

# Kerala Grandhasalasangham and the Making of Kerala's Knowledge Economy: A Historical Analysis of Its Educational Contributions

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**Abstract**—Kerala Grandhasala Sangham has made an inevitable role in the attainment of Kerala Model Education Development. Puthuvayil Nayana Panicker (popularly known as P N Panicker) was the premier proponent of Library Movement in modern Kerala. He had a leading role in introducing and popularizing public libraries in each and every corner of the state. P N Panicker, through the Grandhasala Sangam, dedicated his life for promoting reading as well as acquisition of knowledge among the common people of Kerala. Grandhasalas (libraries) became the public space that triggered the quest for freedom in the Kerala society. This article discusses the role of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham in the making of Modern Kerala and the dedications of P.N Panicker in introducing the first version of the “knowledge economy” in the public sphere of the Kerala state, India. Grandhasalas have a significant role in awakening the minds of deprived people about the right for equality in the dark period of the state and played a pivotal role in making aware of the strength of unity among the lower class. The ceaseless efforts of the father of library movement of the state P N Panicker and Grandhasalasangam in reviving the minds of Kerala society through the torch light of letters can never be forgotten.

**Index Terms**—Kerala Grandhasala Sangham, P N Panicker, pathfinder, public libraries, reading centers, knowledge economy, educational contributions, literacy activities

## I. INTRODUCTION

The role of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham is monumental in the history of the educational development of the state. Public libraries became a

secular democratic space for the excluded to share their knowledge and experience in the caste hierarchical Kerala society. They paved a way to make them aware of their rights. The first public library in Kerala was introduced by Swathithirunal in the year 1829 (Vijayan, 2009). It was the first public library in the country also. The history and the popularity of public libraries in the state are on one occasion with the National Movement. The great vision of Swathithirunal on the cultural and educational empowerment of the people was planned by providing free education and setting up of libraries in many places of Travancore. Travancore public library then organized under a registered society during 1898 and gradually acknowledged by government (Vijayan, 2009). In 1900 during the time of Sreemoolam Thirunal it was opened for public in own building. The library became managed and run by Travancore Grandhasala and worked as University Library after the formation of Thiruvithamcore University in 1938. In 1948 government take the ownership and in 1959 it was upgraded by the central library of the state. In 1945 the representatives of forty-seven libraries of Travancore assembled at P K library Ampalappuzha and decided to form Akhila Thiruvithamkoor Grandhasala Sangham (Unnikrishnan, 2018) which was the earlier form of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham. After the unification of Travancore and Cochin provinces it became Thiru-Kochi Grandhasala Sangham. In 1958, after the formation of Kerala state by the amalgamation of three provinces –Travancore, Cochin and Malabar then originated Kerala Grandhasala Sangham in today's form.

Tracing out the contributions of public libraries in the educational development of the Kerala State of India cannot be separated from the public life of the people in the state and of the entire nation. Kerala Grandhasala Sangham was tagged in our public life in two perceptions, one as a part of agrarian labor organization activities and the second as a part of teacher organization activities. The present article tries to trace out how Kerala Grandhasala Sangham and P N Panicker acted as a catalyst in the educational development of the state.

#### Meaning and Functions of 'Grandhasala'

Grandhasala is the corresponding Malayalam term for the English word library, literally public library. 'Sala' means, a center or collection and 'Grandha' means book. In the present article the word 'Grandhasala' meant for public library, common space for people to collect books irrespective of all disparities of job, education, social status, etc. The period of evolution of Grandhasalas mentioned in the article was from early 1800 A.D to 2000 and the geographic area demonstrated here are the three provinces such as Travancore, Cochin and Malabar before the formation of the state. Gradually the geographic area happens to be the Kerala state, while sketching the contributions of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham for the total Literacy Campaign and Adult Education. The phrase Grandhasala Sangam means Cooperative Organisation of libraries.

The crux idea behind the formation of Grandhasalas in the three provinces was that they will certainly act as a triggering force of the National Movement (Vijayan, 2009). According to Sivadasan (2022) public libraries in Malabar were worked limitlessly for educating the deprived class (kudiyanmar) and gradually those libraries became adult education and non-formal education centers. Therefore, Grandhasalas became a center for gathering the public irrespective of all disparities, sensitized people towards nationalism and provide the arena of knowledge for the common people.

