

A Teacher who Transformed Anganwadis into Learning Hubs

Ananya D

In the Jogur (2) village of Kalaburagi (rural) district, Karnataka, there is a story that every parent and child now tells with pride. It is the story of Shankamma, an *Anganwadi* teacher who transformed what was once a simple food distribution centre into a vibrant hub of learning and laughter for 3–6-year-old children.

A quiet beginning

When Shankamma joined the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) department in 2010 as an *Anganwadi* teacher, her centre was like many others—children came mostly for food, and parents had little awareness of preschool education. Barely 10 to 15 children attended, and structured learning activities were almost non-existent.

Shankamma, known for her regular attendance and sincerity, always dreamed of giving children something beyond mid-day meals. Her opportunity came in 2019–20, when the Azim Premji Foundation started its Early Childhood Education (ECE) intervention in the Kalaburagi Rural Block. Through monthly workshops, block-level meetings, ECCE Days, *Bal Melas*, and Teachers' *Melas*, Shankamma learned about the importance of early years and theme-based learning. Equipped with the *Chilipili Curriculum*,¹ she was determined to bring about change.

The centre came alive

It began with small steps. Shankamma started opening her centre at 9:30 AM sharp and engaged children until 1:30 PM with a full routine that included free play, songs, storytelling, cognitive, creative, and theme-based activities, as well as engagement in Learning Corners.

One challenge was the lack of resources. During a workshop, Shankamma had experienced the use of different teaching–learning materials (TLMs). Inspired,

“ To make the Learning Corners rich and engaging, Shankamma mobilised materials from the local community and shops. Parents began to see how even simple household objects could become learning tools for children. ”



Figure 1: Children dipping blocks in colour and making patterns of their choice.

she began creating her own. With the help of her family, she prepared TLMs for each student so that every child had something in hand to work with. This changed the energy of the classroom. Children, once passive, began to enthusiastically participate in activities.

Earlier, during storytelling, Shankamma would simply read stories aloud. Children would neither listen attentively nor remember much. She decided to change her approach. Using story cards and puppets that she made herself, she explored four to five different methods of storytelling—oral narration, reading aloud, picture sequence stories, mono-acts, and role play. The results were magical. Children, who once sat quietly, now eagerly enacted characters and retold stories in their own words.

Shankamma also introduced variety into creative activities—colouring, bead-setting on pictures, and paper ball pasting. For cognitive development, she introduced weekly theme-based activities, like matching, puzzles, sorting, and identifying missing pictures. These exercises

form the base for critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Playtime took a new shape. She introduced the *Chilipili*-themed play, the traditional games she knew and free play in the Learning Corners. The Pretend Play Corner became a favourite—children acted out roles of parents, doctors, or cooks, imitating real-life activities, like making *rotis*. The centre buzzed with imagination and laughter.

To make these corners rich and engaging, Shankamma mobilised materials from the local community and shops. Parents began to see how even simple household objects could become learning tools.

When she realised that there was no running blackboard in her *Anganwadi*, Shankamma did not wait for external support. Instead, she painted a section of the wall black and turned it into a writing space. Children scribbled, drew, and wrote freely on it. This simple innovation became a powerful tool for eye-hand coordination and fine motor skill development.



Figure 2: A running blackboard is a powerful tool for eye-hand coordination and development of fine motor skills.



Figure 3: Children excitedly surround a teacher who puts on a mask.

She asked other beneficiaries of ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services), such as pregnant and lactating mothers, 0–3-year-old children, adolescent girls, parents, community and other services beneficiaries to come to the *Anganwadi* centre only after 2 PM, thus keeping the mornings dedicated entirely to preschool activities.

Parents were surprised. Children, who once wandered around, now stayed inside the *Anganwadi* compound for four continuous hours. They sang, danced, asked questions, and narrated stories.

Enrolment

Shankamma noticed another gap—enrolment. Despite her efforts, many children in the village were still not attending the *Anganwadi*. So, she took another bold step—organising monthly ‘ECCE Days’². Children showcased what they learned—songs, action rhymes, stories, and playful activities—in front of parents and community members. Shankamma also shared the progress of the children with their parents. Slowly, awareness began to spread.

From 10 children, the enrolment rose to 45 children in one year. She conducted over 20 ECCE Days within 2–3 years. She also conducted a *Bal Mela*³ in her village, which brought together 200 villagers. For Shankamma, *Bal Mela* became a platform to highlight her centre’s innovative practices. Her children confidently performed songs, engaged in cognitive activities, and showcased

“Parents were surprised. Children, who once wandered around, now stayed inside the *Anganwadi* compound for four continuous hours. They sang, danced, asked questions, and narrated stories.”

their artwork, which inspired other teachers and earned appreciation from parents.

Seeing these efforts, the Panchayat members and the community started contributing items, like paints, play materials, and even small funds for the *Anganwadi*. Parents joined a *WhatsApp* group where Shankamma shared daily updates on their children’s progress.

Her *Anganwadi* had become more than a centre. It was now a learning hub!

Children found their voice

Children could sing more than 25 action songs, retell stories, and express their feelings freely. They no longer needed helpers to escort them; by 9:00 AM sharp, they arrived eagerly at the centre.

The impact showed when they moved to primary school. Teachers reported that Shankamma’s students were more active, asked questions, and grasped lessons quickly.

One story remains close to her heart. A child in the village, who was initially thought to have a speech disability (did not speak), began speaking after joining her *Anganwadi*. The joy of the parents, who once believed their child would never speak, knew no bounds.

Another parent, who had shifted their child to a private school, re-enrolled their child to the *Anganwadi* after seeing the difference Shankamma’s methods made. ‘Our child learns better here,’ they admitted.

