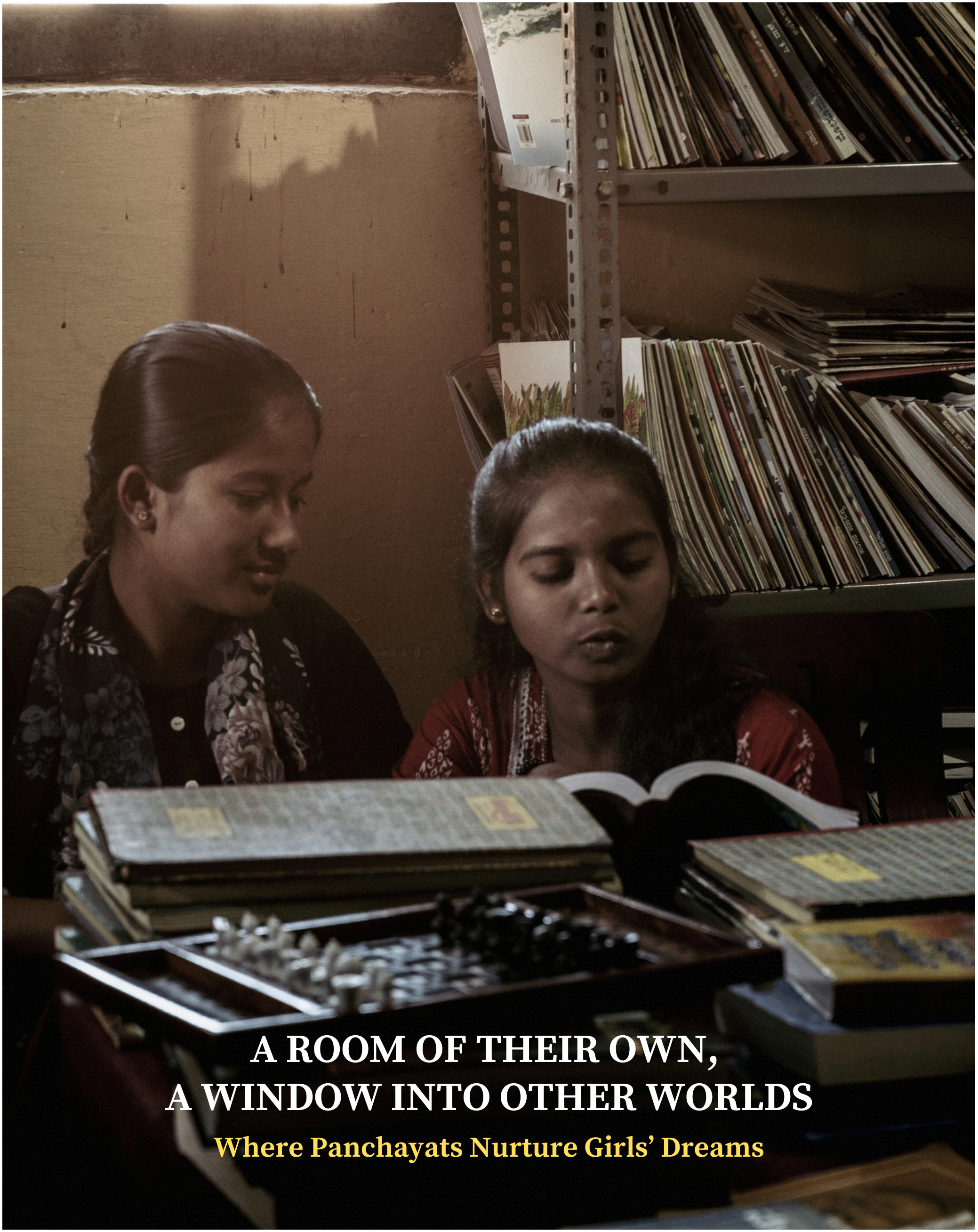


A ROOM OF THEIR OWN, A WINDOW INTO OTHER WORLDS

Where Panchayats Nurture Girls' Dreams

Three months ago, the Dummi public library found a new home.

For years, it operated from a rented room tucked away in another part of the village - far from many homes, difficult to access, cramped and poorly ventilated. The small space felt, as the girls describe it, "suffocating… there was barely enough room to sit and read," let alone accommodate a growing collection of books. Moving the library was not easy. The process itself took six months. Determined to make learning more accessible, a group of adolescent girls came together, drafted a letter to the Gram Panchayat President, and, with support from community members, met the Panchayat Development Officer (PDO) to put forth their request.

