Documentation of Good Practices
For
Samahita project

Prepared by

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This document is a testament to the power of community-driven development, and I hope it serves as a resource and inspiration for similar initiatives elsewhere.

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Abbreviations

Antyodaya Gruha Yojana - AGY
Civil Society Organisations – CSOs
Community-Based Organizations – CBO
Community-Based Rehabilitation – CBR
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - CRPD
District Industrial Centre - DIC
District Level Federation - DLF
District Mental Health Programme - DMHP
Field Level health Workers – FLWs
Fun and Learning Centres – FLCs
International Day of Persons with Disabilities – IDPD
Krishi Vigyan Kendra - KVK
Madhu Babu Pension Yojana - MBPY
Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act – MGNREGA
Making It Work – MIW
National Mental Health Programme – NMHP
Non-governmental organizations – NGOs
Other Backward Caste - OBC
Organizations of Persons with Disabilities – OPDs
Odisha PVTG Empowerment & Livelihood Improvement Programme – OPELIP
Odisha Livelihoods Mission - OLM
Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society - ORMAS
Panchayat Raj Institutions – PRIs
Primary Health Centre – PHC
Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme - PMEGP
Rural Self Employment Training Institute - RSETI
Self-Help Groups – SHGs
Scheduled Caste – SC
Scheduled Tribe – ST
Village development Committee – VDC

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Introduction

SAMAHITA is a collaborative initiative of EKTA, SADHANA, SMRC and Handicap International, supported by the European Union. SAMAHITA promotes gender and disability inclusive governance by strengthening Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) effective participation in local development processes. The project is implemented across six districts in Odisha, Puri, Ganjam, Gajapati, Koraput, Rayagada and Mayurbhanj and aims to empower 845 CSOs over a period of 36 months.

The intervention focuses on CSOs' empowerment through (a) Building the capacities of CSOs comprising men and women with and without disabilities, including scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities, as well as youth; (b) Fostering partnerships among CSOs to recognize and address intersectional discrimination and encourage collaborative action; (c) Networking with government organisations and agencies for various collaborative initiatives.

One of the core activities of the project is the collection and documentation of 35 good practices identified at the community level, using the Making It Work (MIW) methodology[1]. These practices are intended to help partner organizations adopt more inclusive and accessible approaches to development.

This document compiles good practices from the SAMAHITA project's operational area, offering an evidence-based resource that highlights key challenges, success factors, and actionable insights. It aims to support the replication, improvement, and scaling of effective approaches while fostering learning, informed decision-making, and inclusive policy development.

Methodology

Following the MIW methodology, the good practices were identified by partner organizations through a process of multi-stakeholder engagement and consensus-building around common criteria. These criteria include the **achievement of positive changes**, recognition of **diversity and intersectionality, leadership of women and girls**, and a **strong focus on gender equity**. Effective collaboration with authorities across all levels (panchayat to national), as well as with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), private sector actors, and financial institutions, was also a key factor. The potential for scaling up each practice was considered essential to ensure wider impact and sustainability.

Qualitative methods were adopted to document the good practices, ensuring a comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of the interventions. The study team conducted field visits and stakeholder consultations across 43 locations in 6 districts covered by the initiative. During these visits, interactions were held with a wide range of stakeholders, including persons with disabilities, SHG of women, community members, and OPD representatives, to gain diverse perspectives.

Data was gathered using tailored tools such as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Structured Interviews, designed to capture in-depth qualitative insights. After data collection, a rigorous analysis was conducted to interpret the findings and extract meaningful conclusions. A multi-stakeholder committee which is named as MIW Committee which is played a crucial role in finalising these good

[1] https://www.makingitwork-crpd.org/our-work/miw-methodology

practices documentation by reviewing, analysing and selecting the good practices. The insights were then synthesized into this comprehensive document that highlights the good practices. This report along with three video documentaries serves as a record of impactful community-based interventions and as a resource for learning, reflection, and potential replication in similar contexts.

1. Collective action by the Chilikashree Caregiver Group to support individuals with psychosocial disability

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on social protection*
Organisation *- Chilikashree Caregiver Group, Berhampur village, Puri district*
Target groups *- Caregivers, Persons with Mental Health Conditions, Government Line Departments, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), NGOs, and Mental Health Advocacy Groups*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, Effective collaboration with Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Field Level Health Workers (FLWs)*

Introduction

Psychosocial disability is a major public health issue that remains widely misunderstood and neglected due to stigma, limited resources, and weak healthcare systems. Like any other condition, it requires proper care and treatment. Inclusive social protection is essential to ensure individuals with mental health conditions and their families can access the support and opportunities needed to live with dignity and fully participate in society.

Berhampur is a remote island village in Krushna Prasad block, Puri district, Odisha, surrounded by Chilika Lake and accessible only by boat. Located 51 km from Puri, it has over 2,200 residents, with majority belonging to the Scheduled Castes community.

The village is home to 20 individuals with mental health conditions, highlighting the need for inclusive services and accessible care. These individuals often faced stigma and social exclusion, fuelled by misconceptions that they are violent or dangerous. With limited access to professional mental health support, families commonly rely on untrained practitioners or traditional healers. While these approaches are grounded in cultural traditions, they did not always align with individuals' specific needs and occasionally resulted in unintentional harm.

Intervention

As part of SAMAHITA's project intervention, the implementing partner EKTA, with support from the community and frontline health workers, identified individuals with mental health conditions in



Figure 1 Consultation with mental health professional, Puri

Berhampur and adopted a person-centred approach to support them and their families. The field staff of EKTA provided home-based counselling and psychosocial support, helping caregivers understand the potential for recovery. Though initially hesitant, carers eventually brought individuals with mental health conditions for assessment and treatment at the District Mental Health Programme (DMHP) in Puri.



Figure 2 Chilikashree Carer Group meeting

Regular medication led to visible improvements, encouraging continued adherence. Seeing the improvement, carers became interested in getting medicines. But travelling to Puri for medicines provided free of cost by the government was difficult and buying them in medical shops was unaffordable. EKTA suggested forming a group to ease access to medicines and provide support. Thus, the Chilika Shree Carer Group was formed with six caregivers, which enabled collective action. The group later expanded to ten members (seven women and three men) all from Scheduled Caste communities, with ages ranging from 35 to 80 years. EKTA trained carers to build practical skills, ensure treatment adherence, and provide consistent, compassionate, and informed support. Workshops were held in collaboration with departments like Health and Social Welfare to strengthen support systems for individuals with mental conditions and their families.

Depending on the condition of the person with mental health issues, consent is taken. In most cases, especially during the initial stages of intervention, consent is obtained from caregivers. However, once the individual's mental health improves and stabilizes, they are encouraged to actively participate in meetings and attend training sessions, gradually becoming more involved in decisions concerning their care and development.

The Chilika Shree Carer Group has played a vital role in supporting individuals with psychosocial disabilities by monitoring their health, facilitating access to disability certificates, pensions and welfare schemes, and ensuring availability of psychiatric medicines at the nearest Primary Health Centre (PHC). The group also works to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and promote a more informed and inclusive environment for individuals with mental health conditions.

Most significant changes

The intervention brought significant improvements to the mental health ecosystem in

Berhampur village by reducing stigma, improving treatment access, and strengthening community support.

"Earlier, we could not identify people with mental health conditions. With the help of the SAMAHITA project, we were able to identify them. With their help, we were able to provide appropriate medication and care to improve their health.
Sanghamitra Jena, Anganwadi worker

Awareness and sensitization efforts led to a noticeable reduction in stigma, encouraging open conversations about mental health and reducing discrimination. Early identification and support improved as community actors like ASHA workers, Anganwadi staff, and OPD members became more proactive in referring individuals for care.

Access to treatment and medication has become more consistent and affordable thanks to the advocacy efforts of the Chilika Shree Carer Group. Their initiative ensured the availability of psychiatric medicines at the Satapada Primary Health Centre (PHC). Under this arrangement, a single representative carer is designated to collect medicines on behalf of all individuals with mental health conditions in the community. This system has significantly reduced the time, effort, and expenses involved, making treatment access more consistent, affordable, and convenient for both carers and their families.

"My husband Sukant Behera has struggled with mental health issues for 35 years. We faced many challenges and sought treatment from various places, including Ayurvedic centres and local healers, spending a lot and even selling my jewellery. At one point, a local healer assaulted him, which led to further conflict. We had lost all hope. Due to SAMAHITA staff's encouragement, we finally took him to a hospital in Puri where he received proper treatment and regular medication. His condition has improved significantly; he no longer wanders away and stays home."
Kamma Behera, Caregiver

"Earlier, I couldn't do my own work and used to live alone in the house. I would talk to myself, abuse others, feel restless, cry, and laugh without any reason. After I started taking medicine, I can now do my own work, manage household chores, interact, smile, and talk with others. By taking my regular medicine, I am able to do all my activities properly."
Kusum Jena, Woman with psychosocial disability

The group also helped individuals with mental health conditions access government schemes such as pensions, disability certificates, and health benefits, promoting dignity and inclusion. A strong sense of solidarity among caregivers has emerged, with members sharing responsibilities and supporting one another emotionally and practically.

"My husband Kishor Mallik is highly educated and has double masters' degrees. However, he could not find a proper job even after being so educated. This led him to depression and affected his mental health. He also has obsessive compulsive disorder. He did not get himself treated which worsened the situation over time. The intervention by the Chilika Shree Carer Group helped in getting a certificate of disability and also a pension for my husband. Since I cannot move out of the

house, I run a petty shop from my house itself to get some income. With the pension coming in, we are better off economically."

Sundari Mallik, Caregiver

A strong sense of unity among caregivers has also emerged. Members of the Chilika Shree Carer Group now support one another by sharing responsibilities such as accompanying patients, collecting medicines, and offering emotional support, ensuring the continuity and quality of care within the community.

Berhampur village has proven that with proper awareness and treatment, psychosocial disability can be managed, and individuals can be reintegrated into the mainstream of society.

Factors that made this practice successful

This mental health initiative succeeded through a combination of community awareness, training, therapeutic support, structured systems, and government linkages.

Training for mental health staff, carers, frontline workers and volunteers built essential skills, ensuring consistent and quality care. Therapeutic interventions, including home-based counselling, medical support, and referrals, addressed the diverse needs of people with mental health conditions and their families in an accessible, integrated way.

Regular meetings provided peer support, encouraged shared learning, and strengthened caregiver capacity. Community events such as Mental Health Day and Carers Day helped reduce stigma and promote inclusion by engaging families and stakeholders.

Finally, linking individuals and families to government schemes such as the DMHP under the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), Madhu Babu Pension Yojana (MBPY), and Antyodaya Gruha Yojana (AGY)[2] has ensured access to essential benefits, resources, and long-term support.

Challenges

Many caregivers of individuals with mental health conditions face serious challenges, particularly due to the lack of stable incomes. Most are landless and confined to their homes because of caregiving responsibilities, limiting their ability to seek employment. For families living in poverty, immediate survival needs often take precedence over mental health, which is frequently misunderstood or overlooked.

Access to mental health services remains limited, especially in remote areas where healthcare facilities are scarce and transportation is unreliable. The shortage of trained mental health professionals and the limited availability of psychiatric medications mean that many conditions go undiagnosed and untreated.

[2] Antyodaya Gruha Yojana (AGY) – A scheme by the Odisha state government to provide pucca houses for the underprivileged sections

Even when treatment is available through government programs like the DMHP, the supply of psychotropic drugs is often basic and insufficient. Many families cannot afford to buy medicines privately, leading to treatment interruptions and hindering recovery.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

Mental health interventions can be effectively expanded through strategic improvements. Strengthening relationships with mental health professionals through regular visits can enhance care beyond just medication. Simple digital tools such as mobile tracking systems can support treatment adherence and timely follow-up. Providing economic support to caregivers, particularly women from marginalized communities, is also essential. Linking them to livelihood schemes can help reduce financial strain and promote sustained caregiving. Additionally, periodic refresher training for carers and frontline health workers on rights-based care, psychosocial support, and crisis response can further build community capacity.

This practice can be effectively replicated in other resource-poor settings by mobilizing caregiver groups, strengthening local capacity, encouraging community participation, and partnering with Panchayati Raj Institutions and government schemes to ensure long-term sustainability.

2. Mother Teresa SHG - Empowering fisherwomen through diverse livelihoods

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programs*
Organisation *- Mother Teresa SHG, Khatisahi*
Target groups *– Women Self-Help Groups, Government Line Departments, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), NGOs*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, leadership of women and girls, effective collaboration with authorities like OLM/Mission Shakti*

Introduction

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are powerful platforms for empowering women, especially in rural areas. They promote inclusive livelihoods by empowering women and marginalized groups with access to credit, skills, and entrepreneurship support. Through diversified income-generating activities (IGAs) like food processing, tailoring, livestock rearing, petty shops, and eco-friendly products, SHGs enable sustainable income, reduce vulnerability, and foster local economic resilience.



Figure 3 Members of the Mother Teresa SHG

Khatisahi is a small village near Chilika Lake in Odisha, home to around 300 households and approximately 1,000 residents. The majority belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC) community and have traditionally depended on fishing and related activities for their livelihoods.

The village has a strong network of women's SHGs, with 18 active groups and 236 members. Among them, the Mother Teresa SHG has emerged as a leader in promoting alternative, community-led livelihood initiatives.

Formed in 2016 under the Odisha Livelihoods Mission (OLM), a flagship initiative of the Government of Odisha focused on enhancing rural livelihoods for women and marginalized communities, the Mother Teresa SHG consists of 11 active women members (aged 40–60 years). All members are from Scheduled Caste and BPL families. One member is a widow and education level of the group members range from 7th grade to graduation. Three members run small businesses while the rest are daily wage earners.

The group meets regularly, three to four times a month, to plan, review, and coordinate various community-based and income-generating activities. Each member contributes INR 100 per month to a shared savings account, which supports collective ventures, meets emergency needs, and fosters financial discipline.

Interventions

In 2018, the Mother Teresa SHG availed a loan of INR 50,000 from the District Level Federation (DLF) under the Mission Shakti initiative. This financial support enabled the group to diversify their income sources by setting up a range of small-scale enterprises in 2019. The members utilized the loan to start individual and group-based activities such as making snacks like mixture and *sattu*, goat rearing, and tailoring.

Mixture and Sattu making - Among the various income-generating activities initiated by the Mother Teresa SHG, the *dal* mixture making enterprise has emerged as a promising micro-business. Three members of the SHG are actively involved in this initiative, each playing a distinct role in the value chain. While one member prepares the mixture and *Sattu*, another is responsible for packaging, and the third handles sales and distribution.



Figure 4 Weighing and packaging mixture

The business began on a modest scale but has steadily grown through local demand and participation in events supported by the Odisha Livelihoods Mission (OLM). The products are sold through local shops and OLM stalls at community events and fairs, with sales peaking during festival seasons.

Both the dal mixture and *sattu* are priced at INR 140 per kilogram, and the group currently earns approximately INR 13,500 per month from this activity. This microenterprise has not only contributed significantly to the SHG members' income but has also helped strengthen individual skills in mixture production, marketing, and cooperative business management.



Figure 5 Goat rearing by women from Mother Teresa SHG

Goat rearing - In 2019, the Mother Teresa SHG took a loan of INR 1 lakh from the District Level Federation (DLF) under Mission Shakti to start goat rearing as a group enterprise. With this financial support, the group purchased seven goats to launch their livestock venture.

Over time, the SHG has successfully expanded their herd to approximately 40 goats, showcasing their capacity to manage and grow a sustainable, asset-based livelihood. On average, the group earns between INR 50,000 and INR 60,000 annually from goat sales. Demand peaks during festival seasons, when prices are higher, further boosting the group's income.

Other income generating activities - Tailoring is undertaken by two members of the SHG. It provides a modest but steady income of approximately INR 6,000 per month. Additionally, broom-making is carried out by another member of the group, further contributing to the SHG's diversified livelihood activities.

Most significant changes

The journey of the Mother Teresa SHG shows how diversifying income-generating activities can support better livelihoods. To manage irregular incomes, the group engaged in different livelihood activities, which helped bring more stability to their lives.

Goat rearing emerged as a low-maintenance, high-return activity, offering steady income even during lean agricultural seasons. Simultaneously, the production and sale of dal mixtures provided a consistent monthly earning of INR 4,000– INR 5,000 per member. These additional income streams not only reduced the group's dependence on any single source of livelihood but also brought about a sense of financial stability many had never experienced before.

For members like Kiran Prabha Jena, the impact has been deeply personal. "I have three children," she says. "I use my income for my children's education, buying fishing nets, my daughter's marriage, and for construction of my house." Her story reflects a broader transformation within the group, where increased income has translated into better education, improved housing, and a more secure future.

Beyond financial gains, the group members have also undergone significant skill development. Through their involvement in these enterprises, they have learned essential skills in food processing,

hygiene practices, packaging, and marketing. These experiences have not only equipped them to run successful microenterprises but have also instilled confidence and self-reliance.

Women in the group have developed strong decision-making capacity. They attend meetings, participate in skill development training (including through OLM), and carry out responsibilities independently. The SHG has a strong stance on girls' education. If girls do not attend school, families may lose access to community funds. The women's group actively monitors this and takes responsibility by informing the village committee when necessary.

Despite living in an isolated island village accessible only by boat, the women of the Mother Teresa SHG have carved out pathways to economic empowerment. Through entrepreneurship and diversification, they've strengthened their financial foundations and taken greater control over their lives. Alongside economic progress, their decision-making capacity has significantly improved. Their growing confidence is also reflected in their active participation in community issues, where they now voice their opinions and contribute to solutions.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of the Mother Teresa SHG's microenterprise initiative rested on several core factors. Regular meetings, trainings, and exposure to various institutions increased members' knowledge of government schemes and rights, empowering them to access services and entitlements. Skill development through local training in food processing, hygiene, packaging, and marketing empowered members to run small businesses confidently. Access to seed capital and bank loans allowed investment in livestock, raw materials, and infrastructure. Income diversification via dal mixture production and goat rearing reduced risk and ensured steady year-round earnings, boosting economic resilience. Strong community support helped market products and expanded the customer base. Finally, assigning roles based on skills and interests improved efficiency and inclusivity. Together, these factors created a strong foundation for the long-term success of the SHG's microenterprise initiative.

Challenges

Due to the remote location of Khatisahi, members of the Mother Teresa SHG face significant challenges in accessing competitive market rates for their goats. Although goat prices have steadily increased in urban and peri-urban markets, the group often has to sell to local middlemen at lower prices, which limits their overall income potential.

In the case of dal mixtures and sattu, SHG members face challenges such as limited access to modern processing technology, lack of quality packaging, and restricted market linkages due to their remote locations. These issues hinder overall profitability.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

The Mother Teresa SHG's success can be further improved and replicated by enhancing market access to secure better prices, especially for goat sales, by reducing reliance on middlemen. Adding value through improved processing and packaging of dal mixtures and other products can attract more customers and increase earnings. Ongoing training in financial literacy, digital marketing, and enterprise management can further empower members to

manage and scale their microenterprises. Expanding access to affordable credit or grants will enable SHGs to invest in higher-quality inputs, larger stock, and better infrastructure. Encouraging diversification based on local resources and strengthening community networks for collective marketing and shared learning will also support long-term success.

By focusing on these areas, the Mother Teresa SHG model can be improved for greater impact and successfully replicated in other communities seeking sustainable livelihoods.

3. Maa Duarasuni SHG's path to empowerment through *Kirtan*

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programs*
Organisation *- Maa Duarasuni SHG, Gangadharapur*
Target groups *– SHGs and community-based organizations, Local government and development agencies*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, leadership of women and girls*

Introduction

Women from marginalized communities, particularly those historically labelled as "untouchables", continue to face multiple and intersecting barriers such as social exclusion, limited mobility, lack of economic opportunities, and minimal access to platforms for self-expression.

Located in the Brahmagiri block of Puri district in Odisha, the village of Gangadharapur is predominantly inhabited by families from the Scheduled Castes (SC) community. Fishing and related occupations form the backbone of the village economy. However, in recent years, a steady decline in fish catch has led to growing economic insecurity among the villagers who traditionally depended on fishing and ferrying people in their boats as their primary sources of livelihood.

Formed in 2001, the Maa Duarasuni Fisherwomen SHG is one of the oldest women's groups in the village. It comprises 12 members and was established with the core objective of economically empowering its women members. The group consists of women aged between 38 and 59 years, all from Scheduled Caste (SC) backgrounds and Below Poverty Line (BPL) households. One member is unmarried. Initially, many of these women made their living by selling fish door-to-door in neighbouring villages. But as fishing-related activities dwindled, the group began seeking alternative means of income.

Intervention

Kirtan is a traditional form of devotional singing that combines music, storytelling, and spirituality. It is typically performed in groups and involves the chanting or singing of sacred hymns. The Maa Duarasuni Fisherwomen SHG members decided to take up *kirtan* singing four years ago, recognizing that it not only enriches the cultural and spiritual life of the community but also holds the potential to generate income for the group. That's how their journey began.



Figure 6 Kirtan singing by Maa Duarasuni SHG members

The 10-member *kirtan* group includes several SHG members. This group includes three male members, a lead vocalist and two instrumentalists, while the remaining seven participants are women from the SHG. The SHG members learned *kirtan* from some locals over the course of four months.

In October 2021, the *kirtan* group went to Puri and performed at the Lord Jagannath Temple over two days. A few months later, they performed at an *Ashtaprahari* (a 24-hour devotional event) in a nearby village called Banamalipur, where they earned INR 2,000. They observed that people showed them respect and that they were also receiving money for their singing. This encouraged them further and strengthened their motivation.

The group gets invited to events in the village and neighbouring locations. These include housewarming events, temple inaugurations, birthdays, annual functions, religious events and rituals like *Ashtraprahari, Yagna,* etc., both within their village and in surrounding areas. They earn between INR 5,000 to INR 7,000 for out-of-town events, and INR 1,000 to INR 2,000 for local ones. After splitting the earnings equally and setting aside money for expenses, they manage to bring some income home. The group has also performed in other states at locations like Ayodhya, Prayagraj, Kashi, among others.

Most significant changes

The journey of the Maa Duarasuni SHG women through *kirtan* singing exemplifies how cultural traditions can be powerful tools for social and economic empowerment. The women of the SHG have experienced meaningful transformation through their involvement in *kirtan* performances and the ferrying business. These activities have brought not only economic benefits but also significant social and personal growth.

Over the past two years, the income generated from singing kirtans and operating ferry boats has become a reliable and consistent source of livelihood. This financial stability has enabled the women to become more self-reliant and better equipped to support their families. With improved incomes,

they are now able to contribute to household expenses, invest in their children's education, and access healthcare more easily.

Beyond the economic benefits, these women have gained a renewed sense of identity and respect within their communities. Many come from backgrounds where their ancestors were treated as untouchables, facing systemic discrimination and social exclusion. Today, through the cultural act of singing kirtans, they have earned admiration and recognition. Their performances have brought them dignity and pride, transforming how they are perceived. As one SHG member says, *"The same people who once refused to even touch us now welcome us into their homes with respect."*

Participation in these activities has also broadened the women's perspectives and raised their aspirations. Traveling to perform at different locations, including areas outside Odisha, has given them exposure to new environments and diverse cultures. This experience has boosted their confidence and encouraged them to aim higher, both in terms of income and societal recognition.

SAMAHITA supports the group by assisting with planning, maintaining accounts, and keeping meeting registers. It also provides training on financial literacy, WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), gender awareness, etc through dedicated modules. The trainings strengthened the group's capacity, confidence, and ability to sustain their work.

Through *kirtan* singing, women have taken steps toward greater confidence, a sense of freedom, dignity, and social recognition. Many other SHGs have started similar activities after seeing their success.

Factors that made this practice successful

Several factors supported the Maa Duarasuni SHG women's kirtan initiative, helping turn a traditional practice into a meaningful source of income and community engagement.

First, the initiative tapped into the potential of cultural traditions by organizing *kirtan* singing, a practice often seen as purely spiritual, into a structured livelihood activity. The women of the SHG have been able to blend tradition with livelihood and transform a devotional practice into a means of empowerment and economic self-reliance.

Second, while the initiative remained women-led, the inclusion of skilled male performers such as instrumentalists and supporting singers helped enhance the overall performance quality. This inclusive approach not only broadened their appeal but also allowed the group to secure more opportunities, highlighting the value of collaboration without compromising women's leadership.

Finally, the consistent presence of the women in public spaces and their excellence in performance gradually shifted community perceptions.

Challenges

The Maa Duarasuni SHG women's *kirtan* group faces challenges, including inadequate performance opportunities, and a lack of platforms to showcase their talent. Additionally, the group has low visibility and recognition beyond their local community, which restricts their income-generating potential and limits their cultural reach.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve and replicate this practice, several key steps can be taken. First, expanding performance opportunities through partnerships with cultural festivals, tourism boards, and digital platforms can help them reach wider audiences and increase their income.

