one that is borne from the street, is inclusive and also encourages participation amongst all communities.

In Bikaner, many associations and relationships are formed around the library. In the old walled city, caste forms the primary basis for many of these associations. Visiting the *vaachanalay* has become a daily activity for these men, who use the space to form relations with other members of their community. Here, they entertain themselves with a game of cards, discuss world events and read magazines and newspapers. Despite being in a central and public location, the *vaachanalay* is very personalized. Often, these men ask for their meals to be brought to the *vaachanalay* and sometimes even sleep on the *patas* at night. The camaraderie that one observes here reveals a great level of comfort with the space. "The *patas* are governed by rules of who can sit on them and where. Access to the *patas* is based not only on gender, but also on caste and age. Men from the dominant caste of the *mohalla* and other equivalent castes and of equivalent status sit on the *pata*."<sup>3</sup> The hierarchy and traditions observed on the *pata* reinforce the customs of the community which are also followed in the space of the *vaachanalay*. For the older men, it is a regular activity that engages them on a daily basis even after retirement, and helps maintain a sense of community.

The spaces have gradually been redefined. People from other communities also use the reading rooms now and the demarcations and hierarchies are becoming more fluid. While women still do not use the *vaachanalays*, alternative spaces for them are being created through organizations like Ajit Foundation.

---

<sup>3</sup> Abraham, Janaki: Veiling and the Production of Gender and Space in a Town in North India: A Critique of the Public/Private Dichotomy (2010) p.198 *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*

The associations that one forms at the *vaachanalay* or at a *mohalla* library, however, are still usually restricted by the neighbourhood one lives in. Outside the walled city, there are spaces with greater accessibility. There are a number of *vaachanalays* and reading rooms that are functional in different areas of Bikaner. These include the Nagri Bhandaar *vaachanalay*, Dak Bungalow *vaachanalay*, Gun Prakash Sajjanalay and Rajkiya Mandal *vaachanalay*. All these are located in busy market areas or other central locations in the city. The temple, *vaachanalay* and market are all communal spaces where people meet and form associations on a daily basis. The reading process is not simply a private exercise.

Users of the State Public Library for instance, come from all over Bikaner as well as from outside the city. The library is dominated almost exclusively by students preparing for competitive exams from morning to evening. Many of the students who come from outside the city live in rented rooms that they share with others while they prepare for these exams. On the other hand, students who live with their families study in the library as they find their homes less conducive for studying.

The State Library, being in a central location, is easily accessible to everyone. Here, students say they can study as well as meet fellow students also preparing for the exams and seek their help when they can. The number of students coming to study in the library is very high. Some have even formed groups, where some students reach the library early and reserve seats for their friends.

On the other hand, in the new *mohallas*, where people have not formed associations with each other over a period of time, these community spaces are missing.

A sense of community is important to sustain such a space and at the same time this space generates the same collective spirit. Libraries and reading spaces hold a place of importance, even for the younger generations among whom reading is declining. The library is still a revered institution. Almost all the respondents said that the library provided access to books and increased knowledge. Some said that it taught younger children the etiquette of reading with concentration in a quiet space. We also found a sense of awareness about the history of Bikaner's libraries which was echoed by many of the people we spoke with. In many neighbourhoods, the *vaachanalay* shares the same space as the temple. Temples are present in several neighbourhoods and are spaces that people are extremely familiar with and visit every day.

## Caste

The *mohallas* in the walled city are usually named after the majority caste which resides here. The neighbourhoods are very old and most of the families have lived here for generations. Each neighbourhood usually has its own square or chowk, temple and, in some cases, *vaachanalays*. These *vaachanalays* are a distinct feature of the city and some of them date back almost 60–70 years.

Looking at these spaces in different *mohallas* gave us the opportunity to study how the caste experience has shaped each one of them.