Today, the library stands in a more central location, close to the bus stop, and is open to everyone in the community. Yet for many girls, it is much more than a building.

It is a sanctuary.

A place where they can sit in silence, think, read, and dream, beyond the boundaries of everyday life. In villages where adolescent girls often lack access to safe and inclusive spaces, the library has become a rare and precious commons - one that welcomes the young, the elderly, and anyone seeking knowledge, rest, or community.

"For us girls, this place holds a lot of meaning and possibilities," they say.

Chandana treasures the library because it provides the quiet she needs to prepare for examinations. For Dikshita, it is a doorway to books beyond the school curriculum. Her favourites are stories such as Ajjiya Kathegalu - grandmother's tales that carry the wisdom of generations rooted in oral traditions.

Jyoti eagerly talks about Premchandara Kathegalu and Kannada folk stories. Fifteen-year-old Archana speaks with curiosity about Karnataka's integration into the Indian Union in 1956. "I found a book in this library that helped me become better informed about our history," she says. Nayana is drawn to stories of British rule in India, while Parvati delights in folk narratives such as Bhagyada Balegara (The Bangle Seller of Fortune), which offers a glimpse into the social fabric of rural Karnataka. She also enjoys horror fiction, she says, giggling, including Toda Mattu Nari (The Fox and the Wolf).





Together, their reading interests reveal the many worlds that coexist on the library shelves - history and folklore and imagination, memory and aspiration.

The girls describe the library as a window into other worlds.

Yet the change it is nurturing is not only individual. It is shared. “It feels like we are trying to build a caring community within the panchayat here," says Dikshita.

Books also often travel beyond the library walls. If elderly grandparents cannot visit, the girls bring home stories and read them aloud. Younger siblings gather to listen. Soumya recalls borrowing a cookbook for her mother so she could try new recipes. Reading becomes a shared activity that connects generations and strengthens a kind of fellowship.

The library itself serves multiple purposes. Located near the bus stop, it is also a waiting place, a resting place, and a meeting point. It opens in the morning and again in the afternoon.

Community members can borrow books using their government ID card and take them home after signing the register.

Today, around 150 adolescent girls from seven villages across Dummi Gram Panchayat regularly access the library. Total membership has grown to 550 people, the librarian informs.

Yet challenges remain.

The building requires small but important repairs. The roof leaks during rain, and additional windows are needed to improve natural light and ventilation. Girls are keen on a second public library in another village to ensure that more children, girls, and families can benefit from such a space.

These girls are not merely asking for books. They are asking for spaces where they can gather safely, learn together, nurture curiosity, and participate in community life on equal terms. Rural public libraries, then, are not simply repositories of books, but living institutions that foster learning, belonging, intergenerational exchange, and democratic access to knowledge.




1000 ಮಾತಿನ
ಪ್ರೇಮದ ಅನ್ವಯಕ್ಕೆ
ಶ್ರೀಮತಿ ಬಚ್ಚಂ.ಬಸಂ

ಕನ್ನಡದ ಸಂಕ್ಷಿಪ್ತ ಇತಿಹಾಸ

ಡಾ॥ ಎಚ್. ಎನ್. ಗೋಪಾಲ ರಾವ್

Across Karnataka, the revitalisation of Rural Public Libraries has emerged as a flagship initiative of the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (RDPR) Department. In places such as Dummi, its impact is already visible: in the confidence of adolescent girls actively exercising their voice and agency in the decisions that affect their lives, their families, and their communities.

This transformation did not happen in a vacuum. It emerged through The Hunger Project's girls' responsive panchayat programme, which works closely with women leaders and service providers in the panchayats and supports adolescent girls in engaging constructively with local governance institutions and in shaping decisions that affect their lives.

Rather than remaining passive recipients of services, the girls are learning how panchayat systems work, identifying gaps in their communities, and collectively approaching panchayat members and officials to seek resolutions. The relocation of the library is one such example. They came together, articulated their concerns, wrote to the gram panchayat president, and followed up with the PDO. Their desire and determination helped ensure that the panchayat responded to a need that mattered not only to them but also to the wider community.

The library, therefore, represents more than improved access to books. It is evidence of a responsive local governance system in action - one where adolescent girls' voices and aspirations are recognised. Through this process, the girls are strengthening both their own leadership and the accountability of local institutions.

Sometimes, a library is more than a room filled with books.

Sometimes, it is where a community learns together to imagine and build.



Sometimes, a library is more than a room filled with books.

Sometimes, it is where a community learns together to imagine and build.