Documenting their stories and performances is important, not only to preserve their cultural heritage but also to inspire others and attract support from donors or organizations. Support from local governments or NGOs can further strengthen the initiative by providing funding, infrastructure, and promotional assistance.

Encouraging peer learning through exchanges between different SHGs will help replicate the model in new areas, allowing groups to adapt the practice to their own cultural contexts. Finally, involving younger generations and promoting inclusivity will ensure the sustainability and continued growth of the initiative over time.

By combining broader visibility, institutional support, and community engagement, this practice can be both improved and successfully replicated across diverse communities.

4. Naripragati Fisherwomen SHG - Creating a steady income through fish farming

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programs/ Financial inclusion*
Organisation *- Naripragati SHG*
Target groups *- SHGs and community-based organizations, Local government and development agencies*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, leadership of women*

Introduction

Economic empowerment is one of the most effective ways to uplift women and ensure their participation in decision-making processes. When women earn and manage their income, they gain confidence, independence, and a voice in both household and public affairs.

Karimpur is a small village with over 100 households, located in the Brahmagiri block of Puri district, Odisha. Historically, fishing and related activities have been the main source of livelihood for its residents. However, declining fish catches, rising competition, and environmental degradation have severely affected their income. This scarcity has forced many fisherfolk to migrate to other states in search of work, where they often face exploitation and poor working conditions.



Figure 7 Naripragati Fisherwomen SHG members

The Naripragati Fisherwomen SHG was formed in December 2016 with 10 women to improve women's economic status. Since the women had little cash, they contributed one glass of rice each at

weekly meetings. The collected rice was sold among members, and the proceeds were saved as the group's fund. The group comprises women aged 32 to 50 years, including one unmarried woman with a locomotor disability and one widow. Their educational qualifications range from 5th to 10th standard, and all members belong to the OBC community. The primary sources of their livelihood are daily wage work and fish trading.

Coming from a traditional fishing community, the SHG members decided to leverage their indigenous knowledge by leasing a pond to start fish farming and increase their income.

The SHG is supported under the SAMAHITA project, with EKTA as the implementing partner facilitating its activities at the community level.

Intervention

In 2023, the Naripragati Fisherwomen SHG took a loan of INR 1 lakh from Odisha Gramya Bank to start fish farming. They leased a pond from a private individual at a cost of INR 50,000 per year and collectively undertook the task of cleaning and preparing the pond for fish farming. As part of this preparation, they installed a protective fence around the pond for INR 5,000 to keep out animals and trespassers.

A unique aspect of their approach is the use of fresh water from Chilika Lake, which receives inflows from the Bhargavi and Daya rivers during the rainy season. This fresh water is pumped into the leased pond during this period, creating an ideal environment for fish rearing.

The SHG invested INR 10,000 to purchase fingerlings of commonly consumed freshwater fish such as Rohu, Catla, and Mackerel from local sellers. They allocated an additional INR 20,000 for fish feed and nutrition. A detailed feeding schedule was developed, with responsibilities shared among members on a rotational basis to ensure consistent care and accountability.

Throughout the cultivation cycle, the women closely monitored water quality, fish health, and hygiene. They ensured proper disposal of any dead fish and maintained a healthy pond environment. The collective nature of the group enabled regular supervision and quick responses to any issues that arose. This group has a rotation system that every three years within the self-help groups to ensure equitable opportunities for more women to take on leadership roles, strengthen their confidence, and contribute to inclusive decision-making.

Harvesting takes place three times a year when the fish reach marketable size. Family members of the SHG women assist during harvests, making the workload more manageable. The harvested fish are sold directly to local merchants who collect the produce from the site, eliminating the need for the women to travel to markets.

To date, the SHG has completed eight successful harvests and fully repaid the bank loan. They have gained significant expertise in fish farming, knowing precisely when to release fingerlings, feed the fish, and monitor their growth. The group works cohesively, supporting each other not only in the business but also in community activities such as encouraging parents to send their children to school.

Most significant changes

The SHG has successfully completed eight harvest cycles and has fully repaid its bank loan, an important milestone that reflects both financial discipline and business success.

"In the beginning, when we started fish farming, we depended on our husbands and other men in the village who had knowledge about the process. We relied on their help for tasks such as selecting quality fish seeds, buying fish feed, managing water in the ponds using pump sets, purchasing medicines, and even selling the fish. However, over time, we gradually learned to handle these tasks on our own. We are now able to manage the entire process on our own, without much external support. The most important thing is that we are now earning more profit than before because earlier we had to rely on others and even pay them commissions, but now we can do everything independently.
Dali Ghadai, President, Naripragati Fisher Women SHG

Over time, the members have gained significant expertise in fish cultivation, and now confidently manage all aspects of the trade. They have developed a strong understanding of the optimal timing for releasing fingerlings, feeding schedules, and monitoring fish growth, effectively evolving into a well-organized and knowledgeable enterprise.

Over the course of eight successful harvest cycles, the SHG members have gained substantial knowledge and experience and now operate their business with confidence and precision. Their fish farming venture has become a reliable source of income, contributing to household stability and personal financial independence.

Beyond economic benefits, the SHG women have emerged as active community leaders, participating in village development and encouraging education, especially for girls.

"In our village, educational facilities are available only up to the 5th grade. As a result, students have to go to a school in another village to study from 6th to 10th grade. Because of this, many girls in our village used to drop out after 5th grade. This was a matter of concern for us. So, we frequently discussed in our group how to help those girls continue their education beyond the 5th grade. As a team, we visited the homes of these girls and explained the importance of education to their parents. We repeatedly tried to convince them to send their daughters to school and encouraged the girls to continue their studies. Now, in our village, almost no girl drops out after the 5th grade as they are studying at least up to high school."
Tunilata Ghadai, Member, Nari Pragati SHG

Factors that made this practice successful

The Naripragati SHG's fish farming activity succeeded because of a few important reasons. Building on the SHG members' background in traditional fishing significantly reduced the learning curve. They were already familiar with fishing, which made it easier for them to start fish farming in ponds. Initial financial support through a bank loan, combined with guidance from experienced community members, played a crucial role in helping the SHG take the first steps. Proximity to Chilika Lake allowed easy access to fresh water during the monsoons. This access to natural resources, such as seasonal fresh water, significantly enhanced the viability and sustainability of the initiative. Clear collective ownership and a rotational system for sharing tasks helped ensure accountability and smooth day-to-day operations. The SHG also leveraged existing resources and market channels by sourcing fishlings from local traders within the village and selling their fish directly to merchants who collect the produce from the site, making the process efficient and cost-effective. Economic empowerment further boosted social participation, with members actively promoting education and community welfare.

The SHG's fish farming succeeded by leveraging local fishing skills, natural resources, financial support, clear roles, and market connections, leading to economic empowerment and greater community involvement.

Challenges

Fish farming comes with its own set of challenges. Disease outbreaks sometimes lead to sudden fish deaths, resulting in significant financial losses. It is also highly vulnerable to climate impacts such as cyclones, fluctuating temperatures, and rising water salinity, all of which affect fish production.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve and replicate this model, regular capacity building on sustainable fish farming, disease management, and climate resilience is essential. These efforts can enhance productivity and reduce losses. Equally important is access to credit, quality fingerlings, feed, and veterinary support for successful expansion.

Integrated fish farming[3] can offer SHG members multiple income streams, lower input costs, and greater resilience to climate shocks. It also promotes efficient use of land, water, and organic waste, making it ideal for small-scale, resource-limited farmers. Peer learning through SHG exchanges can help share best practices and inspire adoption in other communities.

Enhance inclusive mobilization strategies to ensure more women with disabilities from the community are encouraged and supported to join self-help groups. By strengthening their engagement and participation, this SHG can create a supportive environment not only for economic empowerment and business activities but also for broader community development efforts. Nari Pragati SHG in Karimpur demonstrates how training, credit access, and community cooperation empower rural women to run successful fish farming enterprises. Scaling such models requires combined support in training, finance, and market access while building on local strengths for long-term impact.

[3] Integrated fish farming involves farming of fish along with livestock or/and agricultural crops.

5. Dhanalaxmi Caregiver Group - Inclusive education for children with hearing impairment

Topic area *- Access to decision making and governance spaces / Removing participation barriers*
Organisation *- Dhanalaxmi Caregiver Group, Ballipada and Citizens' Association for Rural Development, Ganjam*
Target groups *– Parents of children with hearing impairment, OPDs*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality*

Introduction



Figure 8 Children at the FLC at Ballipada village

Children with hearing impairments often struggle to access quality education tailored to their needs due to limited resources, a shortage of trained personnel, and insufficient inclusive teaching practices. The Dhanalaxmi Caregiver Group supported by the Citizens Association for Rural Development (CARD), a non-profit working in Ganjam district Odisha, has become a key force in empowering families and children with hearing impairments. The group comprises eight carers, all women from the marginalised community, aged between 26 and 36. This practice highlights Dhanalaxmi's efforts to ensure equal treatment for children with disabilities and empower caregivers through the establishment of Fun and Learning Centres (FLCs).

CARD has long provided home-based educational support for hearing-impaired children involving parents or caregivers closely. However, some children lacked adequate home support reducing the intervention's effectiveness. To address this, the idea of FLCs in villages was proposed offering educational support to hearing-impaired children alongside their hearing peers. This initiative gained strong community and parental support leading to the formation of the Dhanalaxmi Caregiver Group in Ballipada village of Kukrakhandhi block in Ganjam.

Formed with seven members and supported by CARD, the group launched Om Shree FLC in 2021 initially enrolling nine children—three with hearing impairment and six hearing children (4 male, 5 female), aged between 7 and 12 years. The inclusive centre provides a safe shared space where

children learn together promoting interactive education and support for both hearing-impaired children and their peers. Efforts were made to reach the most marginalized children, including girls with hearing impairments and children living far from the village centre. Facilitators personally visited their homes, arranged transportation where needed, and scheduled activities at convenient times, ensuring that all children had the opportunity to participate.

Intervention

CARD started by organizing sessions to raise awareness about hearing impairment, covering causes, challenges, inclusive education, sign language, and government support. Meetings also involved ICDS workers, teachers, and health workers. The Dhanalaxmi Caregiver Group visited schools and Anganwadis to promote equal treatment and inclusion of children with disabilities.

After the orientation, a clinical assessment camp was conducted for children with hearing impairments to evaluate their hearing levels. The assessments identified whether conditions were stable or worsening. Children requiring medical intervention were referred to nearby hospitals for further treatment and care.

CARD facilitated the formation of Parents' Associations to support hearing-impaired children and held monthly meetings to address challenges and plan advocacy. While CARD facilitated the process, parents and caregivers played an active role by organizing meetings, mobilizing local resources, and making key decisions. Over time, they took on leadership roles, shaping the interventions for their children. Children with hearing impairments were also consulted through age-appropriate methods, such as sign language and interactive activities, ensuring their voices guided the design of the program. Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) staff sensitized parents on disability rights, laws, and inclusion strategies. Parents were also trained in basic sign language and educated on causes, prevention, and the importance of inclusive education, engaging with teachers and Anganwadi Workers to ensure appropriate support and protection for their children.

What is FLC?

FLC is an inclusive educational space where children with and without hearing loss come together to learn and play. Managed by a dedicated community committee, the centre fosters a supportive and collaborative environment grounded in mutual respect. Through interactive activities and tailored educational programs, the centre promotes both enjoyment and learning. By incorporating sign language and inclusive teaching methods, it ensures that all children—regardless of their hearing abilities—can thrive and develop essential social and academic skills.

Objectives

Facilitate enhanced socialization, improved communication, and increased academic competence among deaf children by integrating them into community-based inclusive learning environments alongside their hearing peers.

Facilitate academic development and foster a supportive attitude among hearing peers participating in the FLC, promoting mutual growth and inclusive learning.

Foster an environment of shared responsibility, active involvement, and collective growth through the management and supervision of these centres by parents, community members, OPDs, Community Resource Groups, and other relevant stakeholders.

The integrated setup fostered social interaction, communication development, and mutual understanding between hearing-impaired and hearing children. It enabled collaborative learning, exposed hearing-impaired children to diverse communication styles, and helped their peers develop

awareness and respect for different abilities, creating a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

To encourage regular attendance and participation, a mix of curricular and extracurricular content is delivered through recreational methods such as educational games, dance, role play, drawing and craft, and storytelling, including stories with visuals.

To ensure quality education, teachers were trained to effectively teach children with disabilities. They learned how to use accessible and adaptable Teacher Learning Materials (TLM) to engage children in inclusive educational activities. These materials supported both academic and social development, encouraging self-expression and making learning joyful for hearing-impaired children and their hearing peers.

CARD facilitated the transition of the FLC from an externally supported initiative to a community-owned, inclusive, and sustainable learning centre, led by the parents' group and the local Panchayat. As part of this process, it held meetings with parents, Panchayat members, and other community members to build agreement, encourage local responsibility, and plan for the centre's future.

Changes achieved

The extensive outreach by the Dhanalaxmi Caregiver Group led to significant positive outcomes for hearing-impaired children and their families. Outreach programs in schools and Anganwadis led to better treatment of children with disabilities. More children are now included in mainstream education, and teachers are better prepared to address their needs. Community attitudes have shifted, with greater acceptance and understanding of disability.

The FLC created an inclusive learning space while equipping caregivers with essential skills and knowledge. Through training and experience, caregivers became more confident and actively engaged in supporting their children's development and advocating for their rights.



Figure 9 Teaching at the FLC

Sign language training enabled parents to communicate more effectively with their hearing-impaired children, strengthening emotional bonds. As Lily Gouda shared, "When I learned sign language, it

significantly improved communication with my hearing-impaired child, fostering stronger bonds, better understanding, and enhanced emotional development."

Currently serving seven students, the FLC has provided personalized learning sessions that have improved academic and social development. The use of TLM has made education more engaging and accessible for children with diverse needs.

The FLC now operates independently, supported by local resources and managed by the parents' group. It was formally handed over to the Panchayat and parent groups, who have requested a dedicated room in the Panchayat office to ensure continued learning in a supportive environment.

This model reflects the potential of caregiver-led, inclusive education initiatives to bring lasting change through community-driven solutions.

Factors that make the Dhanalaxmi Carer Group successful

The success of the Dhanalaxmi Caregiver Group's inclusive education model stemmed from several key elements that fostered a supportive and effective learning environment. Mixed-ability groups, where hearing-impaired and hearing children learn together, encouraging empathy, mutual respect, and peer learning, with hearing children learning sign language to communicate with their deaf peers.

Qualified and trained teachers used sign language and inclusive teaching methods, enhancing the learning experience for all children. Visual aids like posters, flashcards, and storytelling with visuals and subtitles ensured full participation.

A child-centred approach with activities such as art, games, music using vibrations, and role plays kept children engaged and connected to learning. Community ownership was vital, with parents, local OPDs, and stakeholders actively involved in planning and managing the centre, creating collective responsibility for inclusive education.

Regular assessments of both academic and social-emotional progress of children helped track improvements and provide timely support. Together, these factors created an inclusive, engaging, and sustainable environment that empowered children with disabilities and their families.

Challenges

Despite the programme's success, several challenges remain. Awareness about disability rights and inclusive education is still low in some remote areas, making it difficult to reach these communities and overcome resistance to change.

Another major issue is the lack of sign language training among school teachers, which hinders effective communication with hearing-impaired children. This communication gap affects not only academic progress but also social and emotional development. Additionally, frequent transfers of trained teachers disrupt continuity, leaving students without consistent support from educators familiar with their needs.

Lastly, appropriate resource materials are lacking. Hearing-impaired children are primarily visual learners who need books rich in images, diagrams, and visual storytelling. The absence of adapted learning materials aligned with state textbooks makes it hard for these children to engage fully, grasp concepts, and stay motivated. Without customized, picture-rich resources, even the best teaching efforts fall short of achieving desired learning outcomes.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve and replicate the Dhanalaxmi Caregiver Group's inclusive education model, several key steps are needed.

Raising awareness about disability rights and inclusive education is crucial to reduce stigma and foster community support. Expanding training for teachers and caregivers, especially in advanced sign language and inclusive teaching methods, will help maintain education quality. Increasing community engagement through awareness campaigns can build stronger support from parents and local leaders.

Securing sustainable funding from government aid, grants, or local fundraising is essential for continued operation and growth. Improving infrastructure and resources by enhancing learning spaces and providing accessible materials will better meet children's diverse needs.

Regular monitoring and evaluation will help track academic and social progress, allowing timely interventions. Promoting peer learning networks among centres will facilitate sharing best practices and support replication in other communities.

Together, these steps will strengthen and expand the model, helping more hearing-impaired children access quality, inclusive education.

6. Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG - Empowering community through collective action

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process/ Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programmes*
Organisation *- Hare Rama Hare Krushna SHG, Gopalpur*
Target groups *- Women from marginalized communities, SHGs, NGOs, Government departments*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, leadership of women and girls, and a strong focus on gender equity, effective collaboration with authorities*

Introduction

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are powerful grassroots institutions that empower women from marginalized communities by building their capacities to participate in local development processes through collective action, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship. They help break cycles of poverty and challenge harmful social norms like child marriage and domestic violence. The Hare Rama Hare Krushna SHG, led by Gopamma, exemplifies this impact through economic projects, social initiatives, and local advocacy, making it a vital force for sustainable development and social change in the community.

Gopalpur, a coastal town in Odisha's Ganjam district, has a large fishing community reliant on fishing for their livelihood. Recently, the sector has declined significantly, impacting both fishermen and women involved in post-fishing activities like drying and selling fish, who also face economic hardships.

The Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG was formed in 2010 to support women from the fishing community through income-generating activities. Led by 57-year-old G. Gopamma from Rangeilunda block, the SHG has 10 active members, all belonging to the OBC community and aged between 31 and 61, who advocate for fisherwomen's interests. Over time, the group expanded its focus to address broader social issues such as child marriage and domestic violence. Gopamma reflects, "Things were pretty bad in Ganjam 20 years ago. For fisher families, it was a vicious circle of debt and poverty, which led us to form the SHG and improve our situation."



Figure 10 Gopamma of the Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG

Interventions

Parking fee collection at Gopalpur sea beach - One of Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG's most successful initiatives was managing vehicle parking fee collection at the local sea beach. In 2023, Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG became the first women's group to win a Notified Area Council (NAC) tender for managing vehicle parking at the local sea beach. The contract, worth INR 10 lakhs, involved daily operations from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m., with members working four-hour shifts. This initiative created a steady income source and brought better organization to a busy tourist spot.

O**peration of Aahar Kendra**[4] - In 2023-24, under a state government contract, the SHG ran an Aahar Kendra offering subsidized nutritious meals at INR 5 per plate. With government reimbursement of INR 27 per plate and actual costs of around INR 10 per plate, the SHG served approximately 250 people daily. Women handled cooking, cleaning, and hygiene, while maintaining transparent financial records.

[4] Aahar Kendra is a government-supported community food centre that provides affordable, nutritious meals to vulnerable and low-income populations.



Figure 11 Aahar Kendra at Gopalpur

Infrastructure projects - Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG played an active role in local development by securing key infrastructure contracts. These included INR 9 lakhs for drainage system maintenance and INR 1.3 lakhs for constructing a water harvesting structure. The group also contributed to road construction and repairs, significantly improving connectivity, access to services, and overall quality of life in the community.

Social advocacy and community engagement - The SHG actively addressed critical social issues through awareness campaigns on child marriage, dowry, alcoholism, and harmful cultural practices. It intervened in around 30 child marriage cases, using negotiation and legal support to protect children's rights. The group also assisted families in dowry-related legal matters, provided emergency financial aid, and successfully campaigned to shut down a wine shop near the beach, improving safety for the community.

Changes achieved

Economic empowerment - Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG evolved from a savings group into a sustainable, income-generating enterprise. Through initiatives like the Aahar Kendra and beach parking management, members gained stable employment and supplementary income, improving their financial security and household stability. These efforts empowered women economically and showcased the potential of community-led enterprises.

Leadership and skill development - Participation in SHG activities enabled many women to take on leadership roles in local governance. Through hands-on experience in managing services and community projects, members built practical skills in food safety, budgeting, time management, and customer service, enhancing their confidence and capacity to lead.

Improved local infrastructure - Through active participation in local development projects, the SHG played a key role in improving village infrastructure. Drainage system upgrades reduced waterlogging and health hazards, while road construction enhanced access to markets, schools, and healthcare. Additionally, water harvesting structures promoted conservation and long-term water sustainability.

Social impact - Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG emerged as a strong voice for women's rights and social justice. By intervening in child marriages, the group helped ensure continued education for girls. Their legal and financial support to families bolstered community resilience, while the successful closure of a local wine shop improved safety and well-being for both residents and visitors.

> *Our group has 10 members. We extend our assistance in helping women in the community. This is especially so in case of domestic issues. When such issues arise, we engage directly with families to help resolve matters through dialogue and understanding. In cases where further action is required, we accompany individuals to the police station and assist them in filing complaints to ensure they receive the support and protection they need. We work across 27 villages on social issues.*
> G. Gopamma, President, Hare Rama Kare Krishna SHG

Community recognition and inspiration - The success of Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG has elevated its social standing and inspired other women's groups in neighbouring areas. Their journey highlights the impact of collective action, grassroots leadership, and the transformative potential of women-led development.

Building on its success, the SHG plans to diversify income sources into local tourism, dry fish powder production, among others. It also plans to strengthen social advocacy on gender equality, education, and healthcare, expanding its outreach to nearby villages. Additionally, the group plans to forge partnerships with government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations to access training, market linkages, and resources.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of the Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG was driven by strong leadership, collective effort, and a deep connection to community needs. Gopamma's leadership fostered trust and unity, while collective action allowed members to pool resources, share responsibilities, and achieve meaningful outcomes.

Their focus on locally relevant issues such as income generation and social challenges like child marriage kept members engaged and ensured the SHG's work had real impact. Strategic partnerships with local authorities provided access to funding, legal support, and greater visibility.

The SHG also demonstrated innovation by taking on non-traditional income activities like managing beach parking and running an *Aahar Kendra*. These ventures not only generated revenue but improved public services.

Through these experiences, members developed valuable skills in planning, budgeting, and management. The group's journey shows that SHGs can go beyond small enterprises and become key players in driving inclusive, community-led development.

Challenges

A major challenge for the group is sustainability, as key income sources like the Aahar Kendra and parking fee collection depend on short-term contracts. Without securing similar opportunities or diversifying into more stable enterprises, maintaining a consistent income remains difficult. Additionally, resource limitations pose significant hurdles, since bidding for new work often requires substantial upfront capital that the group may not have.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

The Hare Rama Hare Krishna SHG has made remarkable progress, yet there are opportunities for improvement and replication. Securing similar opportunities or expanding into new enterprises will be crucial for achieving stable and sustained income.

While the SHG generates some income, access to finance, professional training, and stronger market linkages is essential for growth. As Gopamma puts it, *"We need more entrepreneurial training and market linkage, which we expect from the SAMAHITA project for the betterment of our group."*

To replicate this model elsewhere, SHGs will need leadership training, business development support, and partnerships with government and civil society. With the right backing, SHGs can drive inclusive, community-led development.

7. Maa Brundabati OPD - Empowering women with disabilities through bag-making

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programs*
Organisation *- Maa Brundabati OPD, Lanjia*
Target groups *- Women with disabilities*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, leadership of women and girls*

Introduction

Women with disabilities in rural areas face multiple layers of marginalization due to the intersection of gender, disability, poverty, and geographic isolation. However, their increasing involvement in local development is empowering them both economically and socially. Inclusive livelihood initiatives play a crucial role in unlocking their potential and fostering sustainable, equitable community growth.

Lanjia, a village in the Dakhinapur Gram Panchayat of Kukudakhandi block, Ganjam district, has over 500 households and relies primarily on agriculture for livelihood. The village is home to around 25 persons with disabilities, including 12 women, who face additional challenges such as restricted mobility, social exclusion, and limited awareness of government welfare schemes.

Despite facing numerous barriers, women with disabilities in the Maa Brundabati OPD have taken bold steps toward self-reliance by launching a home-based bag-making enterprise.

Intervention



Figure 12: Brundabati OPD members with the bags they created

The Brundabati OPD was established in 2022 with the goal of creating livelihood opportunities for its members. The OPD comprises seven young women from the OBC community, aged between 17 and 42 years. Among them, one is married. All members live with various disabilities, including visual (sight), hearing, and locomotor impairments. Their educational qualifications range from 7th to 10th grade. The group is led by President Santoshini Gowda. The members meet monthly and contribute INR 5 each towards a collective savings fund.

Santoshini was experienced in bag-making, having previously crafted utility bags from repurposed cement sacks. Along with her mother, she learned how to cut, reshape, and stitch these discarded industrial bags into durable, eco-friendly carry bags widely used by locals for shopping and storage. Recognizing the rising demand for sustainable, low-cost alternatives to plastic, Santoshini envisioned this as a viable livelihood option not only for herself but also for other women with disabilities in the village.

