

## HUMAN LIBRARY: A WORLDWIDE MOVEMENT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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**Abstract:** Human beings are being abused through various social harassment since the inception and evolving of human society. This has been the tragic reality incurred upon society over the centuries by the evil human elements. In order to protect the society from these elements social reformers have tried to take various steps. The Human Library or Living Library is a golden step to prevent society as well as mankind. It is similar to general library but here one speaks not with the books but with people. People share their personal experiences with each other. The Human Library is an idea to bring together people who may not usually get the chance to have a conversation. It increases understanding between people and challenges prejudice and stereotypes.

**Keywords:** *Human Library; Living Library; Prejudice; Stigma; Stereotype; LGBTQ (L - Lesbian, G-Gay, B- Bisexual, and T-Transgender, Q- Queer /questioning their identity)*

**Introduction:** The “Human Library” is a concept created by Ronni Abergel, Dany Abergel, Christoffer Erichsen and Asma Mouna of the Danish Youth Organisation to stop the violence in 2000 and it is now operational on five continents. Human Library is a library of people, like traditional library. It replaces books with the human beings called living books. The living books here are people who have experienced prejudice or been victimised due to race, sex, age, disability, sexual preference, gender identity, class, religion, belief, lifestyle choices or other aspects. It is a library of human being, individuals, that each represent a group in the community that is somehow exposed to stigma, prejudice and/or discrimination. Human Library has the potential to affect the attitudes and values of a huge number of people. It is a brilliantly simple but highly effective way of tackling a difficult task. It has the potential to issue change our feelings, perceptions and opinions about ourselves and others. Through Human Library the cultural diversity of our communities is celebrated and a positive contribution to the health and well being of the participants is made. Above all, Human Library is a positive experience for everyone involved, a unique opportunity to explore another character and to be inspired by real life experience.

**Aims of Human Library:** The Human Library aims to establish a safe conversational space, where difficult questions are expected, appreciated and hopefully answered by the Human Book on loan.

It was developed to challenge social prejudices wherever and for whatever reasons they occur, and to help people form a better understanding of those with whom they share their communities. The Human Library methodically aims to promote respect for human rights and human dignity through dialogue about the topic of prejudice and stereotypes.

**How to Organise a Human Library:** It is not a fixed physical library, it is mostly event based. To organise a Human Library there are many factors to consider, and too many to discuss fully within this text. However, there are four factors that have to be considered : **Venue, Books, Staff and Readers.**

Selection of the venue is the most important thing that can have a huge impact on the Human Library while delivering the event. The venue that is used directly impacts upon the number of Books and Staff recruited, how much promotion and publicity is required, how long the event runs, and how many readers are attracted. Success of the human library entirely depends on the choice of venue. There are benefits and challenges to both approaches. As part of a large event it becomes easier to attract readers. But, keep it in mind that, it is not the context; it has some purposes that promote society.

Another important thing is selection of books i.e. Human Books. Experience, relevant knowledge and potential human books must be selected who satisfy the readers. A human book is a person who has volunteered to challenge prejudice through respectful conversation with members of the public. It must provide training for all books taking part to ensure that they know how the Human Library works. Effective training will ensure that all books feel safe and valued and understand what the event is trying to achieve, and why they have been invited to share their experiences.

The third stage is to publicise the event in order to attract volunteers to be the facilitating staff who manage properly and provide the right book to a right reader.

The fourth stage is promoting the event with a view to attract readers. At first, the organisers of the event have to clarify / explain by writing a paragraph or a written outline how the event help the readers to overcome their problem.

**Service pattern of Human Library:** When one enters the library, he/she will see a list of human “books” that are available. He/she can discuss the process with the librarian, and arrange to borrow someone. Staff will help them to be introduced to their ‘book’, the guidelines read out, and the reader will be left to have a conversation. After the end of the session reader can choose to borrow another ‘book’ if he/she wishes.

Like a traditional library whenever one visits the human library, they will see many people there. But the difference is, there will be two kinds of people.

1. One can register themselves as an advisor or helper, according to the topics in which they are interested to talk with someone and also have knowledge about the same.
2. One can register as a visitor who will be able to book an advisor on the topic on which they want to talk or have any suggestions. This will be for a fixed time limit.

Similar to general library, here one speaks not with books but with people, People share their experiences with each other purpose of this is to eliminate disconnection between people or to eliminate prejudices about talking to each other.