#### Relevance of studying role of Grandhasalas on Education Perception

Kerala Grandhasala Sangham and its efforts were very accountable by giving a scope to educate marginalized people and also holistic in spreading education in the three provinces of the state. The Grandhasalas were

remarkable in educating the peasants and peasant labors and then to liberate themselves from the chains of caste feudalism (in Kerala feudalism was called Janmi-Kutiyaan system). Therefore, Grandhasalas were pedestal in making education popular and value oriented. The role of Grandhasalas in breaking the deep roots of many social denials and social routines were worthwhile in directing the formation of a democratic society. Therefore, it's important in studying the background and the efforts of Grameena Grandhasalas (village libraries) in light up the minds of Kerala society as a whole.

#### II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To trace an outline of the historical background of Grandhasalas in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar Provinces before the formation of Kerala state
2. To sketch the efforts of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham in Literacy Campaign and Adult education endeavor in Kerala

#### III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study adopted a qualitative historical research design to examine the educational and socio-cultural contributions of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham in the making of modern Kerala. The study mainly depended on document analysis, textual analysis, and field notes as the primary methods of data collection. The qualitative approach was found suitable because the study intended to interpret historical developments, educational interventions, literacy activities, and the socio-cultural influence of the library movement in Kerala rather than measuring variables quantitatively.

#### Sources of Data

The study used both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary sources included archival records, reports of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham, official publications, conference proceedings, literacy campaign documents, and writings related to P. N. Panicker and the library movement. Secondary sources included books, journal articles, research studies, biographies, and scholarly writings related to Kerala renaissance, adult education, literacy campaigns, and public library movements in Kerala.

**Document Analysis**

Document analysis was employed as the major method to trace the historical evolution of Grandhasalas in Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar regions and to identify the educational interventions of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham. Historical records, organizational reports, government documents, literacy campaign materials, and publications such as Grandhalokam were critically analyzed to understand the objectives, functioning, and educational role of the Sangham. The documents were examined systematically to identify recurring themes related to literacy, democratization of knowledge, women empowerment, adult education, and cultural development.

**Textual Analysis**

Textual analysis was used to interpret the meanings, ideas, and educational perspectives reflected in books, articles, speeches, memoirs, and publications associated with the library movement. The method helped to understand how Grandhasalas functioned as democratic spaces for knowledge sharing, social awakening, and cultural transformation. The analysis focused particularly on the educational philosophy underlying the literacy movement and the role of

libraries in promoting social equality and participatory education in Kerala.