"Sili (OPD member) cannot stitch bags, so we give her simpler tasks like stitching the borders, which she has learnt well. We divide the work based on each person's ability. This is only possible because we work together as a group."
Santoshini Gouda, Brundabati OPD

With entrepreneurial insight, she presented the idea to the OPD, inspiring the group to collaborate and expand production. Most members own sewing machines, while those without contribute through hand stitching and other manual tasks. The group sells each bag locally for INR 6, generating an annual income of approximately INR 72,000.

Most significant changes

The bag-making enterprise has had a meaningful impact on the lives of women with disabilities, particularly in terms of income, skills, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. By transforming used cement bags into eco-friendly products, the women have created a valuable source of income. Although modest, this income is regular and has offered financial stability and a sense of economic participation.

"Before the OPD was formed, I used to take tuitions and earned only around ₹500 and that too, not regularly. I had no savings. Now, I'm able to contribute to household expenses and even save a little. Being part of the group has made a big difference in my life."
Madhusmita Gouda, Brundabati OPD

Beyond earnings, the initiative has played a vital role in skill development. Through hands-on involvement, the women learned essential aspects of small business management, including product design, pricing, and basic marketing. These practical skills have empowered them to take charge of their enterprise with greater confidence and competence.

"I used to make leaf plates, but I had to depend on family members to buy the inputs and sell the plates. If they were busy, I had no choice but to wait. Now, because of group work, we support each other, getting materials, managing sales, and working together. I feel more independent."
Mini Gouda, Brundabati OPD

Socially, the initiative has strengthened the visibility and recognition of OPDs within the local community. The fact that the women initiated and continue to manage the business independently has challenged stereotypes and fostered greater respect and inclusion.

Environmentally, the reuse of cement bags for product-making has helped reduce plastic waste and pollution in the area. This upcycling approach not only adds value to waste materials but also contributes to a cleaner and more sustainable local environment.

These outcomes show how inclusive, eco-friendly entrepreneurship drives positive community change. Though modest, the members' income reflects a vital step toward breaking economic dependence and vulnerability.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of the bag-making enterprise highlights the potential of home-based businesses to empower women with disabilities, particularly in remote rural settings. Several factors contributed to the initiative's effectiveness and offer valuable insights for replication.

One of the most critical enablers was the flexibility and accessibility of home-based work. For women with mobility challenges and domestic responsibilities, the ability to work from home made participation feasible and sustainable. This model allowed them to balance income generation with caregiving roles, making the enterprise more inclusive.

Another key factor was the strength of collective action. Working as a group and through OPDs provided a strong support system. It enabled resource and skill sharing, group problem-solving, and collaborative marketing efforts, strengthening both business viability and social solidarity. Efforts were made to strengthen their knowledge about their rights and entitlements, including orientation sessions on government schemes and social welfare services by staff of the SAMAHITA Project. They were also encouraged to engage with local authorities to demand accessible infrastructure, such as barrier-free roads and community buildings, in order to reduce their mobility challenges. Some members shared that they now feel more confident approaching officials and raising concerns about accessibility in their villages.

These learnings highlight essential factors such as flexibility, collective organization, and market connectivity that should inform similar livelihood models promoting economic independence among marginalized groups.

Challenges

The initiative also highlighted key challenges, particularly in market access and pricing. Despite producing high-quality, eco-friendly products, the women earned low profit margins, while middlemen often captured a larger share of the earnings.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

This small-scale initiative shows how identifying business opportunities, encouraging grassroots innovation, collective action, and disability-inclusive enterprises can drive sustainable change in rural

economies. It highlights the potential of OPDs as platforms for inclusive, community-led livelihoods when supported by training, microfinance, and local marketing.

To strengthen and replicate the bag-making enterprise, key improvements are needed. Expanding market access through local retail partnerships, fairs, and online platforms is essential. Stronger branding and storytelling focused on the social and environmental impact can help attract a wider customer base.

Advanced training in product diversification, quality control, digital skills, and financial management will build the women's capacity to scale the business. Access to microcredit or linkages with SHGs and financial institutions can support investment in materials and equipment.

For replication, this model can be introduced in other regions through partnerships with OPDs, Carers groups or women's SHGs. Collaboration with NGOs, government programs, and CSR initiatives can provide necessary resources and technical support. Integrating such enterprises into broader inclusive livelihood programs will ensure long-term sustainability and policy support.

8. Maa Parvati SHG – Mini mill empowering steady livelihoods

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programmes*
Organisation *- Maa Parvati SHG, Markandi*
Target groups *- SHG Members, Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), Development Agencies, Financial Institutions, Skill Development & Entrepreneurship Departments*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, leadership of women and girls*

Introduction

Self-Help Group (SHG) loans have become a powerful tool for empowering women, especially in rural areas. By coming together in groups, women gain access to low-interest or interest-free loans without collateral, enabling them to start small businesses such as mini mills, tailoring units, and petty shops, and earn sustainable incomes. These loans not only promote economic independence but also enhance the capacities of marginalized groups to actively participate in local development processes.

Markandi village, in the Rangeilunda block of Ganjam district, Odisha, has about 2,500 households, mainly Scheduled Caste fishing communities. Fishing is the mainstay of the local economy, supported by limited agriculture including paddy, groundnut, and vegetables. Gender roles are clearly defined with men fishing at sea while women handle vital post-harvest tasks such as cleaning, processing, and selling, roles that are essential but often undervalued in the livelihood chain.

The community is facing declining fish catches due to overfishing, climate change, and habitat degradation. This has undermined local economic stability and driven many youth (aged 25–40) to migrate to cities like Goa, Mangalore, and Chennai in search of fishing-related jobs, particularly in seafood processing.

Limited access to formal credit forces fishermen to rely on high-interest informal loans, leading to debt cycles that hinder investment in equipment and resilience to challenges like poor catches or natural disasters.



Figure 13 Mini flour mill operated by Maa Parvati SHG

Intervention

Against this backdrop, the Maa Parvati SHG was formed in August 2020 with 10 women members. The SHG comprises members from the Other Backward community, with ages ranging from 21 to 56 years, including two widows. Meeting twice a month, the group supports each other and manages collective resources. Through access to microcredit, members have started income-generating activities like fish trading, tailoring, and running a mini flour mill. This financial support has reduced their dependence on high-interest moneylenders, improving their economic status and fostering greater financial independence.

Savitri and Devki, a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law team, are active members of the Maa Parvati SHG. In 2020, with financial support from the SHG, they set up a mini flour mill. The SHG had secured a loan of INR 5 lakhs from Mission Shakti,[5] and Savitri and Devki took an additional INR 30,000 loan to establish the mill. The community uses it to process wheat, millets, turmeric, and chillies into powder, charging INR 10 per kg for millets and wheat, and INR 20–30 per kg for chillies and turmeric. The enterprise earns them up to INR 15,000 monthly, with electricity costs of around INR 500 per month.

Most significant changes

The introduction of a home-based mini mill has significantly improved the livelihoods of two women who previously worked as seasonal agricultural labourers, which was not only physically demanding but also unreliable and poorly paid. Shifting to the new enterprise has reduced their dependence on seasonal farm work and offered a more stable, dignified source of income.

With the mini mill now operating from their home, the women earn a steady income while staying close to their families. This flexibility allows them to manage household responsibilities alongside their economic activities, leading to a better work-life balance and enhanced well-being.

The benefits of the mini mill extend beyond the women who run it. Other group members noted that they used to travel nearly 15 kilometers by bus to access the nearest milling facility. The new local setup has eliminated the need for such travel, saving both time and transportation costs. This has made daily life more efficient and allowed more women in the community to balance work and family obligations.

> *"I have three children. I wanted to do something from home so I could take care of them, manage household work, and still earn an income. I now run a mini flour mill along with my mother-in-law. This work has not only helped me become financially active from home, but it has also reduced her need to go out regularly for physically demanding agricultural labour like transplantation and harvesting. Now, she goes only occasionally."*
> *B. Devaki, member of Maa Parvati SHG*

Overall, the initiative demonstrates how localized, home-based enterprises can improve economic resilience, promote women's empowerment, and address practical challenges related to time, mobility, and income stability.

Factors that made this practice successful

[5] Mission Shakti is a flagship initiative of the Government of Odisha aimed at women's empowerment through the formation and support of Women Self-Help Groups (WSHGs). The program promotes economic independence by providing credit, market linkages, and skill development for income-generating activities.

Savitri and Devki's initiative demonstrates how small investments through SHGs can create high-impact, women-led rural enterprises. Their success serves as a model for community-driven microenterprises that are both economically viable and socially meaningful.

Key to this success was their ability to identify a local challenge, namely the lack of nearby milling facilities, and respond with a practical business solution. This not only addressed a pressing community need but also provided them with a steady income, showcasing how SHGs empower women to become economically active and self-reliant.

A major strength of the initiative is that it allows women to work from or near their homes, which they prefer mainly due to the household responsibilities. Unlike agricultural labour that often requires long travel and hours away, the mini mill lets women contribute to household income while staying close to their families. This arrangement improves work-life balance, reduces safety concerns, and enables women to manage domestic and economic roles more effectively. The flexibility leads to greater participation, higher satisfaction, and a stronger sense of ownership among the women involved.

> *"Our group members have taken up various income-generating activities to improve our livelihoods. Three women are into tailoring, one runs a stationery shop along with tailoring, another sells readymade clothes, two operate a mini flour mill, and others are engaged in fish trading. We hold our SHG meetings regularly and actively participate in Palli Sabha (village-level) and Gram Sabha (panchayat-level) meetings. There, we raise and discuss important issues that affect us as women and as a community such as job cards, pensions, drinking water, roads, and local employment opportunities under MGNREGA, among others."*
> *B. Erama, member of Maa Parvati SHG*

Finally, SHG loans foster economic independence, boost self-confidence, and encourage active participation in household and community decisions, helping women achieve true self-reliance.

Challenges

While the current setup enables the women to operate machinery and manage daily operations, several challenges limit the enterprise's potential for growth. There are gaps in financial literacy and record-keeping, which affect their ability to track expenses, profits, and plan investments.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To strengthen the mini mill initiative, greater emphasis can be placed on enhancing business skills for the women. Support in areas such as financial literacy and record-keeping would further prepare the enterprise for future growth. With small investments in better equipment, packaging, or marketing, the enterprise could increase its efficiency and reach more customers.

To replicate this model in other villages, it is important to first identify similar unmet local needs and ensure community ownership of the solution. Working through SHGs or local women's collectives ensures trust, local knowledge, and support. Improving access to finance via partnerships with banks, microfinance institutions, or government schemes is crucial. Collaborations with NGOs or government agencies can provide initial support and infrastructure.

This model can be used to empower women, especially those with limited mobility, and can be scaled to create a network of community-led microenterprises that enhance rural livelihoods and social inclusion.

9. Unlocking employment opportunities for youth with disabilities

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programmes*
Organisation *- Maa Adishakti OPD*
Target groups *- Persons with disabilities, OPDs, CBOS, Development agencies*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, digital inclusion*

Introduction

Employment empowers youth with disabilities by providing dignity, purpose, and social inclusion. Without it, they face isolation and dependence. Promoting inclusive jobs with support unlocks their potential, benefiting both individuals and society.

Munna Behera, 23, from Ganju village in Ganjam district, Odisha, has faced many challenges due to a severe locomotor disability affecting both legs. After his father, a fisherman, passed away seven years ago, Munna became the primary supporter of his family, as his four sisters were married and living elsewhere. After graduating in 2021, Munna applied for government jobs but was unsuccessful. He then joined the Nehru Yuva Kendra (NYK) [6]and became active in the Utkal Samaj Youth Club.

Intervention

In 2024, with the launch of the SAMAHITA project, Munna became actively involved when Community Facilitator (CF) Bijaya Kumar Behera helped form an OPD called *Maa Adishakti*. Through the OPD, Munna gained awareness about various government schemes and learned how youth and persons with disabilities can participate in local governance and community development.

Munna now operates a Common Service Centre (CSC) . Such centres, established by the Government of India, provide essential digital services in rural areas. At the CSC, Munna offers services like Aadhaar updates, PAN card processing, registration for government schemes (such as PMAY, PM-KISAN, and pensions), bill payments, and digital literacy support.



Figure 14 Munna at the Common Service Centre

[6] Nehru Yuva Kendra (NYK) is a government organization in India under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. Established in 1972, NYK aims to engage rural youth in nation-building activities by promoting leadership, skill development, community service, and awareness programs.

He travels using a tricycle provided by the Block Social Security Officer (BSSO), enabling him to run the centre smoothly. Munna remains closely associated with the *Maa Adishakti* OPD and continues to serve his community effectively through the CSC.

Changes achieved

Munna's journey as a self-employed entrepreneur running a Common Service Centre (CSC) has had a profound impact on his life and community. Earning between INR 8,000 to 10,000 per month, he has achieved financial independence and become the primary support for his aging mother after the passing of his father. With this stable income, he is able to manage household expenses on his own, without relying on external support.

> *"I am a person with 100% locomotor disability and had little hope of securing a sustainable job. Due to the support of the Samahita project team, I became a Jogana Sahayak at the Janaseva Kendra (Common Service Centre). I earn around ₹10,000 every month. I aim to further develop my skills and build a bright future. I encourage youth, including OPD members, to be patient and persevere in building skills to become independent."*
> *Munna Behera, Maa Adishakti OPD*

His enhanced mobility has been another transformative outcome. Previously immobile due to his disability and lack of proper mobility aids, Munna received a government-supported tricycle that has become a vital enabler in his daily life. It allows him to manage work and personal responsibilities with much greater ease and independence.

Through his CSC, Munna is also making a significant contribution to community development. Located in a rural area where access to government services was once limited, his centre now serves as a critical hub for digital access. Villagers no longer have to travel long distances for services such as Aadhaar updates, utility bill payments, or banking transactions. Munna has also taken on the role of a digital guide, spreading awareness about government schemes and helping people navigate online processes that were once inaccessible to many.

More than just a means of livelihood, self-employment has given Munna dignity, confidence, and a respected place in his community. He now shares his experience and trains other young men and women with disabilities, as well as other youth members, showing them that they too can learn new skills and start small businesses. His story is a powerful example of how inclusive, small-scale digital enterprises can drive both personal empowerment and broader rural transformation.

Factors that made this practice successful

Several key factors contributed to the success of Munna's Common Service Centre (CSC). First, the government-provided tricycle improved his mobility, enabling him to run the centre independently despite his disability. Second, Munna's strong motivation and commitment to supporting his family and community helped build trust and grow the enterprise. Third, the CSC met a real need in a rural area with limited digital access, offering services like Aadhaar updates and government scheme registrations. Finally, Munna's role in educating the community about digital tools and welfare programs promoted inclusion and built a loyal user base.

Together, the combined impact of mobility support, personal drive, local demand, and community engagement made the initiative sustainable and impactful.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

Munna's story demonstrates that living with an impairment is not a limitation when the right support, accessibility and reasonable accommodations (all rights for all persons with disabilities as per the CRPD) are available. His success inspires other youth with disabilities to pursue education, training, and self-employment. For instance, Jhumuri Swain, a woman with locomotor disability from Munna's OPD, completed a tailoring course and started her own enterprise.

To strengthen inclusive employment models for youth with disabilities, it is essential to invest in skills-based training, digital literacy, and support for self-employment opportunities. Access to mobility aids and assistive tools enables youth with disabilities to work independently and effectively. Membership in OPDs provides valuable peer support, advocacy, and access to resources.

Furthermore, access to microfinance, subsidies, and startup support can facilitate the launch and expansion of disability-inclusive enterprises. Partnerships among government bodies, NGOs, OPDs, and the private sector play a critical role in delivering training, assistive technologies, and outreach efforts, making the model scalable for digital inclusion and local empowerment.

10. SAMARTH - Enabling inclusion, advancing dignity and rights for persons with disabilities in Gajapati district

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on social protection*
Organisation *– SAMARTH, Gajapati district*
Target groups *- Persons with disabilities, OPDs, Development agencies,*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, effective collaboration with authorities*

Introduction

Men and women with disabilities are among the most marginalized groups, often facing compounded discrimination based on gender, disability, and socioeconomic status. They encounter systemic barriers in education, healthcare, employment, and social inclusion, limiting their full participation in society. Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) provide a crucial platform for collective voice, rights advocacy, and meaningful engagement.

In Odisha's Gajapati district, home to over 16,400 persons with disabilities (Census 2011), stigma, inaccessibility, and cultural biases further isolate them. Strong organizational representation is essential to protect their rights and promote inclusion.

Established in 2007, SAMARTH is an OPD based in Paralakhemundi, committed to empowering persons with disabilities. SAMARTH's leadership is inclusive, with all nine board members being persons with disabilities: four women and five men. Women with disabilities actively participate in decision making and advocacy, ensuring their voices are central to the organisation's work. Guided by the principle "Leave none behind, nothing about us without us" SAMARTH focuses on community-based rehabilitation, advocacy, and self-reliance through skills and livelihood development. With 3,015 members across 299 villages in 7 blocks, SAMARTH works to build an inclusive society where persons with disabilities live with dignity and equal opportunity.

Key strategies

Key strategies adopted by SAMARTH to create an enabling environment for persons with disabilities where they can claim their rights, access opportunities, and live with dignity are:



Figure 15 Enabling mobility for people with disability

- **Capacity building** - Enhancing knowledge, confidence, and skills of persons with disabilities to enable self-reliance and informed decision-making.
- **Institution building** - Forming and strengthening OPDs for collective action and sustained advocacy.
- **Multi-stakeholder engagement** - Collaborating with NGOs, government bodies, CSR initiatives, and other partners to broaden support and influence.
- **Government collaboration** - Working in convergence with various departments to ensure inclusion in schemes, services, and planning processes.
- **Committee representation** - Ensuring participation of OPD members in decision-making bodies from the grassroots to the national level.
- **Networking** - Building alliances with organizations at local, regional, state, and national levels to amplify voices and share resources.

OPD led advocacy and campaign interventions

SAMARTH has played a critical role in advancing disability rights and inclusion through sustained advocacy and strategic partnerships. Its campaigns have resulted in tangible policy changes, improved access to services, and systemic reforms.

- Policy advocacy and reform – SAMARTH engages with government bodies to influence laws and policies, ensuring they reflect disability rights and inclusion principles.
- Legal empowerment and rights awareness - Conducting legal literacy workshops and awareness campaigns on disability rights, entitlements, and grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Monitoring and accountability - Tracking government implementation of disability schemes and services through community monitoring, data collection, and reporting. Using evidence such as RTI data to expose gaps and advocate for enforcement.
- Accessibility Advocacy - Advocating for barrier-free infrastructure, accessible public services, and inclusive education and employment environments. Partnering with authorities to implement accessibility guidelines and standards.
- Inclusive Electoral Participation -Ensuring persons with disabilities can access voting facilities and participate fully in elections through voter education and advocacy with election authorities.

Changes achieved

Policy advocacy and reform

- **Establishment of disability rights commissions -** The advocacy campaign by SAMARTH brought statewide attention to the lack of disability-focused governance, prioritizing the needs of persons with disabilities in policy discussions. The establishment of the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities created a formal mechanism to address grievances and monitor the implementation of disability rights across Odisha.
- **Inclusive recruitment** - When Ms. P. Chinnari was denied an Anganwadi Worker position due to her disability, SAMARTH advocated with the Department of Women and Child Development, Odisha. This led to a policy change allowing the recruitment of women with disabilities, resulting in 50 such appointments in Gajapati district and advancing inclusive employment.

- **Revision of pension scheme** - SAMARTH highlighted the exclusion of individuals with less than 100% visual impairment from the Madhu Babu Pension Scheme by engaging the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities and referencing the Persons with Disabilities Act. Their advocacy led the state government to revise the policy, extending pension benefits to those with 40% or greater visual impairment, increasing access to social security for many previously excluded persons. The policy revision aligned state welfare schemes with national disability laws, promoting greater equity and inclusion.

Legal empowerment and rights awareness

- In May 2023, SAMARTH partnered with the District Legal Services Authority and the Social Security and Empowerment Department to conduct a weeklong campaign addressing barriers in accessing social security schemes. Through grievance redressal camps, home visits, and distribution of aids, 317 cases were registered, highlighting the urgent need for such outreach and showcasing the power of collective advocacy for disability rights.
- SAMARTH used RTI data to highlight the exclusion of persons with disabilities from housing benefits under Indira Awas Yojana and advocated with the District Rural Development Agency. The administration enforced the 3% reservation, ensuring housing benefits reached eligible persons with disabilities.
- SAMARTH engaged with the District Education Officer to advocate for the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools, citing provisions under the Right to Education Act, 2009. Directives were issued to all Block Education Officers mandating enrolment of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, promoting inclusive education and equal learning opportunities.
- SAMARTH addressed multiple discrimination cases by advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities in employment and public services. Subhash Mallick, a visually impaired candidate, was appointed as *Swachhasevi Sikhya Sahayak*[7]. Shyam Sunder Morana retained his job after becoming blind due to a workplace injury. Bus conductors denying travel concessions were suspended, reinforcing accountability and empowering the community to resist discrimination.

Accessibility advocacy

- SAMARTH submitted a memorandum to railway authorities advocating for barrier-free access at Paralakhemundi Railway Station and for travel concessions for persons with disabilities. The station was included in the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme for accessibility improvements, and concessional railway smart cards were secured, enhancing affordable and accessible travel for persons with disabilities.
- In 2018, SAMARTH advocated for and secured INR 10 lakhs from the District Innovation Fund to establish a Braille Resource cum Vocational Training Centre. The centre provides Braille literacy and vocational training, empowering visually impaired individuals. Over 100 students have benefited, with 56 currently enrolled and actively participating, enhancing their skills and employability.

[7] A Volunteer Education Assistant primarily supports Lead Teachers especially in rural areas

Inclusive electoral participation

- SAMARTH collaborated with election authorities and the district administration to ensure accessible voting and led a voter awareness campaign under SVEEP for persons with disabilities. Two OPD members were appointed to key election committees, improving inclusive oversight. The campaign promoted greater participation of persons with disabilities in the 2024 General Elections.



Figure 16 Block level OPD members meeting

SAMARTH has played a key role in advancing and ensuring rights of persons with disabilities in Gajapati district.

Challenges faced

- **Government department constraints** - Despite existing laws, implementation is weak due to limited awareness among officials at all levels about the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, and related policies. This results in poor dissemination, underutilization of benefits, and exclusion from essential services. Many officials still adopt a charitable mindset rather than a rights-based approach, which undermines true inclusion and dignity.
- **Education system gaps** - Teachers often lack knowledge about various disabilities and inclusive teaching methods. Schools are poorly equipped with accessible infrastructure and appropriate learning materials, and educators receive little training in assistive technologies or alternative communication.
- **Lack of monitoring mechanisms** - There is no institutionalized system to monitor or evaluate the implementation of social security schemes for persons with disabilities, leading to inefficient resource use, inconsistent service delivery, and low accountability.
- **Limited awareness among persons with disabilities** - Many persons with disabilities, especially in rural areas, are unaware of available schemes and benefits due to low education and lack of family support. This lack of awareness and confidence increases their vulnerability and exclusion.
- **Resource and accessibility challenges for OPDs** – OPDs often face financial and human resource shortages, relying heavily on volunteers and undertrained staff. Limited access to capacity-building hampers proposal writing, reporting, and sustainability. Additionally, operating in remote tribal areas with difficult terrain limits outreach and consistent engagement.

"I was a visually impaired student. I was initially denied admission to the degree programme at SKCG Autonomous College, Paralakhemundi, even though the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 guaranteed a 3% reservation for students like me. After I filed a suit in the High Court, the college was directed to admit me. This judgment ensured that all students with disabilities could benefit from this reservation."
Santosh Kumar Moharana, SAMARTH

Lessons learned on challenges

- **Policy awareness is crucial -** OPDs must have strong knowledge of disability laws and government schemes to effectively advocate and secure rights for persons with disabilities. Legal awareness empowers communities to challenge exclusions and claim entitlements.
- **Inclusion in decision-making -** Representation of persons with disabilities or OPD members in planning and governance committees leads to more inclusive policies and better service delivery. Active participation helps raise specific issues and ensure their resolution. For example, due to SAMARTH's efforts, persons with disabilities now receive special job cards in their own names under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). They are entitled to 100 days of wage employment per household, similar to other rural workers, and can be assigned suitable tasks like nursery raising, record-keeping, or afforestation based on their abilities.
- **Rights-based approach over charity -** Shifting mindsets of officials from a charitable view to a rights-based perspective is essential for true inclusion, dignity, and equality of persons with disabilities.
- **Capacity building for education and service providers -** Training teachers and government officials on disability inclusion, assistive technologies, and accessible infrastructure is necessary to improve education and public services.
- **Monitoring and accountability systems needed -** Establishing institutional mechanisms to track the implementation of welfare schemes ensures better resource use, accountability, and improved access to benefits.
- **Awareness and empowerment of persons with disabilities -** Raising awareness among persons with disabilities and their families about available schemes is vital to reduce vulnerability and enhance participation.
- **Strengthening OPD resources and reach -** Providing financial support, capacity-building, and technical training to OPDs helps improve sustainability, advocacy, and service delivery, especially in remote and tribal areas.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve or replicate SAMARTH's practice, it is essential to strengthen the capacity of OPDs, government officials, and community members through regular training on disability rights and inclusive policies. Building strong collaborations among OPDs, government bodies, NGOs, and the private sector creates a unified front to address the diverse needs of persons with disabilities.