Two of the ‘higher’ caste neighbourhoods that we looked at were Acharyon ki Chowk and Swami Mohalla. In addition to a well-functioning *vaachanalay*, the main Ajit Foundation library is also located near Acharyon ki Chowk. Ajit Foundation has a well-established and well-known presence in the community, with a number of loyal users. The members of the library come from all over Bikaner, some of them from a considerable distance. They also seem to have a certain comfort level with the library. The space is used in many ways by the different members. For instance, girls from the neighbourhood organize a summer camp every year to teach the younger girls arts, craft and dance. Other groups have also been formed on the basis of common interests like a Music Club, Science Club and Mathematics Club. Users know the staff well and share a comfortable relationship with them.

Swami Mohalla, another ‘high’-caste neighbourhood has a *mohalla* library. The library is being run by the same lady for eight years and is doing well. Lakshmi, the library’s coordinator, mentioned the initial difficulties in setting up the library because the community was not comfortable with sending its daughters out of the house. The library established itself in the neighbourhood by organizing a variety of cultural activities which the community could participate in.

On the other hand, Choongaron Mohalla provides another interesting example. This *mohalla* is a Muslim neighbourhood which has almost 100 percent literacy. While there is a strong sense of community and the coordinator of the library shares a good relationship with the rest of the neighborhood, the library does not see many patrons. It is usually visited by children as older women say they have no time to read, while the men only read newspapers. In Bikaner, the Muslim community has not had the same history of libraries and reading spaces which offers some explanation as to why the library at Choongaron Mohalla has not fared as well.

The *mohalla* libraries are set people’s houses, which make them a very informal and private space. The libraries that function well witness a certain level of familiarity and comfort between the staff and users. On the other hand, neighbourhoods like Gujaron ka Mohalla and Harijan Basti are not functioning as well.



Harijan Basti is located away from the other neighbourhoods at the very end of the walled city. The neighbourhood is scattered over a much larger area than is the case with others. Simply on the basis of what we saw of people's houses, the community here would fall in the lower to middle income brackets. However, literacy is very low especially among the older generations. Ajit Foundation has a *mohalla* library in Harijan Basti, which was started two years ago. It has had a change of coordinators thrice and does not seem to have established itself. Quite a few people had not heard of the library, when asked.

The library is currently run by a young collegiate who admitted that participation in the library was still quite low. Only children, the majority of them girls, come to the library to play games or take back magazines for their parents to read. Readers for our detailed interviews were difficult to find in Harijan Basti, and answers mostly emerged from interactions. The literacy level is still quite low in this neighbourhood, though children from the community are now studying further than before in school. There are not many occasions for the community to congregate except for panchayat meetings that take place near the temple area, but this is attended only by the men.

The performance of the library in Harijan Basti is tied to the development of this community in relation to others. Nand Kishore Acharya<sup>4</sup>, a well known writer and literary critic said that socially distance is still maintained with the Harijan community. They have not integrated into society as well. *'To baki mohallon mein ek prakaar ka vaataavaran banaa rahta hai, padhaai-likhaai ka vaataavaran bhi hai, thodi bahut purani paramparai bhi hai. Kuch mohallon mein vaachanalay / pustakalay bhi thi lekin vo cheez in mohallon mein nahi thi. Aur kyunki un mohallo mein nahi thi, jitna prayatna kiya jana chahiye khul kar ke, vo nahi ho raha hai.'* [The other neighbourhoods had a particular environment of study and reading, as well as a sense of their traditions and history; however, these institutions were absent in this (Harijan) neighbourhood. Because of this, despite the best efforts, not enough is getting done here. ]

Sanjay, the coordinator, said that there have been great efforts to improve the participation of the community, including changing the coordinators often in the hope of seeing better results. He mentioned that the problem was that despite a significant improvement in their participation, they still, somehow, have not been able to integrate themselves with the rest of the society. He is still hopeful, saying that if they continue to come and participate in activities with other communities, their awareness would increase, and maybe help in reducing some of the social problems in their society.