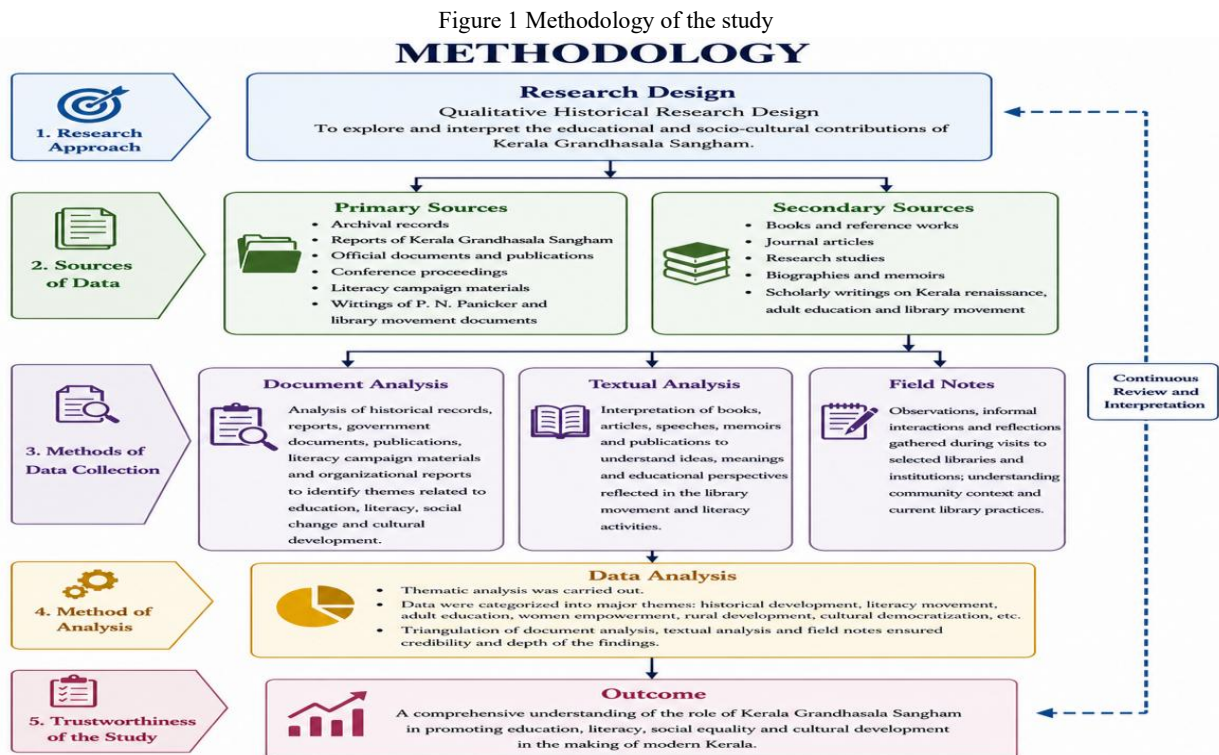
**Field Notes**

Field notes were prepared based on observations, informal interactions, and reflections gathered during visits to selected libraries and related institutions connected with Kerala Grandhasala Sangham. The field notes helped the researcher understand the continuing relevance of public libraries in local communities, their social environment, and their educational activities. These observational insights supplemented the documentary evidence and enhanced the contextual understanding of the study.

**IV. METHOD OF ANALYSIS**

The collected data were analyzed thematically. The researcher categorized the information into themes such as historical development of libraries, literacy movement, adult education, women empowerment, rural educational development, and cultural democratization. Triangulation of documentary evidence, textual interpretations, and field observations was employed to ensure credibility and authenticity of the findings.

A graphical representation of the method adopted for this study is given in Figure 1



## V. HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT OF GRANDHASAS IN TRAVANCORE COCHIN AND MALABAR

Swathithirunal Maharaja assumed power of Travancore in 1829. He had a great vision on the cultural and educational empowerment of the people. Therefore, he determined and planned to provide free education and setting up of libraries in many places of Travancore. Col. Edward Cadogan, took initiative for the setting up of the Trivandrum Public Library who was also assumed as an Acting Resident on 26th December 1829 (Kurian, 1987). Travancore public library then organized under a registered society during 1898 and gradually acknowledged by the Travancore government. In 1900 during the legacy of Sreemoolam Thirunal Maharaja it was opened for public in own building. The library became managed and run by Travancore Grandhasala and worked as University Library after the formation of Thiruvithamcore University in 1938, it became then worked as university library (Vijayan, 2009). In 1948 government take the ownership of the library and in 1959 it was upgraded by the central library of the state. In 1945 the representatives of 47 libraries of Travancore assembled in the P K Memorial library Ambalappuzha with the initiation of P N Panicker. The conference decided to form Akhila Thiruvithamkood Grandhasala Sangham. In 1948 government take the ownership of the library and in 1959 it was upgraded by the central library of the state.

The state library movement was started with the establishment of the Trivandrum Public library and is the relevance of this library in the Indian Library Movement. Therefore, Thiruvithamcore public library has a leading role in the social, cultural and educational progress in princely state of Travancore, and mean while the development of Kerala state as a whole (Joseph,1990; Kurian,1987). The membership of Trivandrum public library was restricted. Dr Allan Brown, the Astronomer to Travancore government and the director of the Observatory took initiative for the establishment of People's Library in Trivandrum and it came into existence before 1878. In 1899 People's Library merged into Trivandrum Public library (Kurian, 1987).