Institutionalizing inclusive policies with clear accountability and monitoring ensures that legal rights translate into real benefits. Empowering persons with disabilities and their families to participate actively in decision-making keeps programs relevant and responsive.

Legal advocacy remains a key tool for enforcing rights and challenging discrimination. Adapting efforts to local cultural and geographical contexts supports sustainable impact. Lastly, securing diverse and sustainable funding ensures continuity and growth.

These steps can help replicate SAMARTH's success in fostering inclusive communities where persons with disabilities live with dignity and equal opportunity.

11. Anterra - A community-led labour sharing in the Saura tribe

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on social protection*
Organisation *- Saura tribe community members, Gajapati district*
Target groups *– SHG women, CBOs, OPDs, Carer groups*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes*

Introduction

The Saura tribe is one of the oldest tribal communities in India, primarily residing in the hilly regions of southern Odisha, particularly in Gajapati, Rayagada, and Koraput districts. The tribe is known for its unique social organization, terraced agriculture, and deep-rooted kinship systems.

The term "Anterra" refers to a traditional labour cooperative system practiced by the Saura tribe of southern Odisha. It forms an integral part of their social and economic structure, especially in the context of agriculture, which is highly labour-intensive. Since most small and marginal farmers [8]cannot afford to hire paid labour during peak agricultural seasons, Anterra provides a vital mechanism for collective work and mutual support.



Figure 17: Saura tribe members

In recent years, SHGs and church-based community groups (*Mandalis*) have played a key role in formalizing and sustaining the practice of Anterra across various villages.

Anterra is a voluntary cooperative group formed based on reciprocity and kinship ties. Members typically include individuals from one's own village, neighbouring villages, and extended kin networks. It is a traditional system of rotational, voluntary labour sharing, organized to support one household at a time with essential physical work, typically without formal wages. The principle is “for one person’s work, everyone contributes.” Tasks are completed collectively, and the same support is extended to other members in a rotational or need-based manner.

[8] In India, marginal farmers are those who own or cultivate less than one hectare of land, typically under 2.5 acres. Small farmers, on the other hand, cultivate between one and two hectares (2.5 to 5 acres) of land.

The primary purpose of Anterra is to assist in various agricultural tasks, such as clearing fields, ploughing, sowing, weeding, and harvesting, as well as construction work such as brickmaking and carrying materials like sand and cement.

Key characteristics

- **Community and kinship-based** - Participation is typically drawn from community members within the village, neighbouring villages, and extended kinship or clan networks.
- **Reciprocal labour exchange** - No monetary compensation is involved. Labour is repaid through mutual assistance during the participant's own time of need. Households offer free labour on a rotational or need-based system. They do not receive cash wages unless it's an external contract
- **Collective tasks** – Anterra supports key agricultural activities such as terrace cultivation, land preparation, and harvesting.
- **Cultural practice** - In many cases, Anterra involves songs, rituals, and communal meals, making it a cultural as well as functional system.
- **Host household responsibilities** – This include providing meals (typically breakfast/lunch) for workers. The host also organizes materials and basic tools if needed.

How Anterra works

A family requests help from their Anterra group, such as an SHG or church Mandali. A work date is set, and all members voluntarily contribute labour to complete tasks. The host family provides meals, usually simple local food, but no wages are paid. The group operates on a rotating system, where members assist each other in turn. For work outside the group, labourers may be paid wages, and providing food depends on mutual agreement.

Most significant community and economic benefits

- **Cost savings** - Anterra reduces reliance on wage labour and external financial inputs, making farming more accessible for economically marginalized households, especially poor families.
- **Faster work completion** - A group of 10 to 20 people working together can complete large tasks within a single day.
- **Food security** - Helps complete timely sowing/harvesting during short agricultural windows.
- **Social inclusion** - Engages all community members, including widows, the elderly, and the landless.
- **Cultural preservation -** Maintains traditional values of mutual aid deeply rooted in tribal culture.

"Anterra is a traditional community practice passed down from our forefathers. It helps maintain unity and a sense of brotherhood among us. Through Anterra, tasks that are too difficult for a single household, like building houses or harvesting crops, are completed with the support of the entire community. Anyone in the community can be part of Anterra, whether a widow, an elder, the poor, or the landless. It is a tradition built on the sharing of labour."
Draupadi Bhuyan, member of Women Fund SHG

Factors that made this practice successful

Anterra's success comes from strong community participation and ownership, with members from local kin groups fostering trust and shared responsibility. It addresses labour shortages and financial challenges in southern Odisha by supporting key agricultural tasks like terrace cultivation and harvesting in difficult terrain.

The practice preserves traditional farming knowledge and resource-sharing norms often overlooked by modern methods. It also builds community resilience during crises by providing a social safety net through voluntary labour exchange, reducing reliance on external aid and minimizing conflict.

Beyond economics, Anterra is a cultural practice involving rituals, songs, and feasts that strengthen community bonds and cultural identity, helping the tradition thrive across generations.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

Anterra is more than just a labour-sharing system, it embodies rural resilience and community-driven development. Facilitated by SHGs and church Mandalis, it ensures no household is left behind due to lack of money or manpower, making it a valuable model for inclusive development in tribal areas with strong social ties.

To improve and replicate Anterra, existing community groups should be strengthened and linked with SHGs and other organizations to enhance coordination. Providing training on sustainable agriculture and labour management can boost productivity while preserving traditions.

Access to tools and materials through collective buying or microcredit lowers costs and improves work quality. Promoting cultural elements like rituals and communal meals helps maintain participation, especially among youth.

By combining traditional knowledge with modern support and inclusive practices, Anterra can be adapted and replicated in similar rural communities.

12. From dependency to dignity - Empowering livelihoods through entrepreneurship

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process/ Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programmes*
Organisation *- SAMARTH*
Target groups *- Women with disabilities, SHG women, OPDS, Development agencies*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, leadership of women and girls, and a strong focus on gender equity, effective collaboration with authorities*

Introduction

Women with disabilities face compounded discrimination based on gender, disability, and often poverty and other factors. This intersectionality creates a challenging cycle but rights-based and inclusive support such as skill development, assistive devices, flexible work and microfinance helps women build sustainable incomes, empowering them and promoting inclusive community growth.

P. Chinnari is 38 years old and has a 75% locomotor disability from childhood polio, certified under the RPwD Act. Despite accessibility challenges and societal bias, she completed her tenth grade in school which is a significant achievement. She lives in Paralakhemundi, Odisha, with her five year old son. She faced limited access to education and job opportunities, causing financial vulnerability. Social stigma further marginalized her and limited her participation in community life. education and job opportunities, causing financial vulnerability. Social stigma further marginalized her and limited her participation in community life.

Intervention

Chinnari is associated with SAMARTH, a community-based organization (CBO) for persons with disabilities promoted by the Centre for Community Development (CCD) in Gajapati district. In 2007, she joined the Tilak Bhinnakhyam Sangh, an OPD facilitated by SAMARTH, where members met monthly to discuss disability issues and access government benefits. She recalls, “Before joining the OPD, I was not really aware of other people with disabilities. I thought that I could be of help to such people.”

Through SAMARTH, Chinnari attended leadership and entrepreneurship programs across Odisha and other states, gaining confidence and knowledge. She started as a volunteer and later became staff, focusing on disability issues. In 2009, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation gifted her a three-wheeler scooter, enhancing her mobility and independence.



Figure 18 Chinnari being felicitated at an entrepreneurship program

In 2012, Chinnari had nerve surgery at the Balaji Institute of Surgery, Research and Rehabilitation for the Disabled (BIRRD) in Tirupati. Before surgery, she walked with a limp and needed to support her knee, but afterwards, she could walk without assistance.

Entrepreneurial journey

Chinnari's entrepreneurial journey began early, learning tailoring and working from home. In 2014, she partnered with a friend to start a tailoring unit in a rented shop in Paralakhemundi, beginning with two sewing machines provided by local charity organizations. Their first major order was to stitch uniforms for students from Standards 1 to 10 across 32 schools, marking a strong start.

In November 2017, Chinnari completed a ten-day entrepreneurship development program with SAMARTH, gaining skills to manage her business effectively. She secured a loan of INR 1.2 lakh from the District Industrial Centre (DIC) under the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), which she used to buy better equipment and materials. She fully repaid the loan by 2021.

Due to health issues, Chinnari now operates from a small shop near her home but continues to actively manage her business. She has employed two women in her shop, teaches tailoring there, serves as an instructor at *Jan Shikshan Sansthan (*JSS*)*[9], and holds the position of Treasurer in the SAMARTH OPD.

Most significant changes

[9] JSS (formerly known as *Shramik Vidyapeeth*) is a Government of India scheme under the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship.

Chinnari's tailoring unit generates a monthly income of INR 30,000–40,000, supplemented by teaching tailoring, which provides her with financial independence and dignity. She has created employment for three people, and continues to contribute to local livelihood generation.

Her involvement with SAMARTH has strengthened her skills in communication, leadership, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship. She continues to mentor others and volunteer, playing an active role in empowering persons with disabilities.

Chinnari is well respected in her community and has been recognized with several awards for her entrepreneurial success, including the District Award for Best Self-Employed (2016) and the State Award for Best Self-Employed (2018) from the Department of Social Security and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Odisha.



Figure 19 Chinnari at her tailoring shop

A strong and independent woman, she has been raising her son on her own for the past one and a half years, despite facing challenges due to her husband's lack of support and alcohol dependency. Through her work, she has shifted perceptions from being seen as dependent to being recognized as a decision-maker in her family and community. Chinnari now plans to expand her business and empower more marginalised women including women with disabilities, fostering inclusive economic growth in Gajapati district.

Factors that made this practice successful

Several key factors contributed to the success of Chinnari's entrepreneurial journey. From a young age, her strong personal interest and self-motivation in tailoring drove her to overcome challenges posed by her disability and turn her passion into a small business.

Capacity-building programs supported by SAMARTH equipped her not only with technical skills but also with entrepreneurship, leadership, and self-advocacy abilities, boosting her confidence and knowledge.



Figure 20 Chinnari at a training program

Most importantly, the mentorship and support from SAMARTH helped her transform her skills into a sustainable livelihood, establish a business, and provide employment opportunities to others.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

Chinnari's journey offers a strong model that can be improved and replicated to support more women with disabilities. Making skill development and entrepreneurship training fully accessible would allow broader participation. Offering diverse, market-relevant skills beyond tailoring can expand livelihood options.

Access to finance is a major challenge. Simplifying loan and subsidy processes and providing application support can help more women start or grow businesses. Mentorship, like Chinnari received from SAMARTH, plays a key role in building confidence and practical knowledge.

Her ability to manage a home-based business shows the value of flexible livelihood models, especially for those with mobility challenges. These can be supported through digital tools and local market linkages.

Success stories like Chinnari's can inspire others and challenge social stigma. With inclusive training, financial access, mentorship, and recognition, this model can be effectively replicated to empower more women with disabilities.

13. Empowering women through structured programmes – The case of Sushila Raita

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programs*
Organisation *- Chandini SHG, Padsa Gorjang, Gajapati district*
Target groups *– SHG women, CBOs, OPDs, Caregivers groups,*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, leadership of women and girls, effective collaboration with authorities*



Figure 21 Sushila Raita at her tailoring establishment

Introduction

Marginalized groups often face significant social, economic, and political barriers that limit their participation in local development processes. However, entrepreneurship presents a powerful pathway for these groups to engage actively in economic activities, generate income, and contribute to community growth.

Padsa Gorjang is a small tribal village in Gumma block, Gajapati district, Odisha, home to 34 households and 182 people belonging to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) Saura community. The villagers primarily depend on subsistence agriculture and occasional wage labour, cultivating crops like paddy, millets, pulses, cashew nuts, and seasonal vegetables.

Many young men migrate to cities like Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, and Hyderabad for labour-intensive jobs, earning around INR 15,000 monthly, while some students work during vacations to support their families. Young women often work in prawn processing or tailoring units outside the village, earning about INR 9,000 per month.

Traditionally, women had limited opportunities to earn income, but with support from Self-Help Groups under Mission Shakti, Odisha PVTG Empowerment & Livelihood Improvement Programme (OPELIP), and Rural Self Employment Training Institute (RSETI), they now receive vocational training like tailoring. This has empowered women such as Sushila Raita to earn locally, save money, and enhance their families' well-being.

About Sushila Raita

Sushila Raita, 28, hails from a large family in Padsa Gorjang. She has four brothers, and including her, the family has a total of 11 members. Her father works as a mason and seasonal farmer, while two brothers study at a Bible college in Mumbai and the other two work as construction laborers there. The family also runs a small shop that provides additional income.

Growing up, Sushila faced many challenges. Her school was 3 km away with no transport, and the roads became impassable during the rains. The nearest Ashram school had no girls' hostel. Although she was eager to continue her education in Parlakhemundi, financial constraints forced her to drop out after Class 5. She then supported her family by grazing cattle and working as a daily labourer.

In 2017, after receiving tailoring training from the Lanjia Shoura Development Agency, Sushila moved to Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu, to work in the textile industry. She initially earned INR 5,000 per month during training, which later increased to INR 10,000. However, cultural differences and homesickness led her to return to her village after six months.

Entrepreneurial journey

After returning to Padsa Gorjang, Sushila joined the Chandini SHG under Mission Shakti. Initially, she was unaware of the group's purpose and was enrolled by the Anganwadi worker, who linked membership to receiving rice from the Public Distribution System, telling them that if they did not become members, they would not get their ration. Over time, Sushila and the other members realized that SHGs offered valuable training, access to credit, and livelihood support.

In 2023, Sushila expressed interest in tailoring and enrolled in a training program at RSETI, Paralakhemundi, learning sewing, cutting, finishing, and basic business skills. Motivated to improve further, she also completed the Basic Enterprise Development and Entrepreneurship Programme conducted by OPELIP at NABM, Bhubaneswar.

With a INR 40,000 grant from OPELIP, Sushila set up her tailoring business, purchasing sewing machines and materials. She now fulfils local orders, including school uniforms and women's clothing, starting her entrepreneurial journey.

Most significant changes

Sushila's tailoring business brought her financial independence. She now earns around INR 8,000–9,000 per month working from home and proudly says, "I earn from my tailoring work at home. I manage all my personal expenses and no longer depend on my parents for anything."

Her skills have grown significantly—she is now proficient in tailoring and embroidery, creating blouses, churidars, frocks, and other garments with great creativity and attention to detail. She proudly shares, "*Nije sileki pindhibar subidha heichi*" ("I can now stitch and wear my own clothes"). Her embroidered

blouses are especially popular, with one SHG member noting, “Everyone in the village appreciates her embroidery work, especially the blouses. She makes new designs that make people happy.”

With steady income, Sushila has been able to save consistently and even bought 3 tolas of gold. She says, “From my earnings, I’ve managed to buy 3 *tolas* (1 tola = 11.67 grams) of gold. I feel secure knowing I can stand on my own feet.” She also contributes to her household by covering small daily expenses and has helped expand the grocery shop which her parents managed near their home.

This initiative has reduced migration, as more women now work locally from home, staying close to family while gaining financial independence. Sushila’s success has improved her social status and confidence. Her thriving business has earned respect in the community and expanded women’s roles beyond household chores, boosting their confidence and standing within their families and village.

Sushila Raita’s journey from a struggling labourer to a successful tailoring entrepreneur highlights the transformative power of skill development, access to training, and timely financial support in empowering women. Her story shows that with the right support - practical skills, seed capital, and encouragement - rural women can achieve financial independence and uplift their families and communities. Sushila’s experience stands as a strong model for sustainable and inclusive development, and a powerful example of women's economic empowerment in tribal areas.

Factors that made this practice successful

Several factors contributed to the success of the tailoring training initiative in Padsa Gorjang. Collaboration between OPELIP and RSETI provided quality, practical training and financial support, helping women develop skills and start businesses. Basic business management training enabled them to run their enterprises effectively.

SHGs created a strong, supportive community network that encouraged savings, peer learning, and access to government schemes, building women’s confidence and participation. The tailoring training was residential and conducted in the local language, with a strong emphasis on hands-on practice. It focused on stitching garments commonly used in the area, making it easier for tribal women with limited education to learn and apply the skills effectively. The home-based livelihood model allowed women to balance household duties while earning income. Frontline workers and community leaders motivated women to join SHGs and attend training, overcoming initial hesitation. Gradual income growth built their confidence and demonstrated tailoring as a viable livelihood.

The program promoted savings and asset-building, enabling women to invest in valuable assets and strengthen financial security. Linking SHGs with financial institutions provided access to credit for business growth. Ongoing grants and mentorship fostered financial independence and empowered women to actively participate in local development, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Finally, SHGs strengthened social bonds and mutual support, contributing to the initiative’s lasting positive impact on the community.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve and replicate this practice, expanding skill training access by setting up more centres closer to remote villages would reduce travel barriers. Incorporating digital tools and mobile training units can reach women unable to attend regular sessions. Strengthening links between training and local

markets is crucial. Partnerships with schools, businesses, and cooperatives can help secure steady orders and fair prices. Providing ongoing mentorship and refresher courses will boost confidence and support business growth. Encouraging peer networks fosters continued learning and innovation. Integrating financial literacy and easy access to microcredit alongside skill training will help women manage finances and invest in their businesses. Finally, adapting the program to local cultures and involving community leaders and frontline workers will support replication in other marginalized communities. Regular monitoring and documentation of outcomes will help refine and scale the approach.

14. Namiya Gamango - Success through discipline and determination

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programmes*
Organisation *- Individual*
Target groups *- People with physical disability*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes*

Introduction

Gajapati district in Odisha is a remote, hilly region where most people depend on farming, forest produce, and small crafts for their livelihood. For men and women with disabilities, life is even harder due to poor roads, limited mobility, and lack of access to skills and resources. Many persons with disabilities are left out of regular work and income opportunities.



Figure 22: Namiya Gamango and his wife at his grocery shop

Namiya Gamango's journey showcases how a man with disability in a remote rural area can overcome adversity through self-employment. Starting a small grocery business with limited resources, he built a sustainable livelihood using local opportunities, access to credit, and personal determination. His story highlights the potential of micro-enterprises to promote inclusion and economic independence for persons with disabilities in underdeveloped regions.

Early life

Abandoned by his parents at a very young age, Namiya Gamango and his brother grew up without any support system. They lived in the Gumma block of Gajapati district. With no access to schooling and limited resources, the siblings survived by begging for food. Despite owning 3 acres of land, the absence of adult guidance made it difficult to use it productively.

At the age of 7, Namiya suffered a fall and acquired a permanent physical disability. Later, he migrated to Arunachal Pradesh in search of work. Due to his disability, he struggled with manual labour and only found occasional work in road construction. He learned Hindi during this time, a skill that would later prove crucial in his entrepreneurial journey.

Eventually, he returned to Odisha, determined to create a better life. At 22, he got married and the responsibility of family life pushed him to seek new, sustainable livelihood options.

Journey to entrepreneurship

One day, a friend informed him of a cloth trader at Gumma *haat* (local market) who needed someone who could speak Hindi. Desperate, Namiya took up the job, earning just INR 15 a day. Later, a vegetable vendor offered him a chance to sell onions and chilies for a day. Namiya took the opportunity and earned INR 20, making his first step toward self-reliance.

Impressed by his honesty and work ethic, the vendor encouraged Namiya to start a small shop. He started his grocery business with just INR 500. With his wife's support, he also regularly sold groceries at the Thursday market in Gumma, slowly gaining the trust of the local community.

> *"I had never learnt the trade from anyone, but a local vendor from Parlakhemundi encouraged me to open a shop in the village, as there were no shops at all. He said, 'People will buy from you. You'll earn and be able to manage your own expenses.' With his advice in mind, I somehow pulled together ₹500, bought a weighing scale, and began selling onions, chillies, and sugar — a business that needed little capital but gave me the confidence to start."*
> *Namiya Gamango*

Fifteen years ago, Namiya secured a INR 50,000 loan from the State Bank of India, Gumma, with a 50% subsidy. He used this loan to expand his shop and increase inventory. Onions became his top-selling product, moving up to 2.5 quintals daily with a profit margin of INR 13 per kilogram.

Despite various challenges, Namiya diversified his income to improve his family's standard of living. He cultivates paddy on 1.5 acres, keeping 20 bags annually for self-consumption, and grows cashews on 1 acre. He owns four bulls which are used for ploughing and also rears 6-7 goats. Additionally, he receives a monthly disability pension of INR 1,200.

Most significant changes

Namiya has steadily transformed his life through determination, smart use of resources, and strong family values. With a subsidised loan, he expanded his shop. He diversified his income by farming paddy and cashew, rearing goats and bulls, and receiving a disability pension, ensuring financial stability.

Namiya ensured that all three of his daughters received an education and spent over INR 2 lakhs on their weddings. After the loss of his only son, he took full responsibility for raising his grandchildren and supporting their education. With his savings, Namiya built a pucca shop using his own bricks and labour. He also benefited from housing support through the Indira Awas Yojana and constructed another house for his grandchildren.

> *"When we got married, we lived in a thatched house and often didn't have enough to eat. Times were tough. But we worked hard together, and over time, our lives began to improve. We live a much better life now."*
> *Basmati Gamango, Namiya Gamangos wife*

His mother, who had earlier remarried and left home, returned to live with him after her second husband's death. Namiya provides for her as well, closing a difficult chapter of early abandonment with compassion.

Now, he dreams of starting a clothes business—something he's passionate about. With a newly purchased motorbike, he plans to travel to nearby markets, source garments, and scale his livelihood further.

His journey from a child with physical disability with no support to a respected entrepreneur is an inspiring example of resilience, community trust, and the power of self-belief.

Factors that made this practice successful

Namiya credits his success to strong mental resilience and a willingness to learn through experience. Supported by mentors, his wife, and access to financial services like a subsidised loan from the bank, he expanded his business and diversified income through farming, livestock, and a pension. Government welfare schemes for housing, disability, and education further improved his family's wellbeing. Above all, his honesty, discipline, and determination have been key to overcoming poverty and social challenges.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve and replicate Namiya's success, increased access to affordable credit and tailored financial services for persons with disabilities is essential. Providing formal skill development and business training can enhance entrepreneurship. Strengthening local support networks, including mentorship and peer groups, will build resilience. Expanding awareness and access to government welfare schemes ensures vital social safety nets. Finally, promoting diversification of income sources and encouraging community-based resource sharing can help others achieve sustainable livelihoods like Namiya.

Namiya's story is not just one of personal success but a powerful testament to how inclusivity, small opportunities, and availing the right support systems can transform lives. It reinforces the need to empower men and women with disabilities in rural areas through accessible livelihood options, skill development, and community-based support. His life stands as a model of self-reliance, dignity, and social contribution.

15. Empowerment through entrepreneurship for persons with disabilities

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process/ Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programmes*
Organisation *- Individual*
Target groups *- Persons with disabilities*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes*



Figure 23 Nakula Paik at his furniture workshop

Introduction

Entrepreneurship offers a powerful pathway to economic independence, social inclusion, and personal empowerment for men and women with disabilities. However, barriers such as discrimination, lack of access to resources, training, and capital often hinder their entrepreneurial potential. Inclusive action is needed to create environments that enable persons with disabilities to thrive as entrepreneurs.

Gajapati district in Odisha, a predominantly tribal and hilly region, relies heavily on agriculture, forest produce, and traditional crafts for livelihoods. For persons with disabilities, especially those in remote areas, opportunities for employment are further constrained by mobility challenges and limited access to skill development.

Despite significant challenges, Nakula Paik of the Jai Jagannath Divyang Dala OPD has transformed traditional bamboo and cane craft into a sustainable livelihood. At 45, he lives in the remote village of Anandapur in Gumma block, with his wife and two school-going sons. Born with a physical disability in a humble farming family that relied on rain-fed agriculture, Nakula faced poverty and limited opportunities from an early age. After leaving school in Class 7, he began working alongside his father, driven to support his family. His journey highlights how traditional skills, when paired with resilience and community support, can pave the way for inclusive and sustainable livelihoods.

Steps towards entrepreneurship

Nakula Paik's journey into entrepreneurship began at age 15 with training in cane furniture making from the Block Office and NGO Gram Vikas. He further honed his skills through the District Industries Centre (DIC) and worked with Gram Vikas for two years, mastering the craft. After the project ended, Nakula continued independently, building a sustainable livelihood.

He later took a INR 25,000 bank loan and partnered with four artisans to start a workshop in Parlakhemundi. Despite five years of effort, poor market demand and limited growth forced them to close the workshop.