---

<sup>4</sup> Nand Kishore Acharya is a playwright, poet, writer and critic. He is the author of works like *Paagalghar* and *Kavita Mein Nahin Hai Jo* and currently resides in Hyderabad.

Gujaron ka Mohalla presented another interesting case. Like Harijan Basti, there are no *vaachanalays* here and literacy levels are very low. This neighbourhood is predominantly composed of Muslim Gujjars who are traditionally buffalo herders and men and women are both engaged in the profession. There are also a few Hindu families in the neighbourhood. The Ajit Foundation *mohalla* library is currently run by a middle-aged woman called Phulwati. Phulwati's family is from Uttar Pradesh and settled in Bikaner about ten years ago. By her own admission, she is very isolated from the Gujjar families whom she believes are very different from her 'own kind of people'. Speaking to the families in the neighbourhood, we found that no one knew about the library. They felt a disconnect with the idea of a library and thought that it had no place in their lives because their traditional occupation did not require them to read or write. They thought that education was only useful in so far as it helped them to earn a living. The few people who occasionally visited the library lived in its immediate vicinity and were from non-Gujjar families. The low attendance at the library is due to both low literacy levels and the lack of any interaction between those running the library and the community, other than formal business transactions (They supply milk to the community).

Bikaner also has colonies outside the walled city. These are much like the modern neighbourhoods found in other cities. There are no caste-based colonies in the new city, the houses are separated by boundary walls and are gated. One such neighbourhood is Murlidhar Vyas Colony (named after a politician, not caste group). The AF library here is run by the woman who also runs the neighbourhood *aanganwadi*. This model seems to be doing fairly well, as the children who come to the *aanganwadi* are given access to the library resources and activities. Admittedly *vaachanalays* are a feature of the old city; however, it is difficult to see a model like that existing in a new colony. In the older neighbourhoods, caste provides a sense of community where relationships between its members have developed and strengthened over time.

Nand Kishore Acharya explains this by saying the new *mohallas* do not have any well-knit community. Also, people in these new neighbourhoods are by and large well educated and earn well. They order books and magazines by post, buy it themselves or borrow them from college libraries. These types of neighbourhoods are, according to him, much like in the big cities where people don't know each other. Two very different structures of community exist within and outside the walled city. Communities that have lived together for a long period of time are traditionally more closely knit like the caste-based societies of the walled city. In these new neighbourhoods, while the caste identity has tried to be made invisible, no new institutions have been able to replace it. '*Vyakti ka vyakti ke saath judna mushkil ho gaya. Samuhik vyaktitva vikshat nahi hua jo unko ek doosre ke saath jod sakta hai. Yahaan walled city mein har mohalle ka apne vyaktitva hai, unka apna ek style hai – baithne ka, uthne ka, rahne ka ek architecture hai. To ye sab bahut mayne rakhti hai is tarha ke kaamon ke liye.*' (People find it

more difficult to relate to each other in these neighbourhoods because they do not have a sense of collective identity, which can help them connect with one another. In the walled city, in every neighbourhood there is a sense of community; they have their own distinct ways of living, their own style, their own architecture. All these things matter and are very important for this setting up libraries and other collective spaces).

### Gender

At Acharyon ki Chowk, one of the busiest *vaachanalays* in the walled city, the low entrance leading to the reading room is almost blocked by the large body of men which gathers by the evening, spilling on to the road. Women's access to the *patas* around the city as well as to these reading rooms has been traditionally restricted. Men are reluctant to talk about the absence of women in these spaces. It is an absence that is taken for granted, and the residents of the old city take great pride in these *vaachanalays* and the culture of discussion that flourishes here. A frequent reader of many years at Narsingh *vaachanalay* told us that people of different *mohallas*, castes and age groups visit the *vaachanalay* and sit and read here together. It is this image of diverse composition and shared space that is frequently invoked by the people of Bikaner. While the caste composition of these reading spaces is more complex and not immediately accessible, the absence of women is conspicuous. No space was envisaged for women when the *vaachanalay* was created, the caretaker of Narsingh *Vaachanalay* at Lakhotiya Chowk told us. He added, however, that there were plans to launch an educational programme for students which would benefit women as well, wherein educational books (those relevant for competitive exams) would be rented out on a yearly basis at a nominal charge.