In 1898 due to the advice of the then British Resident Mr. Grigg Trivandrum Public Library was open to the public. This event is analogous to as unique as the

Kerala Temple-Entry Proclamation. He states that in 1898, during the reign of Maharaja Sree Moolam Thirunal and fifty years before the dawn of Indian independence in the country the common people of Trivandrum were allowed entry into this Temple of knowledge. After the formation of University of Travancore, it was under the control of university. Even though a separate library came into existence for university in 1942, Travancore Library continued under the control of university for another seven years (Joseph, 1990; Kurian, 1987; Vargese,1979). Then after during the year 1956 - 57 the library was converted into State Central Library.

Many reading centers were set up in Cochin province during the second stage of National movement. Ernakulam public library and Thrissur public library were established in 1869 and 1873 respectively. The Victoria reading room and library established in 1899 in Irinjalakkuda became Mahathma vayanashala. Kodungalloor public library, Cherayi public library and Trissur Yogakshemam library were situated in 1912, 1914 and 1915 respectively. Number of public libraries gradually increased in here and there of the province within short time span. From 1925 onwards many Grameena vyanasalas were established here and there on the province aiming to popularize the Adult Education Scheme planned by Kochin Government and Panambilli Govinda Menon took initiative to upgrade Grameena Vyanasalas under the organization of board of Grandhasalasangham as he was in Cochin Ministry. Dr A R Menon took a constructive role in starting libraries in every village of Cochin state, when he was the minister of Rural Development (Vijayan, 2009; Panicker, 1949).

From the first decades of the 20th century onwards there were many libraries in Malabar district. Grandhasala Movement in Malabar also worked hand in hand with National movement. Sanmarga Darshini in 1929 at Kozhikode and Aikya Kerala Grandhasala in 1937 were formed as an initiation of freedom fighters. Adult education centers and non-formal education centers over time became libraries. Shri Harshan Library Kannur was one of those libraries which did more in Adult Education and Nationalism. Shri K. P. R. Gopala and Shri K. A. Keraliyan were the founders of the library. The library was started in memory of Harshan of Kannur who died in jail during

the nationalistic movement in 1934. Moreover, most among them worked for wiping out the social evil practices prevailed in the society during that time such as untouchability, social exclusion and exploitation and so on. A.K Gopalan, K.A.Keraleeyan, K.P.R Gopalan, K. Damodaran, Cherukad etc. were in the leading position for the establishment of libraries. Thozhilali library and reading room Chovva in 1929, Thozhilali Yuvajanavayanashala Kannur in 1934, Karshaka Grandhasala Kunnukuzhi Vayoor in 1940, Karshakamitram and Reading room Nedumangad in 1951, Karshakasangham library and vayanashala Areekkode Angadi in 1955, Karshaka vayanashala Chennalode, Kalpetta in 1957, Young Farmers Club Library Koliyoor, Kasargode in 1958, and Karshakamitram Grandhasala Vandanmed in 1958 are some of them. Engandiyoor Grameena Vayanashala in 1914 and Sreenarayanavilasam library- Panagode in 1919 were formed under the initiative of Sree Narayana Guru's disciples (Vijayan, 2009; Unnikrishnanan, 2018).

Malabar Vayanashala Sangham was formed in 1937, June 11, under the chairmanship of Malabar District Board President K. Kelappan as a part of first Malabar Vayanashala Conference of library activists of Malabar. E. Raman Menon was selected as president and K. Damoran as secretary of the sangham and M.K Kelu, Moyyarath Sankaran , K.P.R Gopalan , A Balagopal , Kozhippurath Madhava Menon , V.R Nayanar were in the governing body. Malabar Vayanashala Conference proclaimed that all Grandhasalas should work for social progress by improving their activities. Grandhasalas worked as a lighthouse in the educational development of the State. Grameena Grandhasalas make the illiterate people aware of the value of education and also make sense the literate people about the urgency of expanding the education they got.