Nakula then resumed work from a training shed provided by Gram Vikas in his village, but Cyclone Titli in 2018 severely damaged the shed, temporarily halting his work. In 2019, he joined a former colleague to restart their business in an abandoned school building in nearby Namangada village. They sourced cane from Cuttack and Banapur and made a variety of items like baskets, stools, trays, and sofas. Nakula's cane sofa sets sell for INR 20,000 to INR 22,000, earning him about INR 15,000 monthly after expenses.

His expertise led NGOs and government agencies such as JSS, OPELIP, and DIC to invite him to train aspiring artisans, paying INR 800 per day. He also receives a monthly stipend of INR 11,250 through the Odisha Forest Department. The Directorate of Handicrafts awarded him a INR 1.5 lakh housing grant, improving his living conditions and supporting his livelihood.

Most significant changes

Nakula Paik's cane and bamboo craft business became a reliable source of income, allowing him to support his family independently. By diversifying his earnings through furniture sales, training workshops for NGOs, and a monthly stipend from a forest-based livelihood program, Nakula has built multiple revenue streams that provide financial stability and long-term security. His steady income supports not only his household but also his sons' education and vocational training. Demonstrating strong financial discipline, he successfully repaid his initial loan of INR 25,000, which included a INR 7,500 subsidy.

> *It's important for young people to learn skills alongside formal education. My training in cane and bamboo work has helped me lead a dignified life. My son, who is 14 years old and still in school, is learning bike repair because that's what interests him. I believe everyone should have the opportunity to learn based on their interests.*
> *Nakula Paik, Entrepreneur*

Choosing to stay in his village rather than migrate for work, Nakula has preserved and promoted the traditional craft of cane and bamboo making. He employs two workers in his workshop and actively trains community members, especially youth, including those with disabilities, to develop these skills as a sustainable livelihood. He also trains participants, including persons with disabilities, through programs organized by different government and non-government agencies.

Nakula's efforts have revitalized local handicrafts and enhanced recognition for persons with disabilities within his community. His journey serves as an inspiring model for aspiring entrepreneurs with disabilities across rural India, highlighting how skill, resilience, and community support can transform lives.

Factors that made this practice successful

Nakula Paik's entrepreneurial success is rooted in strong skill development, beginning with his initial training in cane and bamboo crafts. His ability to continuously enhance his skills and adapt to new opportunities has been key to his achievements.

Financial support played a key role, starting with a bank loan that launched his business, followed by grants and earnings from public festivals that strengthened his financial base.

Collaboration with peers was also crucial. Reconnecting with a former artisan colleague, Nakula pooled resources to restart their enterprise successfully.

Institutional support formed the foundation of his journey. Training from Gram Vikas and the District Industries Centre (DIC) provided essential skills, while a steady income from the Odisha Forest Department for four years offered financial stability. This layered support system enabled him to sustain his craft and support his family.

Effective market linkages further expanded the reach of Nakula's products. Through festivals and NGO partnerships, he accessed broader customer bases, boosting visibility and sustainability.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve and replicate his model, expanding accessible training including business and financial skills is key. Providing targeted, low-interest loans and financial literacy will boost sustainability. Strengthening peer networks and cooperatives can reduce costs and increase market reach. Continued institutional support through mentorship and infrastructure is vital. Enhancing market linkages with online sales, fairs, and branding will improve visibility and income. Finally, including disability entrepreneurship in policies and awareness campaigns will foster wider acceptance and opportunities. These steps can help empower more persons with disabilities to build sustainable livelihoods like Nakula.

16. Prof. Kamakhi Das - Empowering visually impaired students through inclusive education

Topic area *- Access to decision-making and governance spaces / Removing participation barriers*
Organisation *- Individual*
Target groups *- People with disabilities*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes*

Introduction

Inclusive education empowers the visually disabled by removing barriers to participation and ensuring equal access to learning. It fosters independence, dignity, and social inclusion, unlocking their full potential and promoting true equality.

Prof. Kamakhi Prasad Das, OES-1[10] (Retd.), is a distinguished academician who has overcome the challenges of visual impairment to make significant contributions in the domains of education, literature, and inclusive advocacy. With a Master's degree in History from Utkal University and over three decades of service in Odisha's government colleges, he exemplifies the transformative power of education and resilience. Currently serving as Course Director at the Indian Institute of Education and Care (IIEC), Bhubaneswar, and Director of Inclusive Education at the National Association for the Blind (NAB), Odisha, Prof. Das has dedicated his life to promoting inclusive education and empowering persons with disabilities, particularly visually impaired persons.



Figure 24 Prof. Das at a literary event

His life and career stand as a testament to the potential of individuals with disabilities when supported by equitable systems, inclusive practices, and a nurturing socio-educational environment.

[10] The Odisha Educational Service (OES) Grade 1 is a government recruitment conducted by the Odisha Public Service Commission (OPSC) for the position of administrative and supervisory roles in government schools.

Early life and education

Born in July 1964 in Parlakhemundi, Gajapati district of Odisha, Prof. Das hails from a middle-class family. He is the eldest son of Smt. Manjula Das and the late Ramachandra Das, a school teacher based in Rayagada. At the age of six, he was diagnosed with a brain tumour which, though successfully removed through surgery in Visakhapatnam, resulted in total loss of vision. This event drastically altered his early aspirations of becoming a physician.

Initial enrolment in a local primary school didn't prove viable due to the absence of Braille materials and trained educators. Subsequently, he joined the Red Cross School for the Blind in Berhampur which is an institution known for its dedication to the education of visually impaired students. Here he acquired proficiency in Braille and essential life skills. He later pursued his higher secondary and undergraduate studies in History at BJB College, Bhubaneswar, where his leadership qualities began to emerge through active participation in seminars and academic forums. His academic journey culminated with a Master of Arts in History from Utkal University, making him the first visually impaired postgraduate from the undivided Koraput district.

Professional career and achievements

In 1991, soon after completing his postgraduate studies, Prof. Das established a school for visually impaired children in Rayagada with support from the Lions Club. This initiative, though short-lived due to his selection into the Odisha Education Service (OES), marked the beginning of his lifelong commitment to inclusive education. The students from his school were transferred to a similar institution in Koraput, ensuring continuity in their education.

Over a distinguished career spanning 32 years, Prof. Das taught in several government colleges across Odisha and played a pivotal role in enhancing academic standards and advocating for disability-inclusive pedagogical practices. His roles have included Head of the History Department at Government College, Koraput; Director of Inclusive Education at NAB Odisha; and Course Director (Education) at IIEC, Bhubaneswar.



Figure 25 Prof Das being felicitated during a workshop

He has authored multiple scholarly and popular works, with publications in print and online platforms including Let's Know History, A Rethought to Life, Antardaah, and Explore Yourself. His literary and academic output underscores his commitment to knowledge dissemination and social empowerment.

Prof. Das has been a prominent speaker at national and international conferences, delivering keynote addresses and organizing teacher training programs and student camps. He has also been a regular contributor to radio and digital platforms, expanding the reach of his advocacy.

Social commitment and family support

Prof. Das credits much of his success to the unwavering support of his family, particularly his wife, Smt. Nilima Das, a radio anchor, and his well-established children in the IT sector. He also acknowledges the pivotal role played by mentors such as the late Dr. Jagannath Patnaik and Dr. Pani of IGNOU in shaping his academic orientation.

He continues to work at the grassroots level, frequently visiting remote areas to promote inclusive education and ensure accessibility for children with disabilities. His philanthropic efforts include providing scholarships from personal funds to meritorious and underprivileged students. He also advocates for the integration of moral education, drawing on teachings from the Bhagavad Gita, to foster values-based learning and holistic development.



Figure 26 Prof. Das with students

Challenges faced

Throughout his life, Prof. Das has confronted numerous systemic and societal barriers common to persons with disabilities. He highlights that pervasive negative attitudes, social exclusion, and lack of access to essential educational tools often hinder the growth of persons with disabilities. The inadequacy of institutional support and societal misconceptions regarding their capabilities further aggravate the challenges, making perseverance and self-motivation indispensable.

Key learnings

Prof. Das's struggles and achievements show that given the right kind of support and opportunities, individuals with disabilities can thrive and make meaningful contributions on their own terms.. One of the major learning is that early intervention plays a crucial role in the successful integration of visually impaired children into mainstream education, leading to improved academic performance and social inclusion. Equally important is the training of parents and teachers, which equips them with the necessary skills and understanding to support these children's unique learning needs, ensuring

sustained progress. The use of assistive technologies, such as Braille kits and audiobooks, has proven invaluable in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. Additionally, structured mentorship programs combined with strong institutional support help persons with disabilities develop employable skills, empowering them to contribute meaningfully to society. A combination of all these factors can be used as a model to help children with disabilities. arly intervention plays a crucial role in the successful integration of visually impaired children into mainstream education, leading to improved academic performance and social inclusion. Equally important is the training of parents and teachers, which equips them with the necessary skills and understanding to support these children's unique learning needs, ensuring sustained progress. The use of assistive technologies, such as Braille kits and audiobooks, has proven invaluable in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. Additionally, structured mentorship programs combined with strong institutional support help persons with disabilities develop employable skills, empowering them to contribute meaningfully to society. A combination of all these factors can be used as a model to help children with disabilities.

17. Deomali VDC, Mathalamba - Empowering community through forest land rights

Topic area *- Access to decision-making and governance spaces / Capacity-building/Empowerment of marginalized groups to increase their knowledge on the local governance systems*
Organisation *– Deomali VDC, Mathalamba and EKTA, Koraput*
Target groups *- Village Development Committees (VDCs) and local self-governance bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and development practitioners, Government officials and departments*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, effective collaboration with authorities*

Introduction



Figure 27 Deomali village residents receiving land records

Tribal communities have a deep, interdependent relationship with forests, relying on them for livelihood, culture, and identity. Historically, forest laws ignored their customary rights, treating them as trespassers. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 aimed to correct this by recognizing the rights of Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs), yet challenges remain in accessing these rights and participating in governance.

Mathalamba is a remote tribal village near Deomali mountain, the highest peak in Odisha, located about 13 km from the Gram Panchayat and 73 km from the district headquarters. Home to 103 Scheduled Tribe households and a population of 351, the village remains socio-economically marginalized, relying mainly on seasonal and unstable agriculture and wage labour for livelihoods. Despite applying for land rights, many individual and community forest rights claims faced resistance from forest authorities who were concerned about losing control over forest resources and potential degradation. As a result, many households continued to rely on low-paying wage labour and faced persistent economic vulnerability.

Intervention

In 2024, EKTA began working in Mathalamba village as part of the SAMAHITA project, aiming to strengthen community participation and secure tribal rights. The team initiated regular village

meetings to engage residents in identifying their needs and making decisions for collective development. Recognizing the need for strong local governance, the community formed the Deomali Village Development Committee (VDC) with 15 members, including 8 males and 7 females, all belonging to Scheduled Tribes (ST) category, with ages ranging from 25 to 55,, to lead the village's development efforts. Among them is an unmarried female member, reflecting the committee's openness to varied representation in community leadership. To promote women's participation and voice in local governance, efforts were made to ensure their concerns are heard and addressed in community decisions. Women were encouraged to take on leadership roles. For example, Sonali Khilo now serves as the secretary of the VDC.

To empower the VDC, EKTA facilitated a series of capacity-building activities, such as training sessions, leadership workshops, and exposure visits to successful community models. These initiatives enhanced the committee's ability to coordinate with government agencies through interface meetings, ensuring better access to schemes and services.

A participatory approach was used to create a comprehensive Village Development Plan (VDP). Through methods like Participatory Rural Appraisal and Focus Group Discussions, the community identified key priorities in health, education, livelihoods, governance, and leadership, crafting an inclusive roadmap for progress, ensuring that no one is left behind in the development process. Additionally, a Village Development Fund was established, with households contributing monthly to support essential needs such as infrastructure repairs and official travel, fostering local self-reliance.

During monthly VDC meetings, the issue of unrecognized forest land rights was raised. Since agricultural activities were legally restricted without these rights, the committee focused on the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and mobilized the community to submit formal memorandums to the Tehsil and district offices demanding recognition. Although initial responses were slow, persistent advocacy and follow-up by the VDC eventually resulted in the granting of forest land rights to the residents, marking a significant milestone in securing justice and empowering the community under the FRA.

After formation of the VDC, we applied for IFR land records. As per their commitment, after one month, they gave us 71 land records. There are 103 families in our village and 102 of us have now received land records.
Birsu Khilla, Deomali VDC member

Most significant changes

The Deomali VDC's efforts have led to several significant achievements that have transformed the community's social and economic landscape

Through persistent advocacy and community mobilization, the village secured legal recognition of their forest land rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. In November 2024, individual forest land rights were granted over 139 acres, and community forest rights were recognized over 413 hectares. This not only legalized cultivation but also protected villagers from eviction and improved their access to government schemes and support services.

In Mathalamba village of Kotia panchayat in Pottangi block, we have granted community forest rights of over 413 hectares of land and individual forest rights of over 139 acres, based on the applications submitted by the villagers for forest land records.
Aparna Khara, FRSL Coordinator

The VDC's interventions increased awareness and confidence among community members, enabling them to actively engage with officials and voice their concerns. This led to greater participation in local governance and strengthened their role in decision-making processes.

With improved understanding of government programs, the VDC effectively advocated for stalled projects, such as the *Jal Jeevan Mission*[11]. Their persistence prompted the commencement of water pipeline installation, ensuring access to safe drinking water.

Collaboration between the Revenue Department and MGNREGA enabled villagers to earn wages through land levelling activities on their own farms, fostering livelihood opportunities while improving agricultural land.

In 2024, the Horticulture Department provided water sprinklers to 17 farmers under a subsidy scheme to improve irrigation efficiency. Additionally, three Self-Help Groups received subsidies to cultivate 150 mushroom beds, diversifying income sources. About 10 community members also benefited from MGNREGA funds to construct cattle sheds, enhancing livestock management and rural livelihoods.

> *Water was available at the nearby stream. But we did not have the capacity to channel it to the farms and utilise it for farming. We were getting some benefit through a small nala. After receiving sprinklers, we have been able to bring water to our farms and use it to earn some income.*
> *Anil Khilla, Deomali VDC member*

Together, these achievements highlight the VDC's role in securing rights, empowering the community, improving access to services, and fostering sustainable livelihood development through effective coordination with government departments.

> *After the VDC was formed, we came to know about various government schemes. We also did beekeeping and cultivating mushrooms with support from ORMAS.*
> *Sonali Saanta, Deomali VDC member*

The VDC plans to address ongoing challenges in the village, with sanitation as a top priority. Open defecation remains widespread due to limited awareness, inadequate water access, and a lack of functional toilets. Additionally, the absence of a dedicated space for meetings, training, and social gatherings hampers community engagement. Acknowledging these gaps, the VDC is actively advocating for the construction of household toilets and a community hall to improve living conditions and strengthen social cohesion.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of the Deomali VDC in Mathalamba was driven by strong community mobilization, consistent capacity building, and effective leadership. Regular training and exposure visits equipped members to navigate government processes, while persistent advocacy ensured follow-up and accountability. Strategic use of schemes like MGNREGA provided financial support, and transparent decision-making built community trust. Systematic record-keeping and a shared sense of ownership

[11] The Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) is a government initiative launched by the Government of India in 2019. The mission aims to ensure that every rural household has access to tap water for drinking, cooking, and other daily needs.

contributed to sustained engagement, enabling the VDC to secure rights, enhance livelihoods, and strengthen local governance.

By mobilizing villagers, advocating for rights, facilitating access to government schemes, and addressing local issues, Deomali VDC has significantly contributed to improving the livelihoods, and well-being of the community. The VDC stands as a model of local leadership and empowerment, demonstrating the transformative impact of organized, informed, and engaged community action.

Measures to improve or replicate this practice

Improving or replicating this practice requires continuous investment in community capacity-building, including inclusive leadership development and hands-on training. Strengthened coordination between local institutions and government departments ensures timely access to schemes and resources. Promoting transparency and inclusive participation builds trust and maintains community engagement. Regular monitoring and documentation help identify challenges early and guide responsive action. Adapting the model to local contexts while promoting collective ownership increases the likelihood of successful replication and long-term impact.

18. Runjamada VDC, Gumelpadar – Reinstating solar power

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalised groups to participate in local development processes / Capacity-building/Empowerment of marginalized groups to increase their knowledge on the local governance systems*
Organisation *- Runjamada VDC, Gumelpadar, EKTA, Koraput district*
Target groups *- VDCs and local governance bodies, Government agencies and NGOs*
Criteria for good practice *-Achievement of positive changes, effective collaboration with authorities*

Introduction

Collective engagement and participation are essential for empowering marginalized communities to take charge of their development. In rural and tribal settings, where access to services and decision-making is often limited, fostering community-driven action helps build accountability, improve service delivery, and ensure that development reflects local needs.

Gumelpadar, a remote tribal village in Kotia GP of Pottangi block, Koraput, Odisha, comprises 41 Scheduled Tribe households relying on agriculture and wage labour. The village faces poor road connectivity, inadequate sanitation, limited education and health facilities, and erratic electricity supply. To address the power issue, the Odisha Renewable Energy Development Agency (OREDA) installed a solar mini-grid in 2016, electrifying all 41 homes. Each household received 4–5 lights, and many later added fans, TVs, and refrigerators, operating entirely on solar energy. This renewable energy solution significantly improved living conditions and access to basic amenities.

However, after OREDA's five-year maintenance commitment ended in 2021, the solar system in Gumelpadar began to fail due to deteriorating batteries. As a result, lighting and power supply became unreliable, especially at night, disrupting daily life and leaving the village in darkness for nearly a year.

Intervention



Figure 28 Solar panel installation at Runjamada village

The Runjamada Village Development Committee (VDC), consisting of 15 members (8 male and 7 female), aged between 24 and 55, played a proactive role in addressing the issue.. Strengthened through the SAMAHITA project, the committee organized regular meetings to discuss the problem and successfully mobilized the entire community to take collective action. Women were encouraged to

take on leadership roles, such as Basanti Mari, who serves as secretary and helps women voice their concerns and participate actively in decision-making, thereby strengthening gender inclusion within the committee.

The VDC submitted applications to key authorities, including the Block Development Officer (BDO), District Collector, and the Chief Minister of Odisha, urging prompt repairs. Their persistent advocacy led to OREDA replacing the damaged batteries and renewing their commitment to maintain the solar power system for the next five years.



Figure 29 Runjamada VDC members

Each day, one family in the village is assigned to clean the solar unit to maintain its proper functioning. To support ongoing maintenance, the Village Development Committee (VDC) collects a monthly contribution of INR 30 from every household, which is managed through the VDC's account.

Changes achieved

The successful reinstatement of solar power in the village stands as a major achievement of the VDC. With the installation of solar streetlights, community members no longer have to navigate in the dark, significantly improving safety during evening hours, particularly for women and children. The availability of lighting has also extended the time available for studying and working, increasing productivity and learning opportunities. Replacing kerosene lamps with clean solar energy has not only reduced air pollution and carbon emissions but also contributed to a healthier living environment.

Access to reliable electricity has enabled the use of essential appliances such as fans, televisions, and refrigerators, along with mobile phones, thereby enhancing communication, comfort, and overall quality of life in the community.

The community now actively participates in maintaining the system, recognizing its value and ensuring its sustainability. Through this process, the VDC also learned the importance of engaging with government bodies, further strengthening local governance and coordination.

Factors that made this practice successful

Several key factors contributed to the success of this practice. Empowered local institutions like the VDC effectively bridge the gap between the community and government administration. Women actively participate in decision-making processes, raise their voices on key issues, offer suggestions to the group, and contribute to community development efforts. Solar mini-grids provide a practical solution for electrifying remote villages, but their long-term success relies heavily on active community-based maintenance to keep systems functional and sustainable. Sustainability is achieved through a combination of technical upkeep and ongoing community engagement. Additionally, regular, documented communication with authorities proves to be a powerful tool for advocacy and ensuring timely action.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve and replicate this practice, strengthening community capacity for technical maintenance through regular training would be essential, ensuring local members can promptly address issues. Establishing clear maintenance funds managed transparently by the community can sustain repairs and upgrades. Encouraging stronger partnerships between local committees and government agencies will facilitate faster responses and resource support. Replication in other remote villages should prioritize empowering local institutions like VDCs, promoting collective ownership, and integrating solar mini-grid solutions tailored to specific community needs and capacities. Regular monitoring and feedback mechanisms will help adapt the system for long-term success.

19. Sapajhola VDC, Salempadar – Driving community through collective action

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalised groups to participate in local development processes/ Capacity-building/Empowerment of marginalized groups to increase their knowledge on the local governance systems*
Organisation *- Sapajhola VDC, Salempadar and EKTA, Koraput*
Target groups *- Marginalized rural and tribal communities, NGOs and development practitioners, Government agencies and policy makers*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, effective collaboration with authorities*

Introduction

Collective action is a powerful tool that enables marginalized groups to build their capacities and actively engage in local development. By coming together, community members, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can pool resources, share knowledge, voice concerns, and work collaboratively to address common challenges.

Salempadar is a remote tribal village in Kotia Gram Panchayat, Pottangi block, Koraput district, Odisha. Located 18 km from the Gram Panchayat headquarters, it has 66 households, including 64 from Scheduled Tribes and 2 from Scheduled Castes, with a population of 271. Agriculture and wage labour are the main livelihoods, with villagers growing millets, paddy, bananas, beans, ginger, and other seasonal crops for food security and income.

Before the SAMAHITA project, governance in the village was weak. Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members lacked a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, limiting their ability to address community needs. There were no formal platforms for community members to raise concerns or seek solutions, and access to government services was especially limited for vulnerable groups. The panchayat office was largely non-functional, with important meetings like the Palli Sabha held infrequently. Public participation in local governance was minimal, with women's involvement particularly low. This kept the village marginalized, with many unable to improve their living conditions.

Interventions

As part of the SAMAHITA project, EKTA facilitated a series of strategic interventions in Salempadar village to revitalize local governance and promote inclusive community development, with active involvement of community members. A key step was organizing regular village meetings, which helped create space for open dialogue and collective decision-making.

To institutionalize this process, a Village Development Committee (VDC) was formed, serving as a representative platform for planning and coordinating grassroots development initiatives. The VDC comprises 15 members, including 8 men and 7 women, all from the Scheduled Tribe (ST) community. The members are between 20 and 53 years of age. The VDC's capacity was gradually strengthened through focused training, regular meetings, exposure visits to other villages, and interface events with key stakeholders. These activities enabled members to better understand governance structures, access government schemes, and advocate for community needs.

A participatory Village Development Plan was also developed using methods like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Objective Situation Diagnosis (OSD), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and goal-free discussions. This process ensured that all voices, especially those of women and marginalized groups,

were included in setting priorities for the village's growth. Through these interventions, the community began to reclaim ownership over local development and governance.

Functioning of VDC

The VDC in Salempadar plays a key role in identifying local issues and taking collective action to resolve them. It operates through focused subcommittees, each responsible for key areas of community development:

- ***Education and cleanliness committee** - Comprising three members, this committee works to bring school dropouts back into the education system and counsels parents when children are irregular in attending school. It also leads cleanliness drives, with at least one member from each household participating twice a year, especially during major events such as weddings or festivals.*
- ***Health committee** - Supported by NALCO's Mobile Health Units (MHUs), which provide free check-ups, medicines, and referrals, the health committee mobilizes villagers needing care and offers basic first aid. Their efforts ensure timely access to primary healthcare services.*
- ***Livelihood committee** -This committee supports farmers by providing information on organic compost preparation, promoting organic farming techniques, and assisting with crop insurance applications to safeguard agricultural income.*

Overall, the VDC has emerged as a central body addressing diverse community needs, such as education, health, sanitation, and livelihoods. It has significantly strengthened local governance and encouraged community ownership and self-reliance.

Changes achieved

The VDC in Salempadar has strengthened community participation and local governance, effectively addressing critical needs in education, health, sanitation, and livelihoods. It has fostered unity, enabled collective action, and improved access to services—laying the groundwork for sustainable development. As one community member shared, *"VDC helaru besi bhala hela. Unity badhichi, misiki jauchu, sabu kamma hei paruchi,"* ("Ever since the formation of the VDC, things have improved a lot. Unity among us has increased. We work together, and all the work is getting done.")

As a result of the intervention, Village Development Committee (VDC) members became active and instrumental in strengthening local governance and community engagement. They began conducting monthly village meetings , creating a consistent platform for dialogue and collective decision-making.

VDC members successfully identified key village-level issues and brought them to the attention of relevant authorities by participating in nodal meetings, Gram Sabha sessions, and Block Nodal Meetings. Their active involvement ensured that community concerns were acknowledged at multiple governance levels.

Additionally, VDC members took the initiative to submit formal applications to the District Collector's office, advocating for the village's development needs and helping bridge the gap between the community and the district administration.