**History of Human Library:** A brief history of the Human Library narrates how following a knife attack on a friend in 1993, five young Danish people created **Stop The Violence**. Through the organisation they attempted to challenge negative stereotypes that appeared in the media following the incident. Seven years later the Director of Roskilde Festival challenged Stop the Violence to organise activities that would encourage dialogue and mutual understanding between visitors at the 2000 Roskilde Music Festival. The Event was run by Ronni and Danny Abergel, Asma Mounta, Christofer Erichsen, then working at the Danish Youth NGO ‘**Stop Volden**’, meaning stop violence, inspired by the ‘**American Stop Violence Movement**’. It aims to address people’s prejudices by helping them to talk to those they would not normally meet. The first event ran for four days with eight hours of conversations each day and more than 1000 people participating in the event. This developed greater understanding between people attending the festival by challenging negative stereotypes and prejudice. At the point it would have been difficult to believe that within 10 years Human Library was being used to strengthen and connect communities in more than 50 countries around the world. After the first Human Library at Roskilde, there were many events throughout Europe, usually taking place at music festivals or in libraries.

The next Human Library was hosted in Oslo, Norway by Ronni Abergel for the Nordic Minister Councils Youth Assembly “**Unge I Norden**”. The event was prepared in partnership with Terese Mungal-Foya and went on to inspire the establishment of the Norwegian Human Library program in 2003. The first permanent Human Library was established in Lismore, Australia in 2006.

It should be noted that all Human Library activity that took place before 2010 was under the name of ‘**Living Library**’. In 2010, the name was changed to Human Library in English speaking countries although the Council of Europe have continued to use the Living Library name for activity in continental Europe.

In 2011, the European Youth Centre, Budapest launched a pilot project bringing the Living Library into schools across Hungary.

Since its inception, the Living Library School Project has continued and grown, and has now visited over 40 schools and reached well over 1000 students.

**Indian Scenario:** In India, the first Human Library event was held at Indore in November 2016 at the IIM Indore campus. Hyderabad is the second city to have this event, and “ we are getting ready for our next event this April,”

says Harshad Fad, one of the organizing members. Harshad a student of media marketing at a private institute came across the concept of Human Libraries on the internet. His curiosity led him to the discovery that there is a listed Indian chapter of Human Library.

Of the many topics covered by the Human Library in Hyderabad, is one on surviving Domestic Violence. It is about Saroja who has been a victim of domestic violence for over 12 years. She took a bold step and approached an NGO and from there onwards could gather courage to say no to abuse, subsequently she got out of the abusive relationship and is now managing her life and taking care of her two daughters all by herself. "She is so bold, courageous and positive, which makes us feel so encouraged every time we meet her." says Harshad.

At their debut in March 2016, 10 human books were available; the number of books is expected to double at the next event. Talking about his favourite books, Fad says, "Out of all the books that he has managed to collect so far, surviving domestic violence and self-loathing narcissists are my favourite human books as they instill courage and deter the strangeness in you".

Sharing his experience, the human book Andy Silveira, an LGBTQ activist who also identifies as gay, said, "Narrating personal stories of my life to random people was a bit unnerving, yet it was also a learning experience of narrating it differently, especially when I was aware that a particular reader stayed back to listen to my story for the second time." He went on to add how his identity serves an additional purpose: "I was aware that I was offering a singular experience as a gay/lesbian lives and giving my readers a peek into the similar as well as different points of view which shape our thought and experience."

Harshad is planning to spread Human Library to other cities like Bengaluru, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Gujarat as well.

**Andhra Pradesh :** Parvathi, Director of Government libraries in AP, said that the idea of setting up a human library would change the face of government libraries in the State. After the inauguration of the first human library in the State, human book M. Bala Latha, a Civil Service Ranker from Hyderabad, shared her story with the audience on how she made it to Civil Service examination despite being physically challenged. She said that her father played a role of human book in her life, to support her in all ways and give her courage and confidence. She added that a human library isn't just a book you read without thinking.

K. Sandhya Rani, In-Charge of AP Grandhalaya Parishad, said "The human Library is designed to build a positive framework for conversations that can challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue. It is a place where real people are available for interaction to share their life experiences, knowledge and give a positivity to the readers. These kind of libraries and human books create more interest and impart more knowledge than any medium. Even a person who cannot study the alphabets can also gain knowledge through interaction with human books.

**Delhi :** The first event of Human Library in Delhi had taken place on 18th June, 2017 at Innov8 Co-working Space, Connaught Place. The event was free for all. Book slots were given on first-come, first-served basis. According to Neha Singh, book-depot manager of the Delhi chapter, the first event showcased 'books' from 11 categories, ranging from a recovering drug abuser, Buddhism practitioner and tea-seller turned author to female solo traveller, cancer survivors, bullying victim and a history chronicler, among others which they were to be 'returned' to the depot.

**Orissa :** Bhubaneswar, Capital of Orissa, saw a unique event on a cloudy Sunday as the first-ever library where people touted to be misfits in the society were given an opportunity to share their experiences in a local cafe.

Known as 'The Human Library'. It had about eight individuals from different walks of life and faced social stigma and prejudice, yet had overcome the circumstances and survived tough times, who served as 'human books'. Each such speaker was allocated five to six 'readers' for a period of about 20 minutes.