The contributions of Grandhasalas in the educational and cultural development of Kerla can be studied in the following perceptions

- Make informal, none formal, and continuing education education popular, democratic, and accessible
- Promote reading among the public as a part of social life

- Make conscience among people about Mother tongue
- Make the field of art and literature alive
- Main framing women
- Main role in the character formation of the children

## VI. FORMATION OF GRANDHASALASANGHAM

In 1945 the representatives of 47 libraries of Travancore assembled in the P K Memorial library Ambalappuzha with the initiation of P N Panicker. The conference decided to form Akhila Thiruvithamkoor Grandhasala Sangham which was the early form of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham and in 1947 the sangham registered under Travancore Company Act of 1939. Akhila Thiruvithamkoor Grandhasala Sangham extended its activities to Cochin and Malabar areas and after Thiru-Kochi clubbing it became Thiru-Kochi Grandhasala Sangham. Kerala Grandhasala Sangham was established in 1958 (Joseph,1990; Panicker,1982) by incorporating the libraries of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, after the formation of Kerala state in 1956.Panambilli Govinda Menon and P.N Panicker were selected respectively as first the president and Secretary of the Sangham

## VII. EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS OF KERALA GRANDHASALASANGHAM

Literacy campaign and efforts to achieve total literacy of the Kerala state is the most important contribution of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham. The motto of New Literacy, 'learn to write and be strong' was formed by P N Panicker and Grandhasala Sangham released three short books namely Literacy Reader Book (Saksharatha Padavali). An organization named Kerala Association for Non-Formal Education and Development (KANFED) was established to accelerate the literacy activities and P N Panicker was selected as Secretary of KANFED. Moreover, KANFED did its best to the Total Literacy Campaign by working as State Resource Center and in 1978; to boost literacy it organized an on-foot possession from one end to another end of the state (Puthukkode, 2014). The educational offerings of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham are briefly discussed below.

1. Nursery School
2. Popularizing Hindi Language
3. Women Wing
4. Agricultural Books Corner
5. Bell Bicycle Project
6. Literary Studies
7. Malayala Maha Nighantu
8. Harijan Libraries
9. SSLC (10<sup>th</sup> standard in school) Condensed course

#### 1. Nursery school

Nursery schools were established by the Sangham as a continuity of Child Book Corner and the basic idea behind it was Read and Grow. The most important thing here was that in 1979 in connection with International Child Year Grandhasala Sangham control board started a separate child section in thousand libraries. Therefore, Sangham took efforts to sow the minds of blooming buds and thus became a backbone of the educational development of Kerala state.

#### 2. Popularizing Hindi Language

In 1961 Kerala Grandhasala Sangham received the financial assistance given by the central government to the non-governmental organization for their educational and cultural pursuit. The Sangham started Hindi section in one of its publications namely Grandhalokam. Sangham initiated to publish articles of popular Hindi scholars and also bought many Hindi books for libraries for the popularization of Hindi language.

#### 3. Women Wing

In 1975 UN declared International Year for Women but before that Grandhasala Sangham started a Literacy Centers for women to enlighten them through the fire of letters. Sangham formed its women wing to organize programs for empowering women and coordinate those programs in district wise. Women wing organized discussions and conferences to attract more women in libraries and contributed for their social development.

#### 4. Agricultural Books Corner

It was a joint venture of Kerala Institute for Languages (Kerala Bhasha Institute), Farm Information Bureau and Kerala Grandhasala Sangham. The project was intended to collect and distribute books of Agricultural

Knowledge to the farmers in simple language and thus helped to move the rural libraries towards the world of science.

#### 5. Bell Bicycle Project

The concept of the project was door-to door system of the library books. The project attracted more women towards books and thus became a candle light in the social and cultural development of those sidelined people.

#### 6. Literary Studies

Kerala Grandhasala Sangham organized study classes for literature to the interested people. The famous Malayala literary Sooranad Kunjan Pilla was the director of the program and the classes were led by various Malayalam scholars like S Gupthan Nair, N V Krishna Variar, N Krishna Pilla, Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri, P T Bhaskara Panicker etc. In other words, Grandhasala Sangham helped to make interest on Malayalam literature and cultural studies among the people of Kerala.