As one moves outside the walled city, one experiences a higher degree of anonymity which also manifests itself in its libraries and reading rooms. These too, have their own set of regular readers (those who've been coming here for nearly half their lives), friends and acquaintances. However, unlike those situated within the *mohallas*, not all the faces are familiar. For instance, in the Nagri Bhandaar *vaachanalay* located near Kote Gate, which is predominantly frequented by men, it is not unusual to see young women studying for their exams during the evening, as well as children. A temple is located within the main reading hall where an *aarti* is held every morning and evening, attended by both men and women. Located in a busy market area, it offers a convenient stopover for people. The large complex also includes other facilities such as a separate toilet for women which facilitates easier access for them.

The State Public Library (also referred to as the State Library), one of the biggest libraries in Bikaner, offers a similar space. Outside the purview of family elders, for some women it offers a place where one can take a break from the responsibilities at home. The main hall is clearly dominated by young men studying for competitive examinations. The women are usually

seated in small groups towards the peripheries of the hall, studying and reading. They come in later in the day, post lunch hour, by which time they are free from housework. For older women this is also a time when they are free from other responsibilities as children are away at school. Women's association with the library is often short, and irregular. Anusha, one of the few women we met at the library, told us that she had made some friends at the State Library who had stopped coming after clearing their exams. Women do not spend long hours at the library and the number of married women coming there is very low. But for those who do, the library offers a quiet place away from the disturbances of home, chores, noise, house-guests.

However, there is also a sense of discomfort at being surrounded by so many men. Anusha voiced the need for a separate women's reading area. There was short period during which, due to the presence of certain married women in the library, the women were asked to sit in the smaller inner room beyond the main hall, but this had been discontinued once they'd stopped using the library. The gendered experience of the library needs to be studied alongside the history of the neighbourhood and the gendering of public spaces such as the neighbourhood *patas*, described before. The library remains an institution which is traditionally occupied by men, even within the precincts of a government-sponsored institution like the State Library.

The Ajit Foundation libraries complicate this equation in more ways than one, playing a significant role in redefining the public library. Nine of their ten *mohalla* libraries are run by women as it is convenient to have a librarian who is at home for most part of the day. The women organize activities and events supported by the Foundation to draw more people to the library, especially women, and to bring people together through community events. Activities such as cooking lessons, *mehendi* and art and craft draw more women to the libraries. Family members tend to think positively about the time women spend at libraries when they are engaged in what they think of as productive and cost-effective work; for instance through lessons in tie and dye. This helps to create an environment favourable for their regular association with the library and erases the fear of censure. The workshops and activities fail to engage men in the same way and the boys often complain that all the activities are 'women's activities'. Some of the *mohalla* libraries are run by local aanganwadi workers. These libraries are assured of a regular flow of readers as a result of the network of communication between the aanganwadi worker and other women in the community.

In the *mohalla* libraries, one rarely sees any men in the library area. In those that are functioning well, the men of the household are either away or in another corner of the house during library hours. Younger men and students often borrow books during the holiday season. However, actual time spent at the library is very little. The participation of married and middle-aged men in the *mohalla* libraries is negligible. Books and magazines are sometimes handed to

them through a third person; a child or a family member. The *mohalla* libraries, then, are places where women can meet and socialise with other women away from the critical gaze of family and other community members. The librarian at Swami Mohalla spoke to us about the shift from the *tanga* to the present *mohalla* library. The *tanga* used to stop at the temple area which was dominated by men and elders. Women were uncomfortable to go to this space and the introduction of the *mohalla* library helped to ease some of this tension.