Today, through the VDC, collective action has become a norm, fostering cooperation and tangible outcomes. The VDC has played a key role in helping community members access essential services such as Aadhar cards, bank passbooks, and caste certificates. It also contributed to securing a mobile tower and a water storage facility for the village. One resident shared, *"VDC hebaru sabu kichi jaani parilu. Kaama bhi houchi,"* ("Through the VDC, we are now informed, and work is getting done.")

Recent infrastructure and land development initiatives

The formation of the Village Development Committee (VDC) in Salempadar has led to meaningful improvements in local infrastructure, resource management, and community well-being. It has become a driving force for community-led planning and coordination, resulting in better service delivery and stronger local ownership of development processes. Key achievements include:

- **Land development** - Levelling of 3 cents each for eight households has enhanced cultivable land and increased productivity.
- **Water conservation** - Check dams worth INR 5 lakhs were constructed under MGNREGA, supporting irrigation and groundwater recharge.
- **Safe drinking water** - Every household now has access to clean water under the Vasudha Scheme, supplemented by a solar-powered borewell.
- **Waste management** - Regular waste segregation practices were introduced, improving sanitation and environmental health.
- **Street lighting** - Funds from the panchayat enabled the installation of streetlights, increasing safety and night-time mobility.
- **Protection walls** - Two protective walls, costing INR 8 lakhs and INR 6 lakhs respectively, were built to prevent soil erosion and safeguard village structures.



Figure 30 Check dam being built

These developments reflect the VDC's role in fostering participatory, inclusive, and sustainable progress.

To sustain and build on current progress, Salempadar plans to implement several key initiatives: construct a drainage system to improve sanitation, build an additional protection wall, and install household toilets to reduce open defecation. A community hall is proposed for meetings and training, while the Antyodaya Awas Yojana will provide housing for the poorest families. Laying paver blocks

will improve internal roads, and cattle sheds will support livestock-based livelihoods. These steps aim to strengthen infrastructure, hygiene, and economic resilience in the village.



Figure 31: Land levelling work for cultivation

These planned interventions aim to enhance infrastructure, improve living conditions, and ensure inclusive growth in the village.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of the initiative in Salempadar stemmed from inclusive community participation, strong local leadership through the Village Development Committee (VDC), and consistent capacity-building support from the SAMAHITA project. Participatory planning ensured that local needs were accurately identified, while regular training and exposure strengthened the VDC's ability to coordinate development efforts. Convergence with government schemes enabled tangible improvements in infrastructure, water access, and land use. The involvement of marginalized groups, especially women, fostered ownership and unity, turning Salempadar into a model of collective action and grassroots governance.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

The experience in Salempadar village demonstrates that with the right support, marginalized communities can become active agents of their own development. The success of the Village Development Committee (VDC) offers valuable lessons for replication in similar contexts.

To improve the model, continuous capacity building of the VDC members is essential. Regular training sessions and exposure visits can enhance their confidence and understanding of governance processes. Promoting the active participation of women and youth will make the committee more representative and inclusive, while also building future leadership.

Digital tools can further empower the VDC by simplifying planning, monitoring, and access to government schemes. Creating strong linkages with local authorities and line departments will help streamline the delivery of services and increase the responsiveness of the system.

Replication in other villages would require identifying committed local leaders, facilitating community mobilization, and ensuring handholding support through civil society organizations or government

initiatives. Peer learning through inter-village exchanges can accelerate adoption by showing what is possible when communities take ownership of their development.

By combining inclusive participation, institutional support, and local leadership, the Salempadar model can be adapted to strengthen grassroots governance and development in other underserved regions.

20. Samsun SHG - Diversified livelihoods through strawberry and apiculture farming

Topic area - Capacities of marginalised groups to participate in local development processes / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programmes
Organisation - Samsun SHG, Uppar Barabanda and EKTA, Koraput
Target groups - Women Farmers, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Women's Collectives, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Development Partners, Government Agencies and Development Programs
Criteria for good practice - Achievement of positive changes, leadership of women and girls, effective collaboration with authorities

Introduction

In the remote tribal regions of Odisha, especially in Koraput district, limited livelihood opportunities and dependence on subsistence agriculture have long constrained economic growth, particularly for tribal women. Faced with low and uncertain incomes, women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as powerful platforms for financial inclusion, collective action, and livelihood diversification.

Uppar Barabanda is a tribal-dominated village under Kotia Gram Panchayat in Pottangi Block of Koraput district. Located about 15 km from the Gram Panchayat headquarters and 50 km from the district headquarters, the village comprises 80 households and a population of 344, most of whom belong to Scheduled Tribes. The primary sources of livelihood are agriculture and wage labour.

The village has five active Self-Help Groups (SHGs), including Samsun SHG, which was formed six years ago. The age of members ranges from 22 to 55 years, with two members being unmarried or single. All members belong to a Scheduled Tribe (ST) community. The group meets monthly and contributes INR 100 per member. With collective savings of INR 70,000, it supports both livelihood activities and financial resilience. The group members were keen to increase their income, which motivated them to explore high-value crops like strawberries and adopt allied activities such as beekeeping. INR 70,000, it supports both livelihood activities and financial resilience. The group members were keen to increase their income, which motivated them to explore high-value crops like strawberries and adopt allied activities such as beekeeping.



Figure 32: Strawberry farming at Uppar Barabanda

The Odisha government promotes strawberry farming by providing tribal farmers with saplings, training, and technical guidance through agencies like ITDA, Horticulture department and ORMAS. With favorable climate and soil conditions, Koraput is well-suited for strawberry cultivation, leading to high yields and improved economic returns. Recognizing its potential, the SHG began strawberry farming in 2024, shifting away from traditional crops like rice and millets. This marked a strategic move toward high-value and market-oriented agriculture.

Interventions

EKTA facilitated exposure visits for SHG members to successful strawberry farming sites in Kotia. Through these visits, the members were introduced to the economic potential of strawberry cultivation, gaining first hand insight into best practices and the viability of adopting similar models in their own village.

These efforts were aligned with state-level initiatives by the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) and the Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Empowerment, which provide inputs and technical support to tribal farmers. The SHG received high-quality saplings, sprinkler systems, mulching sheets, and organic compost, which enhanced water efficiency, soil health, and overall crop productivity.

- Strawberry farming was initiated in 2024 on less than an acre of unused land owned by one of the SHG members.
- Family members, especially the husbands of SHG members, actively supported land preparation, irrigation, and marketing.
- Strawberries were sold directly from the farm in 200g packs priced at INR 100 each, attracting tourists visiting Deomali. Surplus produce was marketed in nearby local markets such as Kunduli and Similiguda.
- Recognizing the role of pollination in improving yields, the SHG also took up apiculture (honey bee farming), supported by ORMAS through the provision of beehive boxes, safety gear and training. While strawberries are self-pollinating, bee activity helped enhance yield and generated additional income from honey.

- The SHG also cultivated sunflower alongside strawberries to diversify farming and enhance income. The combination supports pollination, especially through beekeeping, leading to improved strawberry yields and additional earnings from sunflower seeds and honey.

Changes achieved

The journey of the Samsun SHG from traditional farming to high-value agriculture highlights the transformative impact of integrated support, community-driven initiatives, and access to knowledge. Their transition to high-value farming and allied activities has led to a visible improvement in household incomes, food security, and community participation.

The adoption of strawberry and beekeeping was a turning point. In 2024, the group earned INR 7–8 lakhs in seasonal income from strawberries, sunflowers, and honey. This reduced their reliance on moneylenders and allowed reinvestment in crops like ginger, chilli, and beans, strengthening financial independence and food security.

Higher incomes also enabled members to afford school fees, healthcare, and household needs, improving overall well-being. Training in agriculture and apiculture boosted members' skills, confidence and valuable knowledge in high-value crop production, positioning them as rural entrepreneurs.

"The income I earned from strawberry farming helped me invest in ginger and coriander cultivation. For the first time, I didn't have to borrow money to start the next crop. It has made a big difference in managing household expenses, school fees, and health needs."

Jime Pangi, Secretary, Samsun SHG



Figure 33: Samsun SHG members in their strawberry farm

The SHG now plans to expand cultivation, involve more members, and improve marketing by targeting institutional buyers and farmers' markets. They also aim to produce value-added items like jam, juice, and branded honey, demonstrating a strong model for replication in other tribal areas.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of the Samsun SHG's livelihood diversification stems from several key factors that together created a sustainable and empowering model for rural women.

Shifting from traditional crops like rice and millets to high-value options such as strawberries, along with allied activities like beekeeping and vermicomposting, significantly improved income security and reduced seasonal risks. Support from institutions such as ITDA, ORMAS, and NGOs like EKTA provided essential inputs, training, infrastructure (sprinklers, mulching sheets), and market linkages, enabling the SHG to build a more sustainable and diversified livelihood model.

Using previously uncultivated land for strawberry farming showed how underutilized resources can be transformed with proper planning. Beekeeping complemented crop production by improving pollination and generating extra income, demonstrating the value of integrated livelihoods.

Community and family support, especially male involvement in land preparation, irrigation, and marketing, contributed to smooth operations. Direct sales at local markets like Kunduli and Simliguda ensured better prices, highlighting the role of strong market linkages in sustainability.



Figure 34 Beekeeping along with strawberry farming

Exposure visits to successful models, such as in Kotia, boosted confidence and enabled peer learning. Most importantly, collective action through the SHG fostered savings, shared risks, and joint decision making across key areas such as crop planning, input procurement, division of labour, pricing,

packaging, and marketing. This collaborative approach empowered women both economically and socially to adopt new livelihoods and emerge as community leaders.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To further enhance the Samsun SHG model's success, expanding access to advanced training in sustainable farming techniques and post-harvest management would boost productivity and increase income. Introducing value addition processes, such as strawberry processing or honey packaging, could increase incomes and open up new market opportunities. Strengthening digital literacy among SHG members would also enable better market access through online platforms and improve record-keeping and financial management.

Replicating this model in other tribal and rural areas requires building strong local partnerships with government bodies like ITDA and ORMAS, as well as NGOs, to provide technical support, inputs, and market linkages. Identifying motivated women leaders who can mobilize their communities and foster collective action is essential. Ensuring easy access to credit and encouraging family and community involvement will help sustain such initiatives.

Integrating allied activities like beekeeping and vermicomposting alongside high-value crops can create resilient, diversified livelihoods. Finally, facilitating peer learning and exposure visits will inspire confidence and enable quicker adoption of successful practices. With these steps, the model can be scaled effectively to empower marginalized groups across remote and tribal regions.

21. Jhadeswar OPD - Using digital tools to access Government schemes

Topic area - Access to decision-making and governance spaces / Capacity-building/Empowerment of marginalized groups to increase their knowledge on their rights as per national and international human rights instruments
Organisation - Jhadeswar OPD, Badapada and EKTA, Koraput
Target groups - OPDs, NGOs and development agencies, Policy makers and advocacy groups, youth clubs and community groups, Local government bodies (Panchayats, Block Offices)
Criteria for good practice - Achievement of positive changes, digital inclusion

Introduction

Access to government schemes and entitlements remains a major challenge for marginalized communities, especially men and women with disabilities, in rural and tribal regions. Limited information, bureaucratic hurdles, and social exclusion often prevent them from claiming their rights.

In response to these barriers, the Jhadeswar OPD (Organization of Persons with Disabilities) was established in 2023 in Badapada village by Jagannath Gadwa, a 29-year-old youth with a physical disability. Founded with a vision of empowerment and equality, the OPD aims to build self-confidence and independence among persons with disabilities, while challenging deeply rooted social stereotypes. It promotes the belief that persons with disabilities are equal members of society—fully capable of leading, contributing, and achieving their aspirations.

Since its formation, Jhadeswar OPD has emerged as a local catalyst for inclusive development, earning recognition for its proactive role in community upliftment, rights advocacy, and livelihood planning. By fostering leadership among persons with disabilities and creating a platform for collective action, the group exemplifies how community-led initiatives can bridge exclusion and build a more equitable and empowered future.



Figure 35 Jagannath Gadwa, Jhadeswar OPD leader

How it started

Jagannath Gadwa, a 29-year-old graduate from Vikram Dev College, faced a life-altering setback in 2018 when paralysis left him with limited mobility. Despite the challenges, his commitment to social service remained strong. In his village of Badapada, where education was often neglected, he began teaching children from Classes 1 to 10, reaching around 60–70 students between 2021 and 2024. His informal classes combined academics with yoga, physical activity, and motivation, raising educational aspirations in the community.

When health issues forced him to pause teaching, Jagannath turned his focus toward supporting others with disabilities. Recognizing the widespread lack of awareness and difficulty in accessing government schemes, he founded the Jhadeswar OPD in 2023, a collective platform for persons with disabilities to support one another and advocate for their rights.

Jagannath's own journey inspired the initiative. He explains, *"People in the village were mostly unaware of government schemes for persons with disabilities and didn't know how to access them. It was hard to navigate the process alone, but coming together as a group (OPD) made it easier to understand and claim available benefits. That idea motivated us to form the OPD."*



Figure 36: Jhadeswar OPD members

Today, the OPD promotes inclusion, empowerment, and improved access to entitlements for people with disabilities in the village.

Membership and organization

The Jhadeshwar OPD comprises 11 members, including 3 women and 2 men as core members, while the remaining are general members drawn from the wider community of persons with disabilities in the village. To promote inclusive representation, all other persons with disabilities residing in the village have also been enrolled as general members of the OPD. Jagannath Gadwa is one of the primary members of the Jhadeswar OPD.

The OPD maintains comprehensive documentation for all its members, including personal details, disability certificates, livelihood information, and contact records. This systematic recordkeeping plays

a vital role in facilitating timely and accurate applications for various government welfare schemes, enabling members to access essential services, entitlements, and benefits without delays.

A joint bank account has been opened in the name of the group. The members contribute through regular monthly savings, strengthening the group's financial stability and preparedness for future initiatives.

Activities of the OPD

- **Regular meetings** - The OPD conducts regular meetings to discuss challenges, raise awareness about disability rights, and inform members about government schemes.
- **Advocacy for rights** - The OPD actively advocates for the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities at the local, block, and district levels.
- **Engagement with local governance**- The group works closely with Panchayats and government bodies to promote inclusive development and ensure disability issues are addressed. They have good relations with government officials, which helps them to be part of various schemes.
- **Digital advocacy** - Jagannath Gadaba and the OPD are active on social media and digital platforms like YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and government portals. They use these tools to stay connected, learn, advocate online for their rights and solve problems. The group demonstrates a strong culture of self-learning and digital engagement.

Changes achieved

Initially, the Jhadeswar OPD's focus was limited to forming the group, with little awareness of government schemes. Today, its members not only apply for entitlements for themselves but also help others in the village do the same. Jagannath reflects, "*I got to know about the rights of people with disabilities much better. Earlier, we were reluctant to meet government officers, but SAMAHITA helped me understand our rights and gave us the confidence to approach them. They help us resolve our issues and provide training. We even got to celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, something we didn't know about before*."

Through SAMAHITA's support, members have gained stronger knowledge of institutional development, legal rights, and entrepreneurship. The OPD has also effectively used digital platforms to raise issues and resolve long-pending cases.

One notable success involves Padma Gadwa, a 35-year-old woman from Alia Gram Panchayat with a 40% locomotor disability. Despite years of efforts and valid documentation, her disability pension application had been stalled for over a decade. After Jagannath posted a tweet tagging the SSPD, District Collector, and Chief Minister, her pension was approved within two hours. She now receives INR 1,000 per month. Similarly, Padmini Mali's case was also resolved through digital advocacy.

Jagannath himself received his Unique Disability ID (UDID) card after raising the issue through a tweet, demonstrating how digital platforms can effectively expedite access to entitlements. Cluster Coordinator K. Madhavi remarked, "*Government officials now prioritize Jagannath's requests because they know if they don't, he might tweet about it!*"

These examples reflect the OPD's growing confidence, digital engagement, and ability to drive meaningful change for persons with disabilities in the community. The Jhadeswar OPD is an inspiring example of how grassroots organizations of persons with disabilities can use digital platforms to strengthen communication, exercise their rights, and access entitlements more effectively.

Jagannath says, "*Persons with disabilities should be self-reliant, aware of their rights, and informed about government schemes and benefits available to them. With the right support and knowledge, they can lead a dignified and independent life like anyone else. In the digital age, OPDs must embrace technology to improve communication, raise awareness, and ensure better access to rights and services for persons with disabilities.*"

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of the Jhadeswar OPD can be attributed to several key factors. First, strong leadership by Jagannath Gadwa, whose personal experience and determination inspired and mobilized the community. His commitment helped build trust and encouraged others with disabilities to participate actively.

Second, capacity-building support from the SAMAHITA project played a crucial role in enhancing awareness about rights, government schemes, and digital tools, empowering members to confidently engage with authorities and claim entitlements.

Third, the use of digital platforms for advocacy significantly accelerated the resolution of long-standing issues, breaking traditional barriers and increasing accountability among government officials.

Fourth, the OPD's inclusive approach, focusing not only on individual benefits but also collective support, fostered solidarity and strengthened the community's voice.

Together, these factors created a supportive environment where persons with disabilities gained knowledge, confidence, and access to resources, leading to tangible improvements in their lives.

Challenges

Many members and carers have limited education and lack access to digital tools, which makes it difficult for them to effectively engage with online platforms for advocacy and information.

Livelihood remains a major challenge for persons with disabilities and their careers, who often face limited access to income-generating opportunities, skill training, and inclusive employment.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To further enhance the effectiveness of the Jhadeswar OPD, expanding digital literacy and access to technology among members is essential, enabling more individuals to use online platforms for advocacy and information. Strengthening partnerships with government agencies will ensure smoother coordination and quicker resolution of disability-related issues.

Replicating this model in other villages requires identifying motivated local leaders like Jagannath, who can inspire trust and mobilize their communities. Continuous capacity-building and easier access to government schemes will empower new groups to advocate effectively.

Additionally, integrating livelihood training and entrepreneurial support can broaden the impact by helping persons with disabilities achieve economic independence alongside social inclusion. For example, the OPD plans to leverage the skills of three members who make popular sweets during fairs and weddings. Currently limited by lack of support, they intend to start a collective sweet-making enterprise. With support from the SAMAHITA project, including initial investment, packaging, marketing, and social media promotion, this initiative aims to expand their reach and income.

22. Ambedkar Youth Club – Youth action for community development

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Youth engagement, participation and collective action to address community matters*
Organisation *- Ambedkar Youth Club (AYC), Sankaudi and EKTA, Koraput*
Target groups *– Youth group*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, effective collaboration with authorities*

Introduction

Youth are powerful agents of change. When organized and empowered, they can drive inclusive and sustainable development—especially in rural, remote, and tribal regions, where marginalized communities often face barriers to participation, leadership, and opportunity. Youth-led initiatives in such contexts can play a crucial role in bridging these gaps and fostering social equity.



Figure 37 AYC members

The Ambedkar Youth Club (AYC), established in the village of Sankaudi under Randapali Gram Panchayat in Jeypore Block, Koraput District, stands as a strong example of grassroots youth action. Initially formed by a group of sports-enthusiastic youth to promote physical activity and team spirit, AYC has since evolved into a vibrant platform for community development, cultural preservation, sports promotion, and youth empowerment.

As of today, AYC has approximately 50 active members between the ages of 18 and 40, with an equal gender distribution (25 male and 25 female). The group comprises predominantly Scheduled Tribe (ST) members (45), along with 4 from Scheduled Castes (SC) and 1 from the General category, and is supported by the SAMAHITA project. Through collective leadership and consistent engagement, its members have become key contributors to the village's social and developmental progress, demonstrating how organized youth efforts can transform communities from within.



Figure 38 AYC members after winning a football tournament

Key activities

The AYC actively engages in a wide range of community-focused initiatives.

AYC encourages physical fitness and teamwork through regular participation in inter-village volleyball and cricket tournaments. National and local commemorative events like Independence Day, Ambedkar Jayanti, and Saheed Laxman Nayak Jayanti are observed to instil civic values and pride among youth.

Cultural preservation is central to AYC's efforts, with the club organizing traditional festivals such as *Ganesh Puja, Chaiti Parba, and Bol Bom*, fostering unity and social harmony.

Members also lead tree plantation and cleanliness drives, support sanitation efforts, and volunteer during community events like weddings. They actively participate in Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings, raising youth issues and promoting inclusive election participation.

With support from the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) fund, AYC established a clubhouse that hosts youth activities, tuition classes, and community events. Gym equipment was procured through member contributions, offering affordable fitness access. The club also conducts career counselling sessions for students.

Changes achieved

The club has sparked meaningful transformation among the village youth, fostering a vision that extends beyond individual growth to the holistic development of their community.

> *"In our Ambedkar Youth Club, all the youth of the village come together to engage in sports, cultural activities, and developmental work for the progress of our village. Through this, unity and cooperation are growing among the young people. By joining the club, we are able to develop our leadership qualities, team spirit, and sense of social responsibility. Along with this, there is noticeable improvement in cleanliness, educational awareness, and sports activities in the village.*
> *As a member of the club, I actively participate in all its activities, helping in village cleanliness drives, youth awareness camps, and organizing cultural programs. Ambedkar Youth Club teaches us unity, discipline, and the spirit of social service. Through it, we are becoming aware, responsible, and active citizens."*
> *Debendra Nayak, Ambedkar Youth Club, Sankaudi*

Youth participation in governance has grown significantly. Once limited to attending Panchayat meetings, club members now actively identify issues and submit formal proposals. In the past year, they raised requests for clubhouse repairs, playground development, and sports equipment, demonstrating their increasing influence and commitment to shaping the village's future.

The active involvement of girls in the club has boosted their participation in community activities and raised awareness on gender equality, fostering a more inclusive social environment. Financial literacy training by SAMAHITA has equipped youth with essential skills in saving, budgeting, and effectively using formal banking systems.

With support from the SAMAHITA project, AYC has improved its internal processes, strengthening group functioning and decision-making. Exposure visits to other youth clubs have helped members exchange ideas and build their capacity for leadership and community engagement.
K. Madhabi, Cluster Coordinator, SAMAHITA

Beyond development initiatives, the club preserves cultural traditions, promotes civic participation, and creates opportunities in sports and livelihoods, fostering leadership and social responsibility among youth.

Factors that made this practice successful

The AYC's model of youth engagement in village development has proven successful self-driven approach, strong community participation, and alignment with local development priorities.

Several factors contributed to its success. Organizing youth into well-structured groups with proper guidance laid a strong foundation for community development. Regular engagement fostered unity, responsibility, and improved planning skills, empowering youth to actively contribute to village development.

The youth club emerged as versatile platforms, integrating culture, sports, education, livelihoods, and local governance. This multi-purpose approach kept young people engaged across different areas of community life, helping them build diverse skills and deepen their involvement.

A key lesson from this experience is that with proper organization, consistent support, and meaningful opportunities, youth groups can become powerful drivers of positive change in their communities.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To enhance its impact and ensure sustainability, the AYC has taken concrete steps. It is pursuing official registration to access support from government and NGOs and strengthen its role in local development. Opening a dedicated savings account will improve financial transparency and management.

While AYC has actively engaged youth in sports, culture, and service, there's scope to enhance inclusion of youth with disabilities. Members should be trained on disability inclusion, and partnerships with DPOs and health workers can help reach more youth. Events should be accessible and activities adapted to diverse needs, with dedicated funds to support inclusion.

The club plans to launch skill-building and income-generating initiatives, such as leasing a village pond for fish farming, to promote entrepreneurship and steady income for members. With proper training

and support, this initiative could serve as a stepping stone toward broader economic empowerment within the community.

AYC is also committed to environmental and public health efforts, including tree planting with regular maintenance and biannual village-wide cleanliness drives. These activities aim to improve the local environment and foster community responsibility. To increase impact, the club should involve youth in regular maintenance, raise awareness through local partnerships, and track progress with simple monitoring tools.

By combining youth leadership with practical, community-focused initiatives, the AYC presents a replicable model for empowering rural youth and promoting sustainable development.

23. Van Dhan Vikas Kendra (VDVK) and VDC in Podeiput – Empowering tribal livelihoods

Topic area *- Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process/ Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programmes*
Organisation *– Van Dhan Vikas Kendra (VDVK) Podeiput, Laxmibai VDC Podeiput, and EKTA, Koraput*
Target groups *– Community based organizations, NGOs, Government departments working on tribal development*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, leadership of women and girls, effective collaboration with authorities*



Figure 39: VDVK women entrepreneurs

Introduction

The Van Dhan Vikas Yojana (VDVY) is an initiative by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), Government of India, and is implemented by TRIFED (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India). This scheme aims to improve the livelihoods and socio-economic status of tribal communities by encouraging value addition to Minor Forest Produce (MFP), enabling them to earn better returns through local processing and market access. The scheme provides training, infrastructure, and market linkages to tribal communities, enabling them to process and sell forest products, thereby generating sustainable income and improving their socio-economic status.

