

The Revival of Reading is a Cultural Subject too

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Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore emphasized that true culture and learning should be boundless, when he wrote

"Let all the doors of my house be open on all sides, yet let not any be driven by the wind."

The story about our declining reading habits and their revival, tends to frame the problem educationally, in terms of falling literacy scores, phonics curricula and classroom engagement. Of course, all these are important.

However, there's another layer to this; something more fundamental: the revival of reading is being driven by forces that education systems did not engineer on their own, and cannot fully claim. The fondness for books and a familiarity with reading is also a cultural outcome, rooted in identity, community, belonging, and social meaning.

Lets examine the argument more closely.

1. The Sociology of Reading: Bourdieu's Framework

The theoretical foundation for understanding reading as a cultural rather than instructional act comes largely from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of '*cultural capital*', the idea that certain practices, including reading, are not simply skills but social assets that signal and reproduce class, identity, and belonging.

Bourdieu argued that cultural capital can manifest in an embodied state (long-lasting dispositions), an objectified state (pictures and books), and an institutionalized state (educational qualifications) and that the process of socializing children into reading is a critical piece of elite societies.

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This framework decouples reading from schooling: the *disposition* to read is formed at home, in communities, through habitus; not primarily in classrooms.

Research building on Bourdieu points to "classed effects of literate socialization practices" on *cognitive habitus* meaning the drive to read is absorbed through social environment long before formal instruction begins. Education systems may teach the mechanics of reading, but are they the only ones that instill the *desire* for it?

That desire is cultural in origin.

2. The One Book Theory

Simply having books in the home nearly doubles the odds of a child¹ achieving literacy and basic numeracy. The 'books at home' phenomenon is one of the strongest predictors of educational accomplishment, across countries at every income level. Growing up with books in the home is linked to children completing roughly three more years of education on average compared to children raised without books.

The message for parents is strikingly simple: physical books in the home DO matter. You don't need expensive tutoring programs or a medley of educational apps. A home library, however modest, is one of the most powerful educational investments you can make. And home is where the culture is set.

The correlation is undeniable.

- Children who own their own books are six times more likely to read above the level expected for their age.
- They're also nearly three times more likely to enjoy reading.

¹ A landmark study published in the *Journal of Global Health* followed children across 42 nations.

- Conversely, children who don't have a book of their own at home are twice as likely to have issues with mental wellbeing.

This gets even better. Simply reading to your child everyday is a 'superpower pill' that reaps rich rewards. Reading for pleasure is the single biggest indicator² of a child's future success, more than their family circumstances, their parents' educational background, or their income.

So rich or poor, reading becomes a great equalizer! Reading for pleasure in a child's early years is vital to closing the attainment gap, as well as enhancing wellbeing and quality of life in the long-term. This is corroborated by longitudinal studies of children born in Britain.

Those with poor vocabulary skills at age 5 were

- Four times more likely to have reading difficulties in adulthood
- Three times as likely to have mental health problems
- Twice as likely to be unemployed as an adult

There is plenty of evidence in every culture to corroborate the above.

3. P N Panicker, The Library Man of India

P. N. Panicker's vision for reading was fundamentally cultural, not merely pedagogical. Rather than treating literacy as a classroom skill to be taught, he ignited a popular cultural movement that transformed reading into a way of life across Kerala. His slogan "Vayichu Valaruka" ("Read and Grow") was a simple, powerful cultural message that resonated with ordinary villagers, not an academic curriculum.

²https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/reading-for-change-performance-and-engagement-across-countries_9789264099289-en.html#page1

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Panicker traveled tirelessly to remote villages and tribal settlements, inspiring people to embrace reading as a communal value. The Kerala Grandhasala Sangham he founded made libraries the “nerve centers of all social and cultural activities,” embedding them at the heart of community life rather than treating them as educational institutions. Libraries became spaces for social interaction, political consciousness, and cultural awakening; connecting common people to knowledge as a collective heritage.

His approach challenged the oppressive caste system by making reading accessible to all, fostering a cosmopolitan outlook among Keralites. The movement’s success—Kerala achieving universal literacy in the 1990s—stemmed from this cultural transformation, not top-down pedagogical instruction. Every year, National Reading Day (June 19) honors his legacy of making reading a cultural practice, not just an educational achievement. Panicker’s enduring contribution was showing that a society that reads together grows together culturally.

4. Savitribai Phule’s social imprint

Savitribai Phule (1831–1897), opened schools for sure. But history considers her work in 19th-century India, to be fundamentally social rather than pedagogical. Savitribai’s work transcended classroom instruction. She opened India’s first school for girls in Pune in 1848, defying severe social persecution and even having cow dung and urine thrown at her as she walked to school. Her mission was social liberation through literacy, not academic achievement.

Reading became a tool for women and oppressed castes to challenge caste hierarchy, gain self-respect, and participate in public life. She established multiple schools across Maharashtra, transforming reading into a social movement for equity. Savitribai also founded the “Mukti Balbhavan” (home for destitute children) and ran orphanages, making reading part of

broader social welfare. Her poetry and writings promoted social reform, using literature as a vehicle for consciousness-raising among the oppressed. .

5. The Pandemic Data: Reading Revived as a Social Response

This revival and its timing did not only come from school reform or curriculum change! It came from people, cut off from social life, reaching for books as a source of meaning, comfort, and community. According to a Nielsen Book India survey, reading time among Indian consumers surged from an average of 9 hours to 16 hours per week during the lockdowns, with two-thirds of surveyed readers consuming more books.

Another study was focused on the undergraduate & postgraduate students of Guru Nanak College, Budhlada. A questionnaire was circulated to 300 respondents and 272 complete questionnaires were considered for data analysis. 58.1% of the respondents have revealed that they read more content in the lockdown period. Even global user-generated stories platform Wattpad says it registered a significant increase in user activity during the lockdown, worldwide and in IndiaReading returned not because instruction improved, but because cultural conditions demanded it.

Conclusion

Neither can the decline of reading be blamed on schools alone, nor can reading be revived only because schools improved.

Yes, the education system is a vital part of it. But reading truly declines because the cultural context doesn't support it. When community, identity and shared meaning around books erodes, under the onslaught of broadcast media and algorithmically optimized distraction.

It can be revived only when

- It becomes a culture in homes, in early childhood. (0 to 9 years of age)

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- Young people raised in the above culture, rebuild the cultural context and social media communities. For eg. independent bookstores become gathering places.
- Reading becomes a badge of identity and belonging.

The educational dimensions of reading such as phonics, fluency, and comprehension will continue to be real and important. But they operate downstream of culture.

A child who grows up surrounded by people who *love* books, who sees reading as what interesting people do, who belongs to communities where books are talked about with passion and becomes a reader. A child who does not, may learn the mechanics but never pick up a book again.

The revival of reading is, at its core, people choosing what kind of person they want to be; and that is always, first, a cultural question.