However, one must also mention the Chowkhuti Mohalla library as being the only one run by a man. The library at Chowkhuti Mohalla is built alongside a small school. It is run by a man who is also the owner and principal of the school. It serves as an example of the importance of the social position of the library coordinator in the shaping of the space. Run by a male school teacher, it is frequented primarily by children and is markedly different from the *mohalla* libraries described earlier wherein the library space becomes a space for women.

The women become friends through their association with the library and form bonds that extend beyond the library space. Most popular among women are magazines such as *Grihashobha* and *Meri Saheli*, which they discuss widely among themselves. These contain information that the women can connect with their everyday lives. At one *mohalla*, we were told that when the library first began they would find that certain pages of the magazines were torn off for their content. This has considerably reduced over time. Women share with each other ideas, recipes and information of various kinds that finds its way to other women who are unable to visit the library. In one library, we found on that certain days the library becomes a point of congregation for extended family and friends. While the children played games and read books, the women cooked together and talked with each other. One cannot go so far as to draw a parallel between the *mohalla* libraries and the male-dominated reading rooms of Bikaner, the former being a recent and novel phenomena in Bikaner's history of reading. However, there is an attempt to carve an alternative female space, a process which goes beyond the organization's own goals to promote reading among women. The library as a collective reading space, has embraced other forms of collectivity. Social reading, a practice that is not widespread among women, takes place alongside other activities such as art and cookery. To look at the library primarily as a reading space would mistake its relevance for the community.

The Swami Mohalla library is regarded as one of the best functioning *mohalla* libraries. While this can be partly attributed to the enthusiasm and social standing of the librarian, it is also rooted in the particular history of the *mohalla* or the neighbourhood. The attitude towards women's education in Swami Mohalla has been favourable in recent times. Some of the children we met in the library had studied much more than their parents. They spoke freely about their likes and dislikes, hobbies and plans for the future. Others mentioned that their

mothers were teachers. We learnt that it was not unusual for women to pursue higher education; sometimes they would enroll for a college education even after marriage.

Chungran Mohalla, a Muslim-dominated *mohalla*, is known for its inordinately high literacy among women. It is particularly high as compared to other Muslim localities, as well as in relation to the rest of the walled city. Sakina Begum, an old resident of this *mohalla*, holds an important place in this legacy as a pioneer for both women and the Muslim community. She was the first woman to go to school, a step that was met with much resistance from the community. She later went on to become the first woman teacher at the local Lady Elgin's College. Gradually the situation began to change. Today the working woman in Chungran *mohalla* is typically a teacher. Around 70 per cent of the women in the neighbourhood work as teachers in the local schools, a figure that far exceeds the percentage of men. It was Sakina Begum who, through her association with Ajit Foundation, urged her grand niece, also a teacher, to run the *mohalla* library. Favourable literacy rates do not however necessarily translate in to strong reading habits. While the library in this neighbourhood is a well-recognized place, the women we spoke to told us they had no time to read. In this neighbourhood the women are busier than the men, said one woman teacher. Reading here is an activity full of interruptions and does not involve much more than the morning newspaper or at best a few pages of a magazine.

### READING CULTURE

There is a parallel narrative which strongly recognizes the decline of the institution of neighbourhood libraries and the lack of interest in reading among the youth of Bikaner. People recalled that there were reading rooms in several *mohallas* and small libraries were a common feature with books for both adults and children.

Large personal collections are common among the older generation. A library attendant at one of the bigger *vaachanalays* said that although books had become very expensive, he continued to buy and add to his collection. His most recent purchase was a volume of the Mahabharat. Also popular among the older readers at the library were Chekhov, Dostoevsky and other classical literature as well as contemporary Hindi literature. These personal collections were often opened to residents of the *mohalla*, a practice that is not as widespread now. Nand Kishore Acharya told us about how the terrace of his uncle's house was made into a library, where he and his friends would sit and discuss poetry and other matters.

The decline of the library in Bikaner can be seen in relation to a larger trend, one that encompasses a wider area and scale. We shall restrict ourselves to the ways by which this change is perceived and understood by the people of Bikaner in relation to their own lives.