In Odisha, the nodal agency responsible for overseeing the implementation of VDVY is the SC/ST Development Department, Government of Odisha, while the executing agency is the Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation of Odisha Ltd. (TDCCOL).

Odisha has 660 Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs[12]), which are organized into 22 VDVK Clusters, positively impacting over 6,300 tribal individuals across the state. In Koraput district, these Kendras are part of the broader initiative to promote sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship among tribal communities. The implementation involves providing training, procurement of machinery for

[12] VDVK - These centres are a key component of the Van Dhan Yojana launched by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and implemented by TRIFED (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India).

processing of produce, and establishment of branding and packaging units to facilitate market access for the processed products.

The VDVK at Podeiput village is an active part of the VDVK Podagada cluster which has a total of 300 women members. The VDVK at Podeiput has around 100 women members who are engaged in various livelihood activities. The focus of the VDVK, is on enhancing the quality and value of forest produce, which includes products such as *Harida, Bahada*, *Neem* leaves, *Bela* leaves, etc.

Interventions

- **Processing of forest products** – The VDVK focuses on processing raw forest produce into value-added products. For example, *Harida, Bahada*, neem leaves, *Bela* leaves, and curry leaves collected from forests are carefully washed, powdered, packaged, and sold under the VDVK's brand name, enhancing their market value and providing better income to tribal gatherers.
- **Tribal entrepreneurship development** - The VDVK promotes entrepreneurship among tribal youth and women by supporting small businesses based on value-added products. This has created new income opportunities and fostered self-reliance. Examples include leaf plate making, mushroom cultivation and seed production, bakery, and millet-based products.
- **Product diversification** - Apart from leaf plate making and processing products like *palua*, *sua chaula*, and *mandia*, the VDVK has diversified into producing oils extracted from forest herbs such as lemongrass oil, curry leaves oil, and eucalyptus oil. This diversification broadens income sources and enhances revenue potential by utilizing a wider variety of forest-based resources.
- **Training and capacity building** - Regular training programs are conducted for tribal community members, especially women, to build their skills in processing, packaging, and marketing forest products. The focus is also on teaching modern techniques in production, hygiene, and product quality management.
- **Collaboration with other agencies -** The VDVK collaborates with government departments such as Horticulture and Agriculture, as well as NGOs like EKTA and CYSD, to improve the operational efficiency of the centers. Additionally, they actively participate in tribal fairs and exhibitions to showcase their products and build connections with potential buyers.

Laxmibai VDC

The Laxmibai VDC was formed in Podeiput village in 2017 with support from EKTA to drive the overall development and well-being of the village community. The VDC comprises 10 members (6 women and 4 men), aged 38 to 49, bringing diverse experiences and perspectives. It is socially diverse, including 5 OBC, 3 ST, 1 SC, and 1 General category member. The formation of the VDC gave local residents, including marginalized groups, a platform to engage actively in decision-making and take responsibility for the village's progress. Lack of a community hall was a major constraint for conducting group activities in Podeiput village. To address this, the VDC made a representation to the panchayat, who sanctioned the construction of a community hall. This facility is expected to greatly support collective activities and strengthen community engagement. The Laxmibai VDC strengthened the implementation of the VDVK in Podeiput.

Changes achieved

The implementation of the Van Dhan Vikas Yojana has had several positive impacts on the tribal communities. The VDVK initiative in association with the Laxmibai VDC, has led to improved tribal incomes, women's empowerment, skill development, and sustainable use of forest resources. It has

strengthened self-reliance among tribal communities and shown strong potential as a model for inclusive and eco-friendly rural development.

> *VDVK helps us utilize the produce from the forest properly. Earlier, we used to make leaf plates by hand but now we have a machine which has helped increase production. These leaf plates are now sold at different locations in the state and helps us earn some income.*
> *Draupadi Naik, VDVK member*

By focusing on the value addition of forest products, the VDVK has significantly increased the income of tribal families. The added value of processed products allows tribal communities to fetch better prices, leading to improved livelihoods. The majority of the beneficiaries in the VDVKs are women, and the scheme has contributed to their economic empowerment. Women are not only involved in the production process but also in decision-making and management activities, thereby increasing their social and economic status. The training and skill development programs have enhanced the capabilities of the tribal people, enabling them to manage production units, improve product quality, and meet market demands. This has led to increased self-sufficiency and reduced dependency on external factors. Through sustainable practices promoted by the VDVK, tribal communities are learning to use forest resources responsibly, ensuring their conservation for future generations.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of the VDVK, in Podeiput can be attributed to several interlinked factors that worked together to drive meaningful community-led development. At the heart of this effort was strong community participation and ownership.

A major strength came from the active involvement of women, especially through the VDVK, where around 100 women were already engaged in livelihood activities. Their organization, motivation, and experience in working collectively laid a strong foundation for the Laxmibai VDC's broader initiatives.

Crucial support came from the SAMAHITA project and EKTA NGO, which provided technical guidance, leadership training, and ongoing facilitation. This support helped build the Laxmibai VDC's institutional capacity and confidence to function effectively.

Equally important was the VDC's ability to engage with local governance structures. Their successful advocacy with the panchayat for the construction of a much-needed community hall demonstrated effective coordination and the ability to mobilize external resources for local priorities. This hall is planned to be used for VDVK activities.



Figure 40 VDVK members meeting

Finally, the initiative's strength lay in its commitment to sustainable and inclusive development, combining infrastructure creation with community empowerment. Together, these factors not only led to the success of the Laxmibai VDC but also set a replicable example of grassroots development done right.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

The VDVK initatiive along with the support of Laxmibai VDC in Podeiput presents a strong grassroots development model, with potential to expand its impact to other communities. To strengthen its capacity, ongoing mentorship is needed in leadership, community needs identification, resource mobilization, project implementation, and fostering active community engagement. Integrating VDCs into formal governance systems like Gram Panchayat planning can institutionalize their role and secure sustained funding and support.

Documenting and sharing the Podeiput experience through case studies, videos, and learning exchanges will support replication efforts.

24. Maa Tarini SHG - Diversifying income sources, strengthening livelihoods

Topic area - Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process / Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programs
Organisation – Maa Tarini SHG, Maliguda and EKTA Koraput
Target groups – SHGs, Government officials agriculture, horticulture), NGOs
Criteria for good practice - Achievement of positive changes, leadership of women



Figure 41: Maa Tarini SHG members

Introduction

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have been instrumental in diversifying income sources for marginalized communities, particularly women. By providing access to savings, credit, and skills training, SHGs enable members to pursue small enterprises and livelihood activities, reducing economic dependence. They also serve as platforms for building awareness and confidence among marginalized members, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to participate actively in local development processes. Strengthening SHGs not only enhances household income but also fosters greater inclusion in decision-making and governance at the community level.

Maliguda is a small agrarian village in Odisha's Koraput district, with around 100 households and a population of 300. Farming here is largely dependent on seasonal rainfall. During the monsoon, villagers cultivate rainfed crops such as paddy, millet, sua, and alasi (linseed). In the winter season, they grow vegetables like beans, radish (mula), potatoes (aloo), and tomatoes, along with flowers including sebti, gendu (marigold), and dahlia.

Formed in 2014 under the Odisha Livelihoods Mission (OLM), the Maa Tarini Self-Help Group (SHG) in Koraput district comprises women from farming households. The SHG consists of 10 members, aged between 28 and 53 years. All members belong to the OBC (Other Backward Class) category. The group focuses on improving livelihoods through collective savings, access to credit, and traditional

knowledge-based farming. Since its inception, it has maintained regular meetings and consistent savings, fostering strong financial discipline among members.

Intervention

The Maa Tarini Self Help Group (SHG) took its first major step toward financial independence in 2015 by securing a bank loan of INR 50,000. The funds were strategically invested in agriculture, particularly in flower cultivation, a traditional practice of the community.

Flower cultivation proved to be highly profitable for the group, generating nearly INR 50,000 in earnings within a year. This success motivated the members to expand the business, marking a shift from their earlier focus on vegetable cultivation to a more market-driven approach centred on floriculture.



Figure 42 Flower cultivation by SHG members

Although they never received formal training, the women drew on deep rooted traditional knowledge passed down through generations. "*We learnt it from our mothers in law*," they say proudly, referring to the cultivation of marigold (Gendu), Sebti, and Dahlia. The SHG enabled them to scale up this knowledge through better planning, pooled resources, and access to credit. They now collectively purchase saplings—either from local nurseries to ensure high quality female flowers, or by using homegrown seeds, balancing quality and cost. As they say, "*Paisa misei ki chara kinuchu – jahara jete darkar, chara ku dekhi ki bhag karibe*," ("We combine our funds to purchase saplings and then distribute them according to each member's need, carefully selecting the best ones.")

The flowers are sold in local bazaars, providing a reliable income and strengthening the group's financial independence. During festivals like *Manabasa Gurubar*, the demand for flowers increases, allowing the women to earn higher incomes from sales in local markets.

While the women had been growing flowers earlier on a small scale, the practice expanded significantly after the formation of the SHG. This growth was driven by improved planning, better

access to credit, and the power of collective effort. Building on this success, the group later took larger loans for further livelihood activities like paddy and millet cultivation.

Other activities

In April 2021, the group took a loan of INR 2 lakhs to renovate the village pond, under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)[13] scheme.. Although they were paid for only half of the completed work, resulting in a financial loss, the women are proud of the quality and usefulness of the renovation. The pond now serves as a vital water source for villagers and livestock. The group plans to start fish farming in the pond to generate additional income and better utilize the resource.

Access to drinking water has been a significant challenge in the village. Although the panchayat is responsible for providing infrastructure such as borewells and pipeline water, it is the persistent efforts of the SHG women, through active participation and consistent lobbying in panchayat meetings, that have been crucial in ensuring these facilities are both implemented and properly maintained.

Similarly, the construction of the road was made possible after the SHG groups repeatedly raised complaints and followed up persistently with the panchayat, showcasing their active role in advocating for community development.

Changes achieved

The Maa Tarini Self-Help Group (SHG) has demonstrated how collective effort, and traditional knowledge can drive both economic and social progress. Regular meetings have strengthened group decision-making and fostered a deep sense of cooperation and shared responsibility among members.

Through successful flower cultivation, the SHG has created a reliable source of income, enabling families to meet essential needs such as education, healthcare, and nutrition. This steady income has also encouraged savings and improved financial security.

Beyond livelihoods, the group has played a key role in community development. Their initiatives have improved access to clean drinking water and led to vital infrastructure upgrades, including the renovation of the village pond and internal roads. These changes have improved mobility, especially during the rainy season, and raised the overall quality of life.

The Maa Tarini SHG's journey reflects the power of women-led, community-driven action in fostering inclusive and sustainable rural development.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of the Maa Tarini Self Help Group stems from several key factors. Regular, meetings, where all members participated, fostered strong group cohesion and collective decision-making. The members' deep-rooted traditional knowledge of flower cultivation, combined with access to credit,

[13] MGNREGA is India's flagship rural development program. It aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing guaranteed wage employment to rural households. It gives a legal guarantee of at least 100 days of wage employment per year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

enabled them to scale up their livelihoods effectively. Timely capacity-building and financial support empowered members to take ownership of their development. Persistent advocacy and collaboration with local authorities helped secure vital infrastructure improvements. Together, these elements created a sustainable model of economic empowerment and community development.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To build on Maa Tarini SHG's success, formal training in advanced floriculture and solutions like drip irrigation and drought-tolerant varieties can enable year-round flower cultivation despite water scarcity. Access to extension services and government schemes will strengthen sustainable, climate-resilient farming.

Diversifying income through mushroom cultivation reduces economic risks. With training completed, the group needs support in sourcing quality spawn, affordable units, and market linkages. Government schemes and technical guidance can enhance this livelihood's viability.

Strengthening market and value chain connections will secure better prices and demand. Empowering members in local governance will help them advocate effectively. Partnerships with government programs and NGOs can provide technical support and resources, aiding replication in similar communities.

25. Maa Bhawani Carer Group – Building infrastructure through advocacy

Topic area - Access to decision-making and governance spaces / removing participation barriers
Organisation - Maa Bhawani Carer Group, Majiguda and EKTA, Koraput
Target groups – Persons with disabilities, OPDs, Carer Groups, PRIs, Government officials
Criteria for good practice - Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, leadership of women, effective collaboration with authorities



Figure 43 Maa Bhawani Carer Group meeting

Introduction

In Koraput's hilly regions, men and women with disabilities face greater barriers due to difficult terrain and poor infrastructure, limiting their mobility, access to services, and participation in community life. Inclusive development in these areas is both urgent and essential. Capacity-building and empowering marginalized groups with knowledge of local governance are vital to enable their active participation in decision-making, ensuring equitable village development that leaves no one behind. Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and carer groups play a crucial role in advocating for rights and collaborating with communities to develop practical, inclusive solutions.

Majiguda is a small village in P Phulbeda block of Koraput district, Odisha, with 56 households and a population of 212, including 12 persons with disabilities. Disabilities in the village range from hearing and speech impairment to epilepsy, mental illness (MI), and intellectual disabilities (MR). Located in a remote, hilly region, Majiguda faces significant development challenges. Poor road connectivity, limited access to safe drinking water, and erratic electricity supply affect daily life, especially for marginalized groups. For persons with disabilities, these challenges are compounded by mobility issues and restricted access to essential services. A lack of community engagement and low awareness levels have further hindered efforts to address these barriers.

Interventions

In the initial phase of their work, EKTA field staff actively engaged in community mobilization by identifying persons with disabilities through outreach efforts and close collaboration with local

stakeholders. They organized meetings and focus group discussions, providing a space for persons with disabilities to share their experiences, voice common challenges, and consider the benefits of forming a collective organization.

In 2017, EKTA facilitated the formation of the Maa Bhawani Carer Group to promote inclusive development and address the various challenges faced by persons with disabilities in the community, through collective action and representation. The Carer Group consists of 12 members, including 2 males and 10 females, aged 28 to 48 years. The group represents diverse social backgrounds, with 3 members from OBC, 6 from SC, and 3 from ST communities.

EKTA provided targeted training to enhance the Carers' leadership, problem-solving abilities, and awareness of rights, with a focus on local governance and rights-based entitlements. Through this training, members developed skills in leadership, advocacy, and communication, enabling them to effectively guide the organization, represent their interests, and engage with stakeholders. This process helped build confident leaders dedicated to promoting inclusion and advancing disability rights within their community.

Changes achieved

The formation and strengthening of the Maa Bhawani Carer Group, with support from EKTA, showcases the power of collective action, strong local leadership, and timely capacity building. Through persistent advocacy, the group addressed critical issues such as road connectivity, water scarcity, healthcare, and pensions for persons with disabilities—significantly improving community well-being.

With training from EKTA, the group became proactive in resolving local challenges. They successfully advocated for the repair and construction of a damaged bridge and road, escalating the issue from the Panchayat level to the District Collector and securing MGNREGA funds. They also facilitated the installation of a solar-powered borewell and ensured timely road and electricity repairs after heavy rains.

Their efforts helped dozens of households secure disability and old-age pensions by assisting individuals in obtaining necessary certificates. Group President Samari Rana shared, "*Over 1,000 people in our Panchayat now receive pensions because of our intervention. Individuals I also accessed housing, transport passes, and monthly pensions, improving their quality of life."*

Active participation in Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha meetings established the group as a trusted voice for the community. They successfully advocated for priority housing under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana for persons with disabilities, another major milestone in inclusive local development.

Factors that made this practice successful

The initiative's success stems from strong community mobilization, empowered local leadership, and sustained external support. Leaders like Samari Rana played a key role in driving collective action and advocacy. EKTA's training enhanced the group's skills in leadership, rights awareness, and local governance, enabling confident engagement with authorities and access to entitlements.

The formation of a Carer group unified their voice on community issues. Persistent advocacy across governance levels led to tangible improvements in infrastructure and services. Aligning community needs with government schemes like MGNREGA and social pensions helped leverage resources effectively.

Participation in Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha meetings established the group as credible representatives of marginalized voices. Documenting and raising grievances prompted quicker government responses. Collaboration with EKTA and local institutions further strengthened their legitimacy and access to services, creating a model of inclusive, community-driven change.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve and replicate this practice, following strategies can be adopted. First, peer learning and exchange visits between Carers in different regions can foster mutual learning and motivation. Integrating digital tools for tracking grievances, sharing information, and connecting with service providers can enhance transparency and responsiveness.

For replication, it's essential to build strong partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and community institutions to ensure sustained support. Recruiting and training local facilitators or community champions can help adapt the model to different social and cultural contexts. Lastly, embedding the approach into existing government programs or Panchayati Raj systems can strengthen institutional ownership and make the model more sustainable and scalable.

26. Empowering children through Fun and Learning Groups (FLGs)

Topic area - Access to decision-making and governance spaces / removing participation barriers
Organisation - Samparka Baincheswar Kalamahadev SHG and SADHANA, Mayurbhanj
Target groups - Parents and caregivers of children with disabilities, CBR workers, OPDs, facilitators and teachers in early childhood education, local Government and health officials (District/Block Level)
Criteria for good practice - Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality



Figure 44: Sonia with her father and grandmother

Introduction

Children with disabilities often face compounded exclusion due to poverty, gender, remoteness, and social stigma. Discrimination from peers, teachers, and communities limits their ability to learn, play, and grow, leading to isolation and low self-esteem. For younger children in rural or underserved areas, the lack of early learning support and inclusive spaces makes these challenges even greater.

Sonia is a 9-year-old girl from the Santhal tribe living in Bada Baincha village, under Kostha Panchayat in the Suliapda block of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha. She lives with her father and grandmother, who have been her primary caregivers since her mother passed away four years ago. Her mother struggled with alcoholism and did not receive proper care during pregnancy, which resulted in serious complications during childbirth and ultimately led to her death.

Sonia was born with multiple disabilities and has never been able to walk or speak. Due to her disabilities, Sonia rarely leaves home and has minimal interaction beyond her family. She spends most of her time indoors, with little exposure to the outside world. Despite her family's support, her world remains confined, limiting her opportunities for growth, learning, and social inclusion.

Intervention

When Sonia was around three years old, SADHANA, a grassroots NGO working on disability inclusion and rights, stepped in to support her. Mantu Dhir, a member of the Village Level Organisation of Persons with Disabilities (Village Level OPD), reached out to her family and facilitated an assessment, which led to the development of a comprehensive intervention plan.

Sonia was taken to the district hospital for treatment of seizures and referred to the District Early Intervention Centre (DEIC) under the Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) for therapy. A Community-Based Rehabilitation Worker (CBRW) from SADHANA accompanied her family to provide support and learn specific therapeutic techniques. This allowed the CBRW to reinforce the same interventions at home as part of Sonia's individualized care plan. To support her physical development, locally made assistive devices including a sitting aid and standing frame were provided as part of her rehabilitation.

Recognizing Sonia's isolation and the social challenges she faced, Mantu Dhir encouraged her father to bring her out of the confines of their home and engage with the community. In consultation with other parents, Village Level OPD and Village Resource Pool (VRP) members, they decided to create a space where children could come together to learn and grow. This led to the formation of a Fun and Learning Group (FLG), aimed at children aged 5 to 7 years. The idea was to provide an inclusive, experiential learning environment that fosters interaction, play, and development. FLGs support early learning and help shape positive community attitudes toward inclusion, making them a powerful tool for the social and educational development of all children, especially those with disabilities.

Fun and Learning Groups (FLGs) enable children with disabilities to play and learn alongside their peers in their neighbourhood within an inclusive and supportive environment. Each group includes 5 to 7 children, with one or two children with disabilities, and caters to children up to 12 years old. These groups operate collaboratively, involving Village Resource Persons (VRPs), parents, group facilitators, and community members. The group facilitator, chosen by parents and community members, leads the sessions using play-based learning methods to make education engaging and accessible for all children.

A facilitator was carefully selected to lead Sonia's FLG, which initially included 12 children. To ensure effective support, the facilitator received training from SADHANA on inclusive education and child-friendly teaching methods. The facilitator receives an honorarium of INR 1,000 per month, which also covers the cost of teaching and learning materials. Additionally, parents contribute INR 50 per child each month to support the initiative.



Figure 45: Sonia at the FLG

Changes achieved

Gradually, Sonia began to enjoy her time as part of the FLG. Surrounded by children of her age in a supportive and inclusive environment, she started to interact with others and explore new ways of learning.

Over time, Sonia's mobility improved. She began to walk, though with a limp, and even dance in her own joyful way. She is now an active child who plays with peers and joins group activities. With support from SADHANA, the village OPD, and her family, Sonia has made notable progress in mobility and social interaction. The FLG provided her with a safe and stimulating environment where she could learn, play, and form relationships with other children.

Seeing her progress, her father and primary caregiver, Kalipada Marandi is more engaged and supportive in her learning journey.

> *"I've seen a lot of change in Sonia. She can walk on her own now though with limited balance. Initially, she couldn't even sit, so we made a clay chair. Later, we built a parallel bar to help her stand and walk. We even added a swing to reduce her fear. She can't speak much but can express her needs."*
> *Kalipada Marandi, Sonia's father and a VRP*

The village community has become more open and inclusive towards children with disabilities. They realise that with proper support, children with impairments can reduce their disabilities and lead much better lives.

> *"Sonia is now able to come to the FLG on her own from her home. She is very happy when she is with other children and tries to sing when in their company. She participates in group work. Other children also try to help her in her work."*
> *Priyadarshini Dhal, FLG facilitator*

Sonia's journey illustrates how grassroots efforts, grounded in empathy and community ownership, can meaningfully transform lives. The FLG not only welcomed her into a world of play and learning but also sparked a sense of collective responsibility in her village, turning inclusion into a lived and shared experience.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of this practice was rooted in early identification and timely intervention, which allowed Sonia to receive support when it mattered most. Her father's active involvement, guided by trained community workers, ensured consistent care at home. Collaboration among SADHANA, local OPDs, and health services created a strong, community-based support system. Locally made assistive devices made rehabilitation accessible, while the FLG provided Sonia with an experiential and inclusive learning environments to grow. As her progress became visible, community attitudes shifted, leading to greater awareness and inclusion.

How could this practice be improved or replicated?

To further strengthen this practice, regular training for Community-Based Rehabilitation Workers (CBRWs) and FLG facilitators is essential to enhance their skills and deepen their understanding of inclusive practices, leading to more effective service delivery. Additionally, strengthening monitoring systems by actively involving village-level frontline workers and school teachers will improve the tracking of individual progress and enable timely, need-based interventions.

To replicate the model in other rural or low-resource settings, key steps could include:

- Building strong partnerships with local OPDs, community leaders, and parents
- Sensitizing parents and caregivers living in remote areas on the rights of their children with disabilities is also key to achieve greater engagement and sense of legitimacy
- Training community-level workers and volunteers in basic rehabilitation and inclusive education
- Using locally available materials for making assistive devices and learning tools
- Encouraging community contributions to ensure local ownership
- Engaging local governments for integration with existing health and education schemes (such as RBSK and DEICs)

By adapting the model to local contexts and maintaining a community-led approach, this practice can be scaled effectively while staying cost-efficient and inclusive.

27. Community-based mental health support system - Empowering local care

Topic area *- Access to decision-making and governance spaces / removing participation barriers*
Organisation *– BKC Pur OPD and SADHANA, Mayurbhanj*
Target groups *– Persons with mental health conditions, Caregivers, OPDs, FLWs, NGOs*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes*

Introduction

Mental health is a critical yet frequently overlooked component of overall well-being, particularly among marginalized populations. For many women in remote or tribal communities, mental illness is not just a health problem. It is closely linked to poverty, gender inequality, cultural taboos, social stigma, poor access to doctors or hospitals, among others. These issues make it harder for them to receive appropriate care. Often, women with mental illness are taken to local healers or quacks instead of trained doctors. Lack of proper treatment leads to a deterioration in their condition reinforcing cycles of illness and marginalization.



Figure 46 Sanjukta Raj

Mayurbhanj district in Odisha faces unique challenges in mental health care due to its large tribal population, geographical remoteness, and socio-cultural factors. Factors such as superstition, substance abuse, and limited access to healthcare contribute to mental health issues.

BKC Pur, a remote village in Deuli Panchayat under Suliapada Block of Mayurbhanj district, is home to around 700 residents from diverse communities including Bhanja Purana (OBC), Santhal tribe, and Bindhani caste. Agriculture and daily wage labor dominate the local economy, but limited job opportunities drive many youths to migrate. In a setting marked by poverty and survival struggles, mental health often remains overlooked and deprioritized.

Sanjukta Raj, a 35-year-old woman from BKC Pur, is the youngest of four siblings. While her sisters are married and her brother works locally, Sanjukta never attended school and displayed emotional vulnerability from an early age. In her mid-20s, a failed relationship triggered a prolonged episode of untreated depression. For over seven years, she withdrew entirely from social life and daily activities.

Limited awareness and stigma around mental illness, combined with a lack of access to proper mental health care, led her family to seek help from local quacks and traditional healers. Despite spending a substantial amount of money, her condition did not improve, resulting in financial exhaustion. Throughout this period, Sanjukta remained silent, non-communicative, and isolated within her home.

