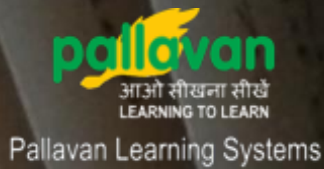


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READING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

NURTURING READERS
IN A TECH-DRIVEN WORLD

27 MARCH 2025
WEBINAR REPORT

READING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

NURTURING READERS
IN A TECH-DRIVEN WORLD



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Thursday, 27 March 2025



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PARO ANAND
Author
Sahitya Akademi Bal
Sahitya Puruskar Recipient
Delhi, India

Exploring how technology,
digital platforms, and innovative
strategies can foster a love for
reading while balancing
traditional literacy skills.



PANELIST
MINAKSHI THAKUR
Publisher-Indian Languages
Westland Books
Delhi, India

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed the way people consume and engage with literature. From e-books and audiobooks to AI-powered content curation, the reading landscape is evolving at an unprecedented pace. While these innovations have made books more accessible to a wider audience, they have also introduced new challenges, such as screen fatigue, shortened attention spans, and a decline in deep reading habits. Understanding these shifts and their implications is essential for educators, publishers, parents, and readers alike.

Recognising the need for a meaningful discussion on this subject, Pallavan Learning Systems, in collaboration with Ritinjali and the Centre for Escalation of Peace, hosted a webinar titled “Reading in the Digital Age: Nurturing Readers in a Tech-Driven World” on March 27, 2025. The event brought together experts from publishing, literature, and education to examine the evolving nature of reading and explore strategies to sustain a thriving reading culture in the digital age.

The webinar covered a broad spectrum of topics, including the impact of digital technology on reading habits, the role of artificial intelligence in publishing, and the importance of inclusive and diverse literature. The discussion also highlighted strategies to promote reading among young audiences, emphasising the significance of both print and digital formats in maintaining literary engagement.

Additionally, the panelists explored the ethical considerations of AI in publishing, the democratisation of literature through self-publishing, and ways to support underrepresented voices in the literary world. The session concluded with an engaging Q&A segment, where participants raised thought-provoking questions on

balancing digital and print reading, enhancing accessibility, and leveraging technology to enrich storytelling.

This report presents details of the key discussions, insights, and recommendations from the webinar. It aims to serve as a valuable resource for educators, publishers, parents, and policymakers seeking to navigate the evolving landscape of reading in a technology-driven world.



ABOUT THE SPEAKERS



Moderator: **Sunaina Narang**

Editor

Pallavan Learning Systems, Delhi, India

Sunaina Narang is a seasoned editor and publishing professional with over 18 years of experience in the industry. Specialising in book commissioning and editing, she has collaborated with a diverse range of authors across genres, refining manuscripts into compelling, reader-ready books. Having worked with leading publishing houses such as Roli Books and HarperCollins India, she brings a deep understanding of storytelling, market trends, and the intricacies of the publishing process.

Panelist: **Paro Anand**

Author, Sahitya Akademi Bal Sahitya Puruskar Recipient, Delhi, India



Paro Anand writes for children, young adults and adults. She won the Sahitya Akademi Bal Sahitya Puruskar in 2017 for her anthology *Wild Child* (now published as *Like Smoke*). She has spoken about and written extensively on children's literature in India. She headed the National Centre for Children's Literature, The National Book Trust, India, the apex body for children's literature in India. She also runs a podcast on HubHopper called *Literature in Action*, and was an invitee to the India Conference at Harvard University in 2018. She was awarded the Kalinga Karubaki Award for fearless writing in 2019. She has travelled the country and the world talking about children's literature and performing her stories including Sweden, USA, UK, German, Switzerland, Singapore, Bhutan, Bangladesh among others. She is well-known for her work with children in difficult circumstances including those impacted by violence in Kashmir and has written extensively on the subject.

Panelist: **Tashi Cheodren**

Student

Druk Gyalpo's Institute, Paro, Bhutan



Tashi Cheodren is an 11th-grade student at Druk Gyalpo's Institute in Paro, Bhutan. Passionate about astronomy, physics, and technology, Tashi aspires to work in water resource management technology. A lifelong reader, Tashi enjoys exploring diverse genres, with a particular interest in dystopian and science fiction literature. Favorite books include Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury and The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams. Tashi also appreciates the accessibility of digital books, which offer a wider range of genres and perspectives. For Tashi, reading is both a source of knowledge and an avenue for expanding ideas and vocabulary.