225 readers joined this storytelling platform to interact with a bisexual who was a survivor of clinical depression, a hearing-disabled lady entrepreneur, a transgender civil-servant, a homosexual who had faced sexual abuse, an acid attack victim, a sufferer of caste discrimination, Padma Shri awardee Italian-born Odissi dancer, victim of human trafficking who was also a former sex worker and a reformed alcoholic for six hours in various time slots. All human books shared their experiences and stories of the challenges that they had faced and the journey of endurance.

The Bhubaneswar Poetry Club in association with Human Library Organisation, Denmark conducted a human library event in the capital city on July 15, 2017. The event comprised a library of “human books”, who would be people with unique life stories struggling with stigma (from LGBTQ community, single parents, former prison inmates, suicide survivors, former drug abuse victims etc). They interacted one-on-one with readers – people like you and me, who were interested in interaction. The Human Library Project. Bhubaneswar, had ten diverse human books, who interacted with around 300-400 readers for four hours – the time divided into sessions with adequate breaks in-between. The discussions and interactions were based on personal life stories, which open multiple windows of thoughts in the readers.

Bhubaneswar Poetry Club’s founder member Bijaya Biswal said, “The objective of the programme is to establish a safe conversational space, where difficult questions are expected, appreciated and answered in order to promote understanding of social prejudices and increase tolerance and empathy between human beings, by making people share their realities with each other.”

**Gurugram :** After the success of the Delhi edition of Human Library in June, on 8th of October, 2017 at Plot 23, Maruti Industrial Area, Sector 18, Gurugram, the Millennium City to host its first edition, and the response in Gurgaon showed that many were anxious to stem the rising tide of vitriol and malevolence, to reach out and understand the other, and help build a more tolerant and kinder society.

The Gurgaon organizers hopped to have a permanent set-up soon, with a focus on a gathering every month. They deserved every encouragement, for the Human Library can join hearts and help heal.

**Bangalore :** In Bangalore “The Human Library” Bangalore has opened its chapter in the city and is going to host regular events in bookshops, libraries and other spaces. Before an event, they will open applications for people who want to become the human books, which could be someone with a story to share. The rest are welcome to join in as readers to be part of the experience.

The first lending session of the Bangalore chapter was opened on August 27, 2017 at Lahe in Indiranagar with twelve to eighteen human books waiting to be lent out for a period of half an hour each. Having generated much curiosity on social media, the number of reader registrations had been overwhelming, says Roshini Ross, slam poet and curator of ‘books’. “And so we decided to have group reading sessions with each book, to allow more participation,” she says.

The topics of each human title will only be revealed on the day of the launch, but the subjects are varied and will touch on religion, LGBTQ rights, discrimination against people with mental health issues and physical disabilities. Divorcees, single parents and victims of acid attacks will also be on the reading list. “What will make the stories more relevant is the aspect of localisation within the experiences of the ‘books’ as Bangaloreans. This will help people really empathise with the narratives,” believes Roshini.

This is the one time you won’t be required to maintain silence at the library, but do remember to turn your phones off.

**Kolkata :** In Kolkata Human Library is going to be organised by Deblina Das at near future on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2019. Deblina founder of Human Library, Kolkata chapter, and book depot, is gung-ho about the event for which she got licence after one-and-a-half years of trying. After completion of Master degree from Jadavpur University she joined a communication firm and started holding counselling session. In that time she has faced enough prejudices to have understood what it feels to be typecast. Deblina’s experience is in her life “while my parents have always been very supportive, this log-kya-kehange syndrome has always been there. Tumi meye hoye eto raat kore bari aasho? Tomar bachha aachhe, tao party te jao?— these questions are always addressed to women like me. So, a space for an open conversation will eventually change peoples mind sets. About 50% of our target group will be “aware” citizens. The rest will learn. And if youngsters are free of prejudices, they will influence their families too. That is what we are aiming at”,

She revealed. “To break stereotypes, we have chosen people from various backgrounds. Our human books could be someone from the queer community, someone who has been sexually abused and has dealt with the trauma or it could be someone who loves to go on solo trips. Readers will have to choose from them,” Deblina said.

**Conclusion:** To live in a great democracy like India, where the culture and lifestyle change every 50 Kms, we need to be able to talk to each other in a reasonable, calm way, no matter our differences. It's only when we can talk about why we think the way we do that we can find ways to work on the problems in our communities. In our society victim human beings want to cover up themselves because they feel stigmatized by society. To bring back people to the mainstream as a librarian my suggestion is that every village, district, state-level libraries can arrange human library event under the aegis of state government.

Initiatives should be taken by every sector of our society viz. Central Government., State Government. and different NGOs even at personal level. otherwise it is impossible to protect those persons from such social trauma.

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