An immediate response to the question of decline is the advent of the television. As the TV finds its way into a large section of the houses in the city, it shifts attention away from reading, both as an individual and a collective activity. Many people recalled buying children's magazines and comics during their childhood in the absence of a library, often pooling in money within a circle of friends and circulating the reading material. It was a popular source of entertainment among children. Now however there are competing mediums that vie for their attention. We were surprised to see that the children's section of the state library had a television. The librarian sometimes used it as an incentive, telling the children they could watch TV after reading for a while. The television has also been seen as distraction from the pata culture, that some say has not retained the same vigour. The television has drawn people back in to their homes, and provided a strong alternative to more traditional and communal sources of recreation. Interest in reading among one generation in the family has not ensured that subsequent generations retain that interest.

In Bikaner, we saw that magazines are commonly read both at home as well as in the libraries we visited. The most popular among these is *Meri Saheli*, which read copiously by women in all the *mohallas* and libraries we visited. *Meri Saheli* is one of India's highest selling women's magazine. We also met men and school-going children who read it in their free time. The women told us it appealed to them because it contained information they could apply to their daily lives. It has sections on beauty, interiors, fashion, fiction, health, relationships, food and entertainment. The women told us they enjoyed the "tips" for interior decoration, enjoyed sharing recipes and reading about film stars. One reader said she likes everything about the magazine except for the way in which people shared their personal and sexual relationships with readers. Her friend was quick to add that sex was acceptable if informative and in the context of sexual- health, but not if it was salacious.

Today's youth in Bikaner, those studying in senior school as well as in college, are very career oriented. There is a growing desire to learn about the opportunities available to them and all that is happening around the world. Some among the older generation feel that this desire is opportunistic as the youth today restrict themselves to the kind of reading which helps in securing good jobs. There is little time left for this section of people for any kind of broader reading. For instance, most popular among the youth in the *mohalla* libraries as well as in the State Library and reading rooms is *Pratigyogita Darpan*, a magazine designed to help those preparing for government service competitive exams, complete with application dates and other useful information. One of our respondents spoke about how today a culture of "how to get things done" prevails. The focus rests on securing certain conveniences and on how to get them as soon as possible, under any circumstance.

The seats in the State Library are dominated by people studying long hours for competitive exams. Although there are books covering a wide range of subjects, most students read only those pertaining to their studies. There are a limited number of people who also read from the library's catalogues. They are mostly older people and not students. We found from the library records that Hindi fiction is the most popular genre among this group of people. Also popular among some students are books and authors they read during their school or college years as a part of their curriculum, two prominent ones being Premchand and Shakespeare. Books related to Indian social and political history (also useful for competitive exams) are also read in addition to textbooks.

We spent many hours at the Ajit Foundation library in Sevgaon at different times of the day in the library and found that it has a greater variety of users. At most times of the day, one can find at least a couple of students studying together. The library is also used by young women, some of them teachers and others college students. The number of married women using the library is very low. These women are registered members who borrow books for themselves as well as for their children. Arunima Soni is one such regular reader we spoke to, who visits the library 3–4 times in a month and also borrows books. Reading is an activity the entire family engages in. She and her husband discuss books with each other and also encourage their children to read. She enjoys reading Rajasthani folklore, history and autobiographies. Maharani Gayatri Devi's autobiography is one of her favourite books. She said as she belongs to Jaipur, she feels a personal connection with the ruler. Ajit Foundation has a group of loyal readers who continue to find time for these libraries. Some of them have been associated with them since their childhood unto adulthood. The library also draws a retinue of children between the ages of 8–15 who come regularly during their school holidays. These include children who live next door as well some who come from 3-4 km away. Here too we found Hindi fiction to be most popular among the books issued out to the members.