#### 7. Malayala Maha Nighantu

Progressive works on developing Nighantu (Dictionary) for Malayalam language. The lexicon-oriented work was a great venture

#### 8. Harijan Libraries

The government department of Harijan welfare established seventy-two Harijan libraries in state wise but most of them lack of minimum facilities. Then Kerala Grandhasala Sangham put forward a project proposal to the state government regarding the rejuvenation of those libraries and government accepted the project and transfers the control of Harijan libraries to Kerala Grandhasala Sangham. Kerala Grandhasala Sangham took efforts to improve the facilities of those libraries, constructed new buildings for them which had no rooms of their own, distributed books for Harijan libraries and succeeded in making them alive to a certain extent. Thus, Kerala Grandhasala Sangham has determinant role in the uplift of the marginalized people by igniting their mind into the aurora of letters.

#### 9. Condensed course

In 1975-76 periods Kerala Grandhasala Sangham coordinated a project carried out by Social Welfare

Department of Central government for the illiterate women in the age group of eighteen to thirty for qualifying them State School Leaving Certificate (SSLC). The project mainly focused on women among backward community. Moreover, vocational training on book binding, weaving and like were given as a part of this project. Thus, Kerala Grandhasala Sangham had constructive role for the development of the women and other marginalized group by offering them educational and vocational training.

#### VIII. CONTRIBUTIONS OF KERALA GRANDHASALA SANGHAM IN THE TOTAL LITERACY CAMPAIGN OF KERALA

Kerala Grandhasala Sangham has key role in the Total Literacy Campaign of Kerala state, India. Kerala Grandhasala Sangham took the responsibility of the working approach Literacy project of central government in the 1970-1971 periods. The pilot project was proposed to start in two sites such as Athiyannoor block in Thiruvananthapuram district and in Malappuram. Sangham was succeeded in preparing the public to learn, in starting learning centers and organizing training for the campaigners were under the leadership of popular scholars.

In 1971 November 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, as a part of campaign, sangham organized a Literacy March in the ten selected learning centers. The pedagogic practices were planned with reference to the culture and context of the learners such that most of the learners in Athiyannoor block were lived on fisheries (Sathyan, 2012). Grandhasala Sangam played key role in the total literacy mission of Kerala state in 1989. The state achieved 100% literacy by this programme. Sangham was acknowledged with UNESCO Krupuskaya award given to the contributions for the literacy, named after Soviet Russian politician Nadezhda K Krupuskaya.

#### IX. CONCLUSION

Kerala Grandhasala Sangham occupies a unique position in the educational and cultural history of Kerala. The study reveals that the library movement in Kerala was not merely an institutional effort to promote reading habits, but a transformative social movement that democratized knowledge and empowered marginalized communities. Public

libraries emerged as inclusive public spaces where people from different castes, classes, and social backgrounds could access knowledge, participate in discussions, and cultivate social awareness.

The contributions of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham were multidimensional. The Sangham played a decisive role in strengthening non-formal and adult education, promoting literacy campaigns, supporting women's education, encouraging rural learning practices, and nurturing literary and cultural consciousness among the common people. Its interventions such as literacy campaigns, women wings, nursery schools, agricultural book corners, Harijan libraries, and condensed educational courses significantly contributed to the educational advancement of deprived sections of society. The efforts of P. N. Panicker and other library activists transformed libraries into instruments of social change and educational awakening.

The study also highlights that the success of Kerala's literacy movement and participatory educational culture cannot be understood without recognizing the historical role of Grandhasalas. The Sangham laid the foundation for a knowledge-oriented society by extending educational opportunities beyond formal schooling. In this sense, Kerala Grandhasala Sangham acted as a precursor to the knowledge economy and lifelong learning culture that later became characteristic features of Kerala's development model. The findings of the study indicate that the philosophy and practices of Kerala Grandhasala Sangham remain highly relevant in the contemporary educational context. At a time when societies face challenges related to declining reading habits, social fragmentation, and unequal access to knowledge, the democratic and community-centred model of Grandhasalas offers valuable lessons for educational planning and cultural development. Therefore, further studies may explore the role of public libraries in digital literacy, community learning, and inclusive educational development in present-day Kerala.

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