



At the Heart of Democracy: Grama Panchayat Libraries in Karnataka

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G. Malligere is a Grama Panchayat (GP) in Mandya district, with a landscape typical of the region with fields, irrigation channels, and cultivated land stretching out on either side. I arrived expecting the familiar rhythms of panchayat work. Instead, what stood out was the most active space in the GP, its library.

Geetha has been the librarian here for eighteen years. She studied till Class 10 and has no formal training in library science. Before joining the library, she worked with non-governmental organisations in tribal regions, where she was involved in forest conservation and livelihoods. She says this experience shaped her understanding of people and their everyday struggles.

When the librarian post opened at the G. Malligere GP, she applied without much hesitation. She wanted stable work, something closer to home, and she liked books. The pay was modest when she joined and improved over time.

The first space assigned to the library was an old building with a leaking roof. During the monsoons, water fell onto the shelves and books were damaged. In 2009, the panchayat shifted the library to an unused godown within the campus, where it has functioned ever since.

As the local government school's closing time approached, the sound of the bell carried across the grounds. Children walked towards the library in small groups, their bags slung low. Geetha stood outside, greeting them as they arrived. Three teachers from the government school stopped by with their children before heading home. They spoke briefly; the familiarity between them was easy to see.

The entrance opens into a hall where tables and chairs are pushed close together.

Children sit in small groups, spreading puzzle pieces across the surface and arguing quietly over what fits where. Newspapers and magazines are placed within easy reach. Books are arranged on low shelves, allowing children to choose on their own. An inner room holds a few computers and shelves organised by subject. Two girls sit shoulder to shoulder in front of the computer, moving slowly through a form, reading each line aloud to each other. Older students arrive later. Some read; others finish homework together. A few move between shelves

without hurry. It's evident that over time, the library has settled into the daily rhythm of village life.

The children excitedly tell me about the library during the summer holidays and how freely they are able to use the space. They speak of activities such as singing, dancing, knitting, painting, and playing together. On some afternoons, the library spills outdoors, where children watch birds, tend to plants, and learn the names of leaves and flowers growing along the boundary wall of the panchayat garden.





Geetha also spends part of her day speaking with women and other adults about government schemes and entitlements. These conversations are informal. Women stand or sit close together, listening, interrupting, and sharing concerns. On some afternoons, Geetha runs basic tailoring sessions. Many women come even when they do not plan to read. They sit and talk, and conversations stretch without urgency. College students come to study and prepare for entrance examinations, while older adults arrive to read the newspaper and linger over the day's news. Through it all, Geetha listens more than she speaks.

Over the years, the library has seamlessly merged with Geetha's personal life. Toys, games, and storybooks from friends and donors have found their way onto the shelves. She lost her son during the COVID-19

pandemic. Later came the loss of her husband to cancer and her mother to illness. When she speaks of the library, she speaks of it as something that holds her days together.

What is unfolding in G. Malligere is not an isolated story.

In a panchayat in the neighbouring district of Ramanagara, the librarian Shilpa speaks with ease and assurance as panchayat members gather at the entrance of the library building. Conversations move between everyday concerns and future plans. What began as a small reading room has expanded into a computer learning centre serving the entire panchayat. Prize money received after being recognised as the best library in the state has been used to extend the space onto the terrace.

That same day, Bhagya arrives. Neatly dressed and serving tea, she could easily be mistaken for being an office staff. Bhagya runs the panchayat's solid waste management programme, managed entirely by women. She is the sole earning member of her household. Her husband is bedridden following a spinal cord injury, and she is raising three daughters. She uses the library to practise typing, and her daughters come regularly. This is a place she knows well and returns to often. She had not planned to stay that day, but remained after hearing that someone was visiting the GP library.



In another village, Chaitra's library carries a different energy—bright walls, open shelves, children moving easily between rooms. Girls speak without hesitation about wanting to become doctors, teachers, and civil servants. No one lowers their voice when they say it.

Across Karnataka, many Grama Panchayat libraries have become spaces for storytelling sessions, reading circles, art

activities, mother-child reading hours, and collaborations with schools, Anganwadis, and health workers. They are among the few remaining public spaces where people across age, caste, and gender can be present together without invitation.

Much of this momentum began during the COVID-19 pandemic. With schools closed, the Rural Development and Panchayat

Raj Department strengthened over 5,600 Grama Panchayat libraries and undertook a large membership drive. Today, more than 5 million children are registered members. Libraries remain open for eight hours a day, including weekends. Librarians receive improved honorariums and have been trained in computer skills and child-friendly engagement. Based on the response, efforts are underway to establish 6,600 more village libraries across Karnataka, ensuring children have access to a library within their own village and keeping public learning at the heart of community life.

The result has been more than increased reading, though that in itself matters deeply. Many children do not have access to books at home. Early reading builds confidence, curiosity, and the ability to imagine a future beyond the immediate.

There is a growing need to strengthen shared public spaces that are steadily disappearing—places where people meet as equals; where women step into leadership; where children find their voice; where communities learn to live with difference before conflict hardens. Grama Panchayat libraries are doing this work quietly and steadily in Karnataka.

Along with expanding access to books, they are shaping how children see themselves and others. This work needs to continue. It needs sustained public investment, attention, and care. It needs recognition that even the smallest public institutions can carry significant democratic weight. At the centre of this work are women like Geetha, Shilpa, Bhagya, and Chaitra, shaping what a public institution can look like when it is rooted in dignity and shared purpose.



Karnataka's experience demonstrates that Grama Panchayat libraries function as one of its core local institutions. Their scale, uptake, and social value call for continuity and expansion. The Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department and equivalent departments in other states need to recognize GP libraries as essential public institutions, supported by predictable funding, adequate space, trained staff, and clear administrative ownership at the panchayat level. Seen this way, strengthening GP libraries becomes integral to rural development, not peripheral to it.





Taken together, these developments offer clear lessons for state and local governments seeking to rebuild public learning spaces at the grassroots. What follows are practical insights drawn from the functioning of Grama Panchayat libraries in Karnataka.

Key lesson	What it means for libraries
Trust local governments	▶ Give panchayats and municipalities real ownership of libraries, rather than relying on rigid, top-down models
Back trust with support	▶ Pair autonomy with simple guidelines, action-oriented training, and regular opportunities for peer learning
Enable peer exchange	▶ Use exposure visits and experience-sharing so local bodies can learn directly from one another
Pilot at scale	▶ Run large pilots across districts or blocks, allowing effective approaches to be adapted and scaled
Be patient	▶ Expect uneven response and capacity; provide additional handholding where institutions are weaker
Work with civil society	▶ Partner with grassroots NGOs to strengthen quality, outreach, and everyday community use

Together, these lessons point to the quiet but enduring role that local public institutions can play in shaping everyday democratic life. Public libraries are not only about books. They are about learning how to live together, about belonging, imagination, and the quiet rebuilding of democratic life from the ground up. In this sense, they are the foundations of a healthy democracy.

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