“The impact showed when they moved to primary school. Teachers reported that Shankamma’s students were more active, asked questions, and grasped lessons quickly.”

New beginnings, new struggles

Recently, Shankamma was transferred to Kotnoor (D) village near Kalaburagi city. Her journey started all over again—but this time, with tougher challenges. The *Anganwadi* operated in a small, rented building with minimal infrastructure. Though many children were enrolled, only one or two attended regularly. Initially, the local community resisted her presence, saying that since many educated members already lived in their own village, there was no need for someone from outside. Parents preferred private schools.



Figure 4: Children learn as they play.

For many, this would have been discouraging, but not for Shankamma. With guidance from the Education Department and the Foundation, she implemented simple strategies:

- Began preschool activities even if only two children turned up.
- Conducted home visits, patiently explaining the importance of preschool education to parents.
- Organised small parents' meetings to build awareness regarding pre-school education, sometimes with just two or three attendees.
- Involved parents in storytelling sessions on ECCE Days and cultural events by asking parents to share some local stories, and asked parents to help their children in colouring, pasting (creative activities), and engaged both parents and children in play where parents were paired with children.
- Displayed children's drawings and learning materials proudly to show the evidence of their progress.

Slowly, change began to take place. The *Anganwadi* attendance increased from 2 to 12 children. Parents began appreciating her efforts, and some even donated uniforms and materials. The same community that once resisted her had now started trusting her.

Beyond the classroom

Shankamma's influence did not stop at her *Anganwadi*. She went on to present a seminar paper at Azim Premji University, titled 'The Importance of Stories and Songs in the Language Development of Early Childhood Children'.

In this paper, she described how songs and stories are powerful tools to:

“ Simply telling the moral at the end of a story does not benefit children; what matters more is allowing them free and open thinking. ”

- **Build vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence construction**

Through exposure to more and more songs, children learn rhyming words, word combinations, and sentence construction. Listening to stories helps children learn new words and use them appropriately. Story activities, such as sharing ideas, looking at books, recognising letters and sounds, observing printed materials, and learning new words, all support children's language development. They also gain awareness of printed materials, connections between letters and sounds, and gradually acquire the ability to read and write.

- **Develop memory, listening skills, and curiosity**

Young children generally have short attention spans and are easily distracted. Storytelling engages them and helps improve concentration, turning them into better listeners. Listening to and retelling stories strengthens children's memory, and it helps when they enter the next stage of schooling.

- **Encourage imagination, creativity, and cultural awareness**

Listening to stories helps children imagine characters, places, and plots. It allows their imagination to flow freely and helps them visualise content even without visual media. Storytelling based on traditions and culture also helps children learn about cultural practices and heritage.

For young children, the moral of a story is less important than the chance to listen, imagine, talk, connect with the feelings of characters, and think. Simply telling the moral at the end of a story does not benefit them; what matters more is allowing them free and open thinking. Asking appropriate questions during and after stories encourages children to think about problems in the story and find possible solutions.

Some challenges and solutions

Shankamma came across many challenges with the new set of children. Children were unable to concentrate while stories were being narrated. Some children from a community that had a different home language could not understand Kannada. Children would talk amongst themselves and found it difficult to sit together in a circle. But these did not deter her, and Shankamma found

her way around the small problems that arose. During storytelling, she adopted the following strategies:

- Using instruments like *Khanjiri* (a musical instrument like a tambourine) to attract children's attention
- Encouraging children whose home language was not Kannada to sit and play with Kannada-speaking children
- Asking questions during storytelling to engage children. For example, 'Who is speaking? What happens next?'
- Clapping hands (like the *banana clap*- children clap at the count of one and two, then act as if they are peeling a banana and eating it) to regain attention
- Using picture cards related to the story to help children focus
- Using puppets while narrating stories to reduce children's tendency to talk among themselves

While singing songs too, she realised that children are unable to follow or sing along. They had difficulty in constructing sentences and joining words while singing. They would not stand in a circle while singing. Even when they were asked to repeat after her, some children sang

alone, not in unison. A few children remained silent and did not sing at all. Shankamma had her ways to deal with these.

- She started to sing the song first as a demonstration. After this, children were asked to repeat.
- She would focus on rhyming words, word combinations, and sentence construction within the song.
- Using actions, expressions, and gestures while singing, she made the activity more engaging, which also supports language development.

Her insights reflected not just her academic knowledge, but her lived experience from years in *Anganwadi* classrooms.

From Jogur-2 to Kotnoor-D, Shankamma's journey shows how one teacher's dedication can rewrite the story of early childhood education. She turned doubt into trust, silence into speech, and bare spaces into centres of joy. Today, her children walk into primary schools with confidence, curiosity and eagerness to learn. Her story is not just about transforming *Anganwadis*; it is about transforming futures.

References

¹ The *Chilipili Curriculum* is an Early Childhood Education (ECE) programme developed for children aged between 3 to 8 years in Karnataka.

² ECCE Day is celebrated once a month at *Anganwadi* Centres to showcase children's learning and to create awareness among parents and the community about the importance of preschool education, healthy routines, and play-based education. On this day, children present action songs, stories, rhymes, and theme-based activities that they have learned. Parents are invited to watch and participate, which builds trust and ownership.

³ Bal Mela is an annual/bi-annual event where children from multiple *Anganwadi* Centres come together to play, learn, and showcase their talents. It includes games, art, cultural programmes, storytelling, and stalls that display children's learning materials and creative work. Parents and community members also participate, making it a celebration of early childhood learning.



Ananya D joined Azim Premji Foundation as an Associate and is currently Block Coordinator, Chittapur Block, Kalaburagi district, Karnataka. She is currently working in domains, like ECE, primary language and maths, upper primary maths and is part of the Foundation's work with youth.

Contact: ananya.d@azimpremjifoundation.org