Panelist: **Minakshi Thakur**

Publisher - Indian Languages

Westland Books, Delhi, India



Minakshi Thakur is a publishing professional with nearly two decades of experience in the industry. She led HarperCollins India's Hindi publishing program (Harper Hindi) and its translation imprint (Harper Perennial) for ten years, championing fair payment and recognition for translators. She has worked with renowned writers and poets such as Perumal Murugan, Gulzar, Javed Akhtar, Krishna Sobti, and Geetanjali Shree, as well as award-winning translators including Rakshanda Jalil and Arunava Sinha. In 2017, she joined Westland Books to establish a multilingual publishing imprint, publishing original works and translations across nine Indian languages.



WEBINAR SESSION



The Digital Shift in Reading Habits

The webinar explored a pivotal question: How has digital technology transformed the way we read, and what does it mean for the future of reading?

Tashi Cheodren illuminated the profound impact of digital platforms, emphasising how e-books and online reading apps have revolutionised accessibility. By placing vast libraries at readers' fingertips, these platforms eliminate storage constraints and enhance discoverability. AI-driven personalised recommendations further refine engagement, curating content tailored to individual preferences. Interactive tools, such as built-in glossaries and dictionaries, deepen comprehension and retention. However, Tashi Cheodren also cautioned against the pitfalls of digital distractions—constant notifications from social media and other applications can fragment focus and diminish reading depth.

Paro Anand emphasised that while technology has facilitated access, true engagement remains paramount. She highlighted that non-readers can be drawn into literature through digital formats, but the diversity of available subjects, styles, and formats is crucial. Reflecting on her personal journey, she emphasised that readers must have the freedom to explore different genres until they find narratives that resonate. Whether digital or print, the essence of reading lies in its ability to strike a meaningful chord with individuals.

Minakshi Thakur provided insights into the evolving publishing landscape in India. Despite the initial excitement surrounding e-books, they have not surpassed physical book sales. Paperbacks continue to dominate fiction markets, while hardcovers remain the preferred format for serious nonfiction. However, digital initiatives like Kindle Unlimited have democratised access, particularly for students, by offering a vast selection of classics and self-development titles.

She also highlighted the surging popularity of audiobooks, which are gaining traction among students and elderly readers alike. Podcasts, an offshoot of audiobooks, are becoming a vital medium for literary discussions. Despite concerns about declining readership, Minakshi noted an increasing number of young people aspiring to become writers—though she stressed the importance of cultivating a strong reading habit before embarking on writing careers.

Minakshi Thakur delved into the success of Pratilipi, India's largest storytelling platform, which boasts over 200,000 writers contributing in 12 Indian languages. The platform exemplifies the growing appetite for digital storytelling. Reader preferences vary by language, with genres such as crime, horror, family drama, and witchcraft gaining significant traction.

Pratilipi allows readers to access initial episodes for free while unlocking subsequent content through a subscription. The platform's most successful narratives are later adapted into audiobooks and digital comics, illustrating the multi-format evolution of content consumption. The rise of regional language content, as evidenced by the growing popularity of non-English news channels and YouTube content, signals a shift in India's reading habits beyond traditional English publishing.

Paro Anand raised concerns about unethical publishing practices that exploit children's aspirations. She highlighted cases where companies promote young students as multi-book authors without ensuring sufficient reading exposure. These practices, often targeted at parents as a commercial strategy, undermine the integrity of literary development. She stressed that genuine authorship requires a strong foundation in reading before transitioning into writing.

Opportunities and Challenges in a Tech-Driven Reading Landscape

Paro Anand emphasised the transformative role of digital technology in making reading more inclusive. Individuals with disabilities can now access content through screen readers, e-books, and audiobooks, providing unprecedented ease of access. Similarly, platforms like StoryWeaver are bridging literacy gaps by offering thousands of multilingual books for free, available for offline use in areas with limited internet connectivity.

A notable innovation is the emergence of "energised textbooks"—interactive, integratable books that enhance participation and deepen engagement. These could revolutionise traditional learning materials, making reading more immersive and appealing, especially for younger audiences.

Tashi Cheodren highlighted how digital platforms personalise reading experiences through intelligent recommendations, annotation tools, and bookmarking features. These elements help readers engage more deeply and discover books aligned with their interests.

Minakshi Thakur stressed the importance of community-driven initiatives in sustaining book culture. She advocated for publishers to support independent booksellers and literacy programmes that extend beyond urban retail hubs. Iconic bookstores like Delhi's Midland Bookstore exemplify how personalised curation fosters a dedicated readership across generations.

While digital platforms have expanded access, they have also introduced challenges in maintaining sustained engagement. Paro Anand noted that while carrying thousands of e-books on a device may seem advantageous, it often leads to fragmented reading experiences. Many readers struggle to complete books, frequently switching between multiple titles without the deep commitment print reading encourages.

Studies suggest that while digital reading increases speed, it often compromises comprehension. Print books encourage deeper analytical thinking, whereas digital skimming can lead to superficial understanding. This is particularly concerning in educational settings, where critical engagement with texts is essential.

