

Libraries rescue education in rural Karnataka

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Representative image. Credit: iStock photo

Covid-19 posed one of the greatest challenges to the education system with school closures. According to UNESCO, the pandemic has led to school closures in 191 countries, leaving 1.6 billion (90.2%) students out of schools. The World Economic Forum has estimated that 320 million learners in India have been affected by Covid-19 and have transitioned to e-learning.

India is marked by inter and intra-household disparities in access to technologies such as television, laptops, tablets, mobile phones, and the Internet. In September 2020, a phone-based survey conducted by the Annual State of Education Report (ASER) showed that one in three children in rural area had no learning activity, and only one in 10 had access to live online classes. Learning, or lack of it, is only one part of the problem; closing of schools led to the non-availability of mid-day meals, disruption in routines, mobility restrictions on play, and lack of interactions with peers -- all of which affected children's overall well-being.

Amid this grim scenario, Karnataka ushered in a new social movement through rejuvenation and recalibration of its 5600-strong network of rural libraries. Historically, decentralised governance through Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been pivotal to empowering rural communities in Karnataka. A three-tier model of governance with gram panchayats, taluk and zilla panchayats has been at the centre of developmental activities

in the state with robust implementation of the gender and caste-based reservations. Additionally, based on a state legislation for libraries, the local bodies levy a library cess, which supports development and maintenance of its libraries.

With the onslaught of the first wave of the pandemic, the PRIs ensured doorstep delivery of Anganwadi and midday meal rations for children. Also, rural children were enrolled free of charge as library members. In addition, a public movement was initiated to collect books through community donations. The honorarium paid to librarians was increased, and training programmes were launched to upskill them.

The panchayats played a vital role in renovating library buildings with child-friendly murals and gardens. The funds untied by panchayats were utilised judiciously. The state government has sanctioned 339 new libraries this year. Many students use the library space for doing their homework or preparing for competitive examinations. Some libraries also house indoor games like chess, carrom, and ludo, and have television screens for learning resources.

Within a short span, over 19 lakh children have been enrolled as members and can access libraries free of cost. Picture books, story books, dictionaries, etc., have been received as donations with support from Azim Premji Foundation, Pratham Books and other organisations. Several NGOs are supporting the initiative: Concerned for Working Children (CWC), Children's Movement for Civil Awareness (CMCA), Adhyayan Foundation, Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), Kalike-Tata Trust, Akanksha Charitable Trust, Yuva Chintana Foundation and India Literacy Project. Efforts are on to upgrade 500 beacon libraries which will be disabled-friendly with ramps, aids and learning materials in Braille for the blind.

According to Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta, additional chief secretary, Panchayat Raj in Karnataka, this initiative is unique because it envisions the rural library as a knowledge centre: "For rural children, these libraries are more than just a repository of books. They provide access not only to books, but also to online resources; more importantly, they provide access to safe spaces for children to read, reflect, interact and learn."

Rural libraries are unique experiments to reimagine the education system supported by decentralised learning spaces for rural children. Along with a potential to harness Karnataka's rich traditions of intellectual discussions, literature and music, rural libraries are strategically placed to be a part of policy framework to leverage Karnataka's existing vantage at the centre of India's science and innovation economy. It can produce the next generation of leaders in science, literature, and culture.

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