Two of the Ajit foundation libraries are attached to local schools. At Chowkhuti Mohalla, the library has a sizeable readership because students from the *Mohalla School* as well as other schools in the vicinity visit the library regularly. The coordinator of the library, who is also the principal of the school, thinks the books available at the library could act as a supplement to the children's course books. He also feels that children who read books find it easier to grasp ideas and concepts at school and one can see the difference once a child starts using the library. Free classes during school hours are converted into library time for the children. With regard to the provisions in the new Right to Education law which calls for inclusion of a library in every school, he commented about the poor state of education in Bikaner and said that people found and took advantage of the loopholes in the law. Although we weren't able to visit any schools in Bikaner because they were closed for the summer, we learnt that with a few exceptions, most government and private schools did not have a well functioning library system. In the few



schools that did have a library, the collection was meagre, unavailable or difficult to access for students because of lack of time.

We asked all our respondents about the impact of the library in their lives. Jaya, who lives near the main AF library, said that if the library hadn't been in the neighbourhood, one would have definitely felt a lack of some sort. Raja said, *"Ye soch ka dayra badh gaya hai. Pehle ek limited soch thi ki kaam dhanda karna hai, paisa kamana hai aur khaana khaana hai. Isse zyada nahi. Maansik taur pe badlaav aayi hai, jinko hum zyada zubaani taur se nahi keh sakte, lekin samajh bahut zyada viksit hui hai isse."* (The scope of my thinking has increased. Earlier, I had a limited way of thinking; that is, I have to work, earn money and eat; nothing more than that. Now, there is a change in the way I think. I can't explain this fully, but my understanding of the world has developed a lot.) Shabana Bano, a librarian said, *"Soch badli hai. Dakhiyano si soch hoti thi; purani prathayen aur parampara se ghar mein khul ke bol sakte hain. Jab zamana aage nikal gaya hai, aap kahaan abhi tak yahaan beithay ho. Ghar mein thoda bahut virodh kar sakte hain."* (It changes the way one thinks. You begin to question traditional ways of life and can put up some resistance at home as well. When the world has moved ahead, how can we continue to remain where we are?) People's responses varied in degree to the importance they placed on the institution of the library in their everyday lives. When asked about the relevance of the library, U.C. Kochchar<sup>5</sup> said that though the library undoubtedly plays a role in creating change, he didn't agree with those who thought a library or access to books would revolutionize a whole society or make women self-reliant and confident. One needs resolution and the desire to leave behind tradition for ambition. The library is not going to change their lives.

The decline of the library is also attributed to the present school system. People spoke about the big bags children carried to school, the load of homework, the pressure of passing and doing well in their exams and the cutting down of the summer holidays. Everyone above approximately 30 years, whom we spoke to, agreed that as children they had more time to play and read. The number of users of the Ajit Foundation libraries is high during holiday seasons and significantly lower when schools are open. The relationship between schools and the library has been tapped upon by the Foundation. It conducts presentations and meetings with local schools to encourage children to use libraries.

The decline of public libraries and reading can also be connected to the disappearance of the close-knit community. On introducing ourselves to the people we interviewed, we were frequently asked about our lives in Delhi. They described the fast pace of the city, and expressed surprise and dismay at the lack of contact between neighbours, the decline of family values, the drive for acquisition of wealth and the consequent lack of time, in contrast to their own lives. For a large section of people in the old city, reading is a community-based activity,

---

<sup>5</sup> U.C Kochchar is a social worker, advocate and writer. He also runs a heritage hotel.

away from the interruptions and hustle-bustle of home. The houses are largely designed to emphasize common areas and shared spaces rather than private rooms. Frequent visitors and household chores are the other reasons cited why reading is mostly imagined in a space away from the home. The survival of neighbourhood and community-run libraries is therefore crucially dependent on the sense of community experienced by the people of a locality - one that ensures the creation and sustenance of such spaces.

*Acknowledgments: We are grateful for all the support and co-operation that Ajit Foundation extended to us during our month-long stay at Bikaner. Our professor Janaki Abraham helped us immensely in sharing her experiences of the field and providing us with the socio-historical base for this paper.*