Tashi Cheodren observed that many students perceive reading as an obligation rather than a passion. The instant gratification of digital media has led to a reliance on online summaries and AI-generated responses, bypassing the cognitive benefits of immersive reading.

Minakshi Thakur highlighted the competition books face from OTT platforms, social media, and gaming. Retail environments further exacerbate this issue, with bookstores prioritising stationery and toys over well-curated literary selections. Moreover, the absence of knowledgeable staff in major retail chains diminishes the experience of book discovery.

Another pressing concern is the generational shift in reading culture. In households where parents are not active readers, the responsibility of fostering a love for books falls almost entirely on schools. However, literacy outreach remains concentrated in metropolitan cities, leaving government schools and rural areas underserved.

The discussion underscored the need to integrate digital and print reading experiences thoughtfully. While technology has made literature more accessible, fostering deep engagement requires deliberate strategies.

Early Exposure and Habit Formation

Minakshi Thakur emphasised the challenge of reversing digital dependency in young children. Many toddlers are introduced to screens before speech development, affecting their ability to engage with books later in life. Furthermore, educational shifts—such as requiring students to complete assignments on laptops—have reduced exposure to handwriting, which is crucial for comprehension and retention.

To address these challenges, Westland's imprint, Red Panda, focuses on picture books, activity books, and comics that capture young readers' interest through visually engaging content. The integration of AI-assisted backgrounds with hand-drawn illustrations is proving effective, with initial sales indicating strong demand.

Paro Anand stressed the need for greater representation of regional language books. While Indian authors writing in English have gained recognition, local-language literature often struggles for visibility. Expanding the availability of diverse narratives can ensure young readers connect with stories that reflect their own experiences.

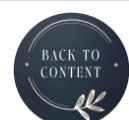
Tashi Cheodren advocated for a hybrid reading model within educational frameworks. Schools should use print books for in-depth study and analysis while leveraging digital platforms for supplementary content and interactive engagement. By strategically integrating both mediums, educators can nurture critical thinking skills while embracing technological advancements.

The Future of Reading: Balancing Tradition and Innovation

Looking ahead, reading habits will be shaped by how we adapt to technological shifts today. Tashi Cheodren emphasised that AI-driven recommendation systems could enhance engagement, ensuring readers discover meaningful content. Meanwhile, Meenakshi Thakur predicted that while digital reading will continue expanding, physical books will remain relevant, particularly for immersive genres like picture books.

Paro Anand reinforced that the focus should be on content rather than format. Innovative approaches—such as storytelling through missed calls—demonstrate that accessibility and engagement should drive literary efforts. She stressed that cultivating a reading culture begins with adults setting the example.

Ultimately, fostering a thriving reading ecosystem requires a collaborative approach among publishers, educators, and policymakers. By reimagining literacy initiatives in alignment with the evolving digital landscape, we can ensure that reading remains a deeply engaging and transformative experience for future generations.



Q&A

Q. What strategies do you recommend for novice readers with limited access to digital platforms? What genres and formats of physical books are best for beginners?

A. Paro Anand: Reading is personal—what resonates with one may not with another. The key is finding a book that speaks to you, which naturally fosters a love for reading.

A. Minakshi Thakur: Just start with any book! Independent presses publish great magazines like *Cycle*, which introduce readers to diverse authors. School reading lists, libraries, and varied selections—from Ruskin Bond to Enid Blyton—help readers discover what they enjoy.

Q. How do you balance reading with screen time?

A. Tashi Cheodren: It's a challenge, but since I love reading, I intentionally set aside time for books, ensuring digital distractions don't consume my entire day.

Q. How has the digital age influenced your writing process?

A. Paro Anand: Writing on a typewriter made me rethink every word, while digital tools encourage skimming. I now print drafts to retain that depth of revision. Research has become easier, and digital platforms like podcasts allow stories to reach wider audiences.

Q. What role does the home environment play in fostering reading habits?

A. Paro Anand: A huge one. My family had a dedicated reading hour, which I initially disliked, but it changed once I found a book that spoke to me. Make books as accessible as musical instruments in a home that values music.

Q. What are your thoughts on AI in comic creation?

A.Minakshi Thakur: AI speeds up background creation but can't replace hand-drawn characters, expressions, or originality. It's a useful tool, but storytelling must remain human-driven.

Q. How has self-publishing impacted traditional publishing?

A.Minakshi Thakur: It has democratized storytelling, but in India, many self-published books lack editorial rigour. While self-publishing thrives online, traditional publishing maintains strong editorial standards and a curated approach. Both can coexist.

Q. Does AI enhance creativity in writing?

A.Tashi Cheodren: AI can inspire creativity by offering prompts, but over-reliance may stifle original thought. It should serve as a catalyst, not a replacement for deep thinking.

CONCLUSION

The webinar provided valuable insights into the evolving landscape of reading in the digital age. While technology has transformed reading habits, panelists stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between digital and traditional formats. They emphasised the role of publishers, educators, and parents in fostering a culture of reading, alongside actionable strategies to make literature more accessible and engaging.

The audience actively contributed to the discussion, posing thought-provoking questions that enriched the conversation. Their engagement underscored the significance of adapting reading habits to the digital era while preserving the essence

of storytelling. The session concluded with a collective commitment to nurturing a lifelong love for reading across generations, emphasising that while technology evolves, the power of storytelling remains timeless.

SUMMARY

On March 27th, 2025, Pallavan Learning Systems hosted its 18th webinar on the theme, “Reading in the Digital Age: Nurturing Readers in a Tech-Driven World” in association with Ritinjali and Centre for Escalation of Peace.

The webinar explored how reading habits have evolved in the digital age, examining the impact of technology on engagement with literature. While digital platforms offer accessibility and convenience, concerns around screen fatigue, reduced attention spans, and the need to balance digital and traditional reading were highlighted. The discussion emphasised the importance of diverse literature that represents different voices and experiences, ensuring books cater to a broad audience. Innovative methods to engage new readers, particularly those with limited access to digital resources, were also explored.

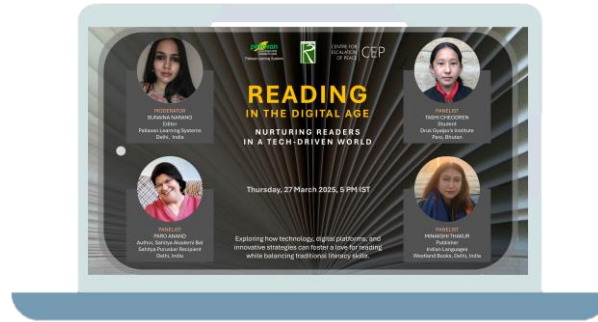
The role of artificial intelligence in publishing was a key focus. While AI streamlines processes such as book recommendations and content creation, traditional elements like hand-drawn illustrations and curated editorial oversight remain irreplaceable. The democratisation of publishing through self-publishing was acknowledged as a positive development, but concerns were raised regarding quality control. The conversation also touched on AI’s potential to enhance creativity while cautioning against over-reliance, which may hinder original thought.



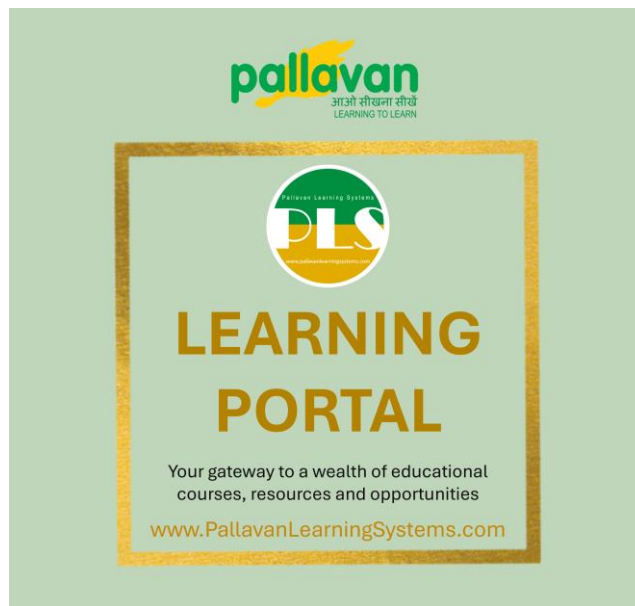
Storytelling was recognised as a powerful tool in sustaining a love for reading, and the integration of multiple formats - including print, digital, and interactive media - was discussed as a way to enhance engagement. To support reading habits, various actions were proposed: strengthening community library projects, fostering collaborations between publishers, schools, and storytellers, and integrating both digital and traditional reading formats in educational curricula. AI-driven book recommendations, interactive and augmented reality books, and the development of diverse content catering to different reader preferences were identified as key areas for innovation. Encouraging dedicated reading time at home, promoting high-quality picture and activity books, facilitating author interactions with students, and supporting independent bookstores were also highlighted as significant steps in nurturing a thriving reading culture.

The session concluded with a dynamic Q&A, where the audience actively engaged by posing insightful questions, further enriching the discussion. Their participation brought valuable perspectives and reinforced the importance of collective efforts in adapting reading habits for the digital era. The webinar closed with a call to action for educators, publishers, and parents to work together in ensuring that reading remains engaging, inclusive, and adaptable to the evolving digital landscape.





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