Intervention

After three years of isolation, SADHANA learned of Sanjukta's situation and reached out to her family, urging them to seek treatment. It took four years of persuasion by village level OPD members Ahalya Raj and Sanatan Dhal before her parents agreed to take her to Baripada District Hospital. Sanjukta received professional counselling and medication through the District Mental Health Programme (DMHP).

> *"Initially, it was very difficult to motivate Sanjukta's parents to seek psychiatric consultation for her. Despite repeated requests, they hesitated and avoided taking action. With consistent guidance from SADHANA, we as VRP volunteers continued to counsel the parents patiently, explaining the importance of treatment. Finally, they agreed to take Sanjukta for consultation and began her medication.*
> *Over time, the parents noticed visible improvements in her condition. This change convinced them to continue the treatment, and they now provide her regular medication without interruption."*
> *Ahalya Raj, VRP Volunteer*

Within just one-month, clear signs of improvement began to emerge, and by the third month, she was helping her mother with household tasks. Six months later, Sanjukta had significantly overcome severe depression. Although not fully recovered, she has made significant strides from her earlier state of isolation.

Sanjukta now makes ropes from *Sabai* grass, which is a traditional skill, and she produces around 5 kilograms of ropes daily. Her father helps by selling the ropes at the local market, creating a small but steady source of income for the family.

Significant changes achieved

Sanjukta's recovery has brought noticeable changes in her life, as well as positive effects for her family and community. With access to professional treatment, Sanjukta gradually emerged from a prolonged state of depression. Once withdrawn and silent, she began communicating, participating in daily routines, and reconnecting with her family and community. This marked a powerful shift in her mental well-being.

Her recovery also opened the door to financial independence. By learning to make ropes from Sabai grass, Sanjukta now earns INR 100 to INR 150 per day and contributes to her family's income. To further secure her earnings and encourage financial independence, the family also opened a savings account in Sanjukta's name, marking an important step toward her long-term stability and dignity.

Sanjukta's family feels relieved of the long-standing emotional and financial burden they had carried for years. Her mother describes it as a remarkable recovery, acknowledging both the deep emotional toll and the financial strain the family had endured.

At the community level, her story has become a catalyst for change. Awareness efforts around mental health has begun to break down long-held stigma. Families and community members are now willing to openly discuss mental health issues, leading to a more supportive and understanding community.



Figure 47 Sanjukta doing household chores

Factors that made this practice successful

Several factors contributed to the success of this practice. Persistent community engagement and continuous support from Village Level OPD members helped Sanjukta's family overcome hesitation and access mental health services.

Access to professional care through the DMHP, including counselling and medication, significantly improved Sanjukta's condition. The active involvement of Sanjukta's family in ensuring she received the correct medication regularly, combined with community support in accepting and encouraging the family, played a key role in her reintegration and overall well-being.

Utilizing traditional skills like rope-making enabled Sanjukta to earn an income, regain confidence, and achieve financial independence. Opening a savings account in her name reinforced her dignity and offered long-term security.

This community-based, multi-stakeholder approach combining health services, family involvement, economic empowerment, and local support proved effective in enabling recovery and promoting inclusion.

How could this practice be improved or replicated?

By focusing on the identification, protection, medical care, and reintegration of women with mental illnesses, the programme by SAMAHITA has made a significant difference in the lives of many women and their families. To improve this practice, ongoing training for community workers and families on mental health awareness and livelihood skills can enhance its effectiveness. Strengthening follow-up and monitoring will help track progress and address challenges promptly. Expanding access to affordable mental health services and creating more livelihood opportunities tailored to local skills will further support recovery and independence.

To replicate the model, it is important to build strong partnerships among local organizations, health services, and community groups. Engaging families early, raising awareness to reduce stigma, and using community-based approaches ensure greater acceptance and sustainability. Adapting livelihood activities to local contexts and encouraging financial inclusion through savings or microcredit schemes can also enhance impact in new areas.

28. Building a bridge of communication through sign language

Topic area - Access to decision-making and governance spaces / removing participation barriers
Organisation - Pratidhwani Parents' Association, Gobardhansole and SADHANA, Mayurbhanj
Target groups – Children and youth with hearing and speech impairments, Parents and families, OPDs, teachers,
Criteria for good practice - Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality

Introduction

Every child deserves to learn in an environment where they are seen, heard, and valued. For children with hearing and speech impairment, inclusive education goes beyond access. It is about equity, dignity, and opportunity. Inclusive education seeks to support all learners, but children with hearing impairments often face barriers that limit their participation. These include communication challenges, lack of trained staff, and limited support services. Addressing these barriers is key to ensuring equal opportunities and meaningful inclusion.



Figure 48 Narendra with his parents

Narendra is a 9-year-old boy from Gobardhansole village, located in the Rajabasa panchayat of Mayurbhanj district in Odisha. He lives with his parents and his 14-year-old brother and attends the local government school. Born with a hearing and speech disability, Narendra faced many challenges from an early age. His difficulties in communication created barriers both at home and in school, limiting his participation in everyday activities and learning. Unable to express himself clearly, he often found it difficult to convey his thoughts, needs, and emotions. This led to frequent frustration and misunderstandings.

In school, Narendra faced even greater difficulties. He attends a regular government school that lacks both specialized resources and trained staff to support children with disabilities. The school, which has only three teachers for 62 students and has classes up to the fifth standard, is not equipped to meet his unique learning needs. With no exposure to inclusive education practices, the teachers were unsure how to support him, and his classmates had difficulty communicating with him. Being the only hearing- and speech-impaired child in the school further added to Narendra's sense of isolation.

Intervention

SADHANA, a community-based organization committed to inclusive development, first connected with Narendra when he was 3 years old. Recognizing his needs early on, SADHANA stepped in to provide critical support to both Narendra and his family.

Narendra's journey toward inclusion began with early identification. Community support workers recognized signs of a possible hearing impairment and guided his family to a government hospital for a formal diagnosis. This early referral played a key role in shaping his rehabilitation plan.

Understanding the emotional and practical challenges faced by the family, SADHANA provided parental counselling and capacity building. Narendra's parents received guidance and training to support his development and improve communication at home. Encouraged by SADHANA, they also connected with the District Disability Rehabilitation Centre (DDRC), where Narendra began attending speech therapy sessions. These sessions, tailored to his needs, focused on helping him express himself through residual speech and nonverbal methods.

To foster a sense of community and reduce isolation, SADHANA helped establish the Pratidhwani Parents' Association, bringing together families of children with hearing and speech impairments. Members of Pratidhwani were trained in basic sign language, improving their ability to communicate with their children and creating a peer support system.



Figure 49 Narendra with his friend

In partnership with Pratidhwani, SADHANA also set up the Bhanja Mahabir Fun Learning Centre in Narendra's village. Operated from his home, the centre runs six days a week and is facilitated by his mother, Sunanda Bindhani, who was trained in Indian Sign Language and teaching techniques for children with hearing impairments. Through visual aids and engaging activities such as drawing, games, and yoga, the centre creates a joyful, inclusive learning space where Narendra and five of his peers can connect and thrive.

Recognizing the need for school-level inclusion, SADHANA organized sign language training for teachers at Narendra's school. These sessions equipped them with practical skills and educational materials to support inclusive learning. Teachers were also guided on fostering an inclusive environment where students with hearing impairments are not treated less favourably and can develop independent learning and life skills. To further aid learning, SADHANA introduced adapted books with rich illustrations, making it easier for hearing and speech impaired children to grasp concepts. Family members were trained to use teaching and learning materials effectively to support academic progress at home.



Figure 50 Narendra (R) at his school

Promoting sign language within the school environment was another key step. Wall paintings featuring basic sign language were added to help all students and teachers learn and use it in daily communication. This has made it easier for Narendra and his peers to interact, promoting better inclusion and mutual understanding.

Changes achieved

The wide range of interventions enabled Narendra and his family to interact better and assimilate with the external society. It also helped create a positive ecosystem for a child with disability and saved him from a life of potential isolation and neglect.

> *"He is interested in attending school and participates in activities like cleaning, planting, watering, etc. He is sometimes given the responsibility to monitor the class."*
> *Suramani Hembram, Narendra's teacher*

Over the years, Narendra has shown significant progress in his ability to communicate, thanks to consistent and focused support. He is now able to express himself more clearly at home and in school, which has greatly improved his confidence and participation in daily activities.

> *"Earlier other children were not able to interact with him. Now with knowledge of sign language, the interactions are much better. I also faced a lot of issues in communicating with him earlier. After SADHANA taught us sign language and how to communicate with him through pictures and how to teach him, things have become much easier."*
> *Sunanda Bindhani, Narendra's mother*

The Fun and Learning Centre became a vital space for Narendra and other children, promoting peer interaction and inclusion. Through regular group activities, it helped build confidence and created a strong sense of belonging within the community.

Family alignment was another key factor in Narendra's growth. His mother learned basic sign language through the Pratidhwani Parents' Association, which transformed communication at home and strengthened their emotional bond. She shared, "*Before learning sign language, we struggled to understand our child. Now, we can truly communicate and that has changed everything.*"



Figure 51 Narenda with this school friends

Teachers also became more confident and capable in supporting Narendra's learning. After receiving sign language training and educational materials from SADHANA, they were better equipped to create an inclusive classroom. His class teacher reflected, "*Before the training, I didn't know how to support a child with hearing impairment. Learning sign language helped me connect with Narendra better.*"

To further reinforce inclusivity, visual tools such as wall paintings depicting sign language were introduced in the school. These illustrations helped raise awareness among other students, encouraging empathy and understanding. As a result, the overall school environment became more inclusive and supportive, not only for Narendra but for all children.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of this practice was rooted in early identification and timely intervention, which laid the groundwork for effective support. Active family involvement, especially the mother's training in sign language, played a key role in improving communication and emotional connection at home.

The establishment of a community-based learning space through the Fun and Learning Centre created an inclusive environment for Narendra and his peers, helping reduce isolation and foster social development. Training schoolteachers in sign language and providing them with adapted learning materials ensured better classroom inclusion and academic support.

Finally, the involvement of community groups like the Pratidhwani Parents' Association strengthened peer learning and made the approach more sustainable by building local capacity and ownership.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

To improve the practice, greater investment in professional sign language interpreters and regular, structured training for teachers and families is needed. Incorporating digital tools, visual aids, and accessible learning materials would further support children with hearing impairments, especially in under-resourced settings. Strengthening monitoring and feedback mechanisms could help track each child's progress and tailor interventions accordingly.

For replication, the model should focus on strong collaboration between local NGOs, schools, health systems, and community-based groups. Raising awareness through sustained community sensitization can reduce stigma and encourage participation. Establishing parent support networks, like the Pratidhwani Parents' Association, and setting up inclusive learning spaces at the village level ensures that support is locally rooted, culturally appropriate, and sustainable across different contexts.

These efforts help create an inclusive learning environment where children with hearing impairments can thrive both academically and socially. Most importantly, such interventions empower children with disabilities to flourish as valued members of society with equal rights and potential, rather than being seen as a burden.

29. OPDs driving inclusive livelihoods for persons with disabilities

Topic area *– Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process/ Inclusive action on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship programmes*
Organisation *- Laxmi Narayan Akshyam Sahayaka Sangathan, Chhenadhua and SADHANA, Mayurbhanj*
Target groups *- Persons with disabilities, OPDs, SHGs, Local government agencies and departments, NGOs focused on disability inclusion, economic empowerment*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, leadership of women and girls*

Introduction

Women with disabilities in remote areas face a unique intersection of challenges shaped by gender, disability, and geographic isolation, factors that often compound and deepen marginalization. These overlapping barriers limit their access to sustainable livelihoods. Inclusive action is essential to ensure equal access to skills training, resources, and employment opportunities. Focused and coordinated efforts can help women with disabilities achieve economic independence and live with dignity.

Chhenadhua is a small village in the Laxmiposi Gram Panchayat of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha. It comprises around 100 households with a population of approximately 500 people. Agriculture is the primary occupation, with many families also engaging in crafting products from *Sabai* grass, such as ropes and mats. The village also depends on Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), especially *Sal* leaves, which are used to make eco-friendly plates and offer seasonal income. Goat rearing is another common livelihood, providing both food and financial support for households.

The village is home to a few persons with disabilities. Among them are Jayanti Singh and Aarti Singh, two sisters in their late thirties who have locomotor disabilities. Jayanti has studied up to Standard 10, while Aarti completed her education till Standard 8. They live with their two younger sisters and two younger brothers.

Growing up with locomotor disabilities, Jayanti and Aarti Singh faced significant social challenges. Community members often assumed they were incapable of achieving anything, treating them with a mix of sympathy and neglect. They were often seen as dependent and incapable, with no opportunities to earn a living or contribute meaningfully to their household. This lack of inclusion led to low self-esteem, limited social interaction, and continued economic hardship.

Intervention

In 2004, Jayanti joined an Organisation of Persons with Disability (OPD) called Laxmi Narayan Akshyam Sahayaka Sangathan, which was facilitated by SADHANA, an organization which works for empowering marginalised communities. The OPD had 15 members, and each member contributed INR 10 every month to a collective fund. Motivated by a strong desire to create their own identity, the group aimed to become financially independent and earn respect within the community.

Initially, the sisters made *Bakhar*, a mixture of herbs sourced from the local forest used to ferment *Handia*, a traditional rice drink popular among tribal communities. They sold *Bakhar* to local *Handia* makers, which provided a good source of income for two to three years. However, following their parents' advice to avoid work associated with intoxication, they decided to leave this business.

The sisters then began learning tailoring, receiving training first from Swagatika, a training institution for women, Mahila Kalyan Samiti, Odisha government and later from SADHANA. They started taking custom orders and also made garments to sell on their own. However, after about a year, they had to stop because the pain in their legs made it difficult to operate the sewing machine and continue the work.

Jayanti and Aarti then decided to take up goat rearing, a significant income-generating activity in the district, especially among tribal and rural communities. Goat rearing is a low-cost, high-profit venture that suited their circumstances well. The sisters started with just two goats a few years back. Over time, through consistent care and effort, they expanded their herd to around 65 goats. Each year, they sell approximately 20 goats, generating an income of about INR 3 lakhs, which is significant.

Mushroom cultivation is an emerging activity in Chhenadhua village due to its high demand, good returns, and low input costs. The sisters were motivated by Nabin Kumar Mahanta, an entrepreneur and family friend who is also engaged in mushroom farming and actively encourages others. To gain formal skills, the sisters attended a residential training program on mushroom cultivation at the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK).



Figure 52 Aarti and Jayanti at their mushroom farm

After completing their training, in June 2024, they invested INR 20,000 to start mushroom cultivation on a 1,000 sq. ft. plot of land next to their house. Nabin provided ongoing technical support and marketing guidance. The sisters sell their mushrooms in Baripada, the nearest town. Their younger sister, Satyabati, a graduate, assists them by transporting the produce to Baripada and handling the sales.

The sisters plan to expand their mushroom cultivation to increase revenue, utilizing additional land they already own to create a semi-permanent facility. They also aim to start vermicomposting, using the straw waste from mushroom cultivation along with cow dung and goat droppings to produce organic compost, which will further improve their financial stability.

Changes achieved

The sisters' journey towards economic independence has been transformative, supported by multiple organizations that provided training and encouragement for various income-generating activities. Through these efforts, they have been able to earn a livelihood without being viewed as dependent

on others. Today, the sisters collectively earn around INR 45,000 per month, contributing significantly to their household expenses and managing to save approximately INR 20,000 monthly, greatly enhancing their economic stability.

The sisters also established strong linkages with government departments like the Krishi Vigyan Kendra and the Horticulture department, which provided vital technical and financial support. This partnership has been crucial in sustaining and growing their mushroom cultivation venture.

> *"Earlier, I was scared of going anywhere. After becoming a member of the OPD, I started stepping out of my home and meeting others. Gradually, with our work and the support from SADHANA, we were able to create an identity for ourselves. Our confidence grew, and we ventured into multiple businesses."*
>
> *Jayanti Singh, Entrepreneur*

The sisters' participation in meetings, training sessions, and exposure visits, along with the success of their businesses, has greatly boosted their self-confidence.

Their achievements have brought positive changes at the family and community levels as well. Family members now treat them as equals, offering greater care and support. In the community, attitudes have shifted dramatically. Where once the sisters were doubted and dismissed, they are now respected and encouraged. Community members acknowledge their success and even support their aspirations for marriage and managing households like any other family. From isolation, the sisters have emerged as productive, confident, and respected members of their community.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of this practice was driven by several key factors. The sisters' strong personal determination helped them overcome physical challenges and social stigma, motivating them to pursue financial independence. Their involvement in the Organisation of persons with disability (OPD) provided a supportive community network that boosted their confidence through collective action. Access to targeted training and skill development from organizations like Swagatika and Krishi Vigyan Kendra equipped them with practical expertise. Guidance and mentorship from individuals and organizations, including SADHANA and Nabin Kumar Mahanta, offered crucial encouragement. Diversifying their livelihood activities ensured stable income, while linkages with government departments supplied essential technical support and resources, making their ventures sustainable and successful.

Jayanti and Aarti Singh's journey from facing social exclusion and physical challenges to becoming successful entrepreneurs is a good example of resilience and determination. With the right support, training, and opportunities, they have transformed their lives, gained financial independence, and earned respect within their community. Their story highlights the importance of inclusive development and the potential of persons with disabilities to contribute meaningfully to society when given equal opportunities.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

This practice could be improved and replicated by expanding access to targeted skill development and entrepreneurship training tailored for persons with disabilities, ensuring programs address diverse abilities and interests. Strengthening partnerships between NGOs, government agencies, and local communities would enhance resource sharing and technical support. Establishing mentorship networks can provide ongoing guidance and motivation. Additionally, promoting awareness campaigns to challenge stigma and foster community acceptance will create a more enabling environment. Replication efforts should emphasize family involvement and peer support groups to reinforce confidence and social inclusion, while also facilitating access to financial services like savings accounts and credit to support sustainable livelihoods.

30. Adaptations for effective rehabilitation and inclusion interventions

Topic area - Access to decision-making and governance spaces / removing participation barriers
Organisation – SADHANA, Mayurbhanj
Target groups – Persons with disabilities, OPDs, Caregivers, Development agencies
Criteria for good practice - Achievement of positive changes

Introduction

Rehabilitation is most effective when it extends beyond institutions into the home, supporting independence and quality of life. Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) is an inclusive approach that provides rehabilitation services directly within communities to persons with disabilities, making support accessible, affordable, and culturally appropriate. It empowers families and local health workers to address the diverse needs of persons with disabilities and promotes full participation in community life by addressing physical, social, and attitudinal barriers.

Men and women with disabilities in Mayurbhanj district face challenges in accessing rehabilitation and support services due to geographic, economic, and social barriers. Children with disabilities such as cerebral palsy, multiple disabilities, and intellectual impairments often face challenges with mobility, posture, and performing basic daily activities. While therapeutic services are available at district centres, many families struggle to access them regularly due to distance, cost, and other constraints. Without consistent follow-up exercises at home, these children's progress in rehabilitation and functional independence is often hindered.

Recognizing these challenges, SADHANA has been actively implementing CBR initiatives, focusing on children and individuals with disabilities who require consistent therapeutic support to enhance their independence and quality of life. With support from Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), Village Resource Pools (VRPs), Anganwadi Workers, and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), SADHANA has facilitated the creation of locally adapted aids and appliances for home use. This community-led approach has empowered approximately 140 children and their families to maintain regular home-based rehabilitation, resulting in improved functional outcomes and greater social inclusion.

Intervention

SADHANA, in collaboration with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), led a focused and inclusive effort to support children and individuals with disabilities. The process began with identifying those requiring intensive support through participatory village meetings and targeted household visits, ensuring early detection within the community.

Once identified, professional assessments were facilitated by physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and intellectual disability experts. These specialists worked together to develop personalized home-based intervention plans tailored to each individual's unique needs.

To enhance rehabilitation, SADHANA mobilized local resources and skilled community members to design and adapt low-cost assistive devices using locally available, affordable materials such as mud, bamboo, wood, and tyres. Over 100 home-based rehabilitation aids have been developed, including parallel bars for assisted walking, sitting mud chairs and corner seats for improved posture, modified

wheelchairs to enhance mobility, standing frames and bolsters to build balance and muscle strength, as well as swings designed for sensory stimulation and balance training.



Figure 53: Lundra Murmu on a custom built mud chair

Practical demonstrations were conducted for families, empowering them with the skills to correctly use these assistive devices and perform daily therapeutic exercises at home. Strong emphasis was placed on involving parents and siblings in these daily routines to ensure consistent and effective rehabilitation support.

> *"When we visited the rehabilitation camp organised by SADHANA, the therapist demonstrated how to reduce my son's knee contracture and how to seat him properly in a 90-90 position. At first, we thought it would be impossible to make such arrangements at home.*
> *But with the guidance of SADHANA's CBR personnel, we learned how to make a simple mud chair at home. We even added a bamboo structure in front of the mud chair with which he is trying to stand from sitting. Now, Lundra enjoys using these assistive devices, and we as a family feel so happy to help him in this way."*
>
> *Naga Murmu, Father of Lundra*

Furthermore, coordination was strengthened among community institutions such as Anganwadi Centres, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), and local schools to foster an enabling and inclusive environment. This multi-sector collaboration supports the child's overall growth, development, and social inclusion within the community.

Changes achieved

Home-level rehabilitation interventions demonstrate the transformative impact of simple, community-driven solutions in enhancing the lives of children with disabilities. By utilizing locally available materials, actively involving families, and building the capacity of OPDs and community stakeholders, these efforts have created a rehabilitation environment that is continuous, inclusive, and sustainable. The use of adapted rehabilitation aids significantly improved children's functional abilities, enhancing their mobility, postural control, muscle strength, and independence in everyday activities such as walking, bathing, eating, and social interaction. Families became more empowered, gaining knowledge and confidence to support their children's rehabilitation effectively at home.

"My son, Kamal Lochan, could not stand independently and always needed support. With the help of SADHANA, we were able to create a bamboo frame along with a bamboo board for him to use his hands while standing.
Kamal is very happy using this supportive arrangement, and we as parents feel so glad to see him standing with comfort and smiling with joy."
Rabi Singh, Father of Kamal Lochan

As these positive changes became visible, community awareness grew, and attitudes toward disability shifted, fostering more inclusive and supportive neighbourhood environments. This approach also promoted social and educational inclusion, with many children successfully integrated into schools and community settings, reducing isolation and stigma. Additionally, by providing home-based interventions, barriers related to cost and travel for institutional rehabilitation were minimized, making support more accessible to families.



Figure 54 Kamal Lochan with locally developed rehabilitation aid

Factors that made this practice successful



Figure 55 Lundra Murmu at the FLC

The success of this practice was driven by several key factors. Strong community involvement ensured early identification of children needing support and fostered local ownership. Collaboration with skilled professionals provided tailored rehabilitation plans and expert guidance. The use of affordable, locally sourced materials made assistive devices accessible and culturally appropriate. Empowering families through training and hands-on demonstrations enabled consistent care and rehabilitation at home. Finally, effective coordination among community institutions created an inclusive environment that supported children's overall growth and integration.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

This practice could be improved and replicated by increasing regular training and refresher sessions for community workers and caregivers to maintain quality therapeutic care. Expanding partnerships with local health and education institutions would strengthen support networks. Developing a sustainable supply chain for materials and skilled local fabricators would ensure timely production and maintenance of assistive devices. Incorporating technology, such as mobile apps for monitoring progress of the users, could enhance follow-up and data collection. Lastly, advocating for stronger government support and integration with existing social protection schemes would help scale up the initiative and ensure long-term sustainability.

While challenges such as standardization and scalability remain, this approach offers a replicable model of decentralized care that aligns closely with the core principles of CBR and a rights-based framework for inclusion.

31. A Journey of inclusion - Raising disability awareness in Mayurbhanj through IDPD

Topic area - Access to decision-making and governance spaces/ Empowerment of marginalized groups to increase their knowledge on their rights as per national and international human rights instruments
Organisation – SADHANA, Mayurbhanj
Target groups – Persons with disabilities, Government agencies, Educational institutions, CBOs, PRIs, NGOs, Media
Criteria for good practice - Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, leadership of women



Figure 56: Observing IDPD

Introduction

Mayurbhanj, one of the largest districts in Odisha, comprises 26 administrative blocks and is home to over 54,661 persons with disabilities. Despite the size and significance of this population, awareness around disability rights and inclusion has remained limited. Disability awareness initiatives in the district have primarily targeted school children, with minimal outreach to the broader community. Each year, on the International Day for Persons with Disabilities (IDPD), the district administration organized a single awareness event, which was attended by around 300 school children. Unfortunately, very few persons with disabilities actually participated in these programmes, resulting in a large portion of the disabled community remaining unaware of their rights, entitlements, and available opportunities. This underscores the urgent need for more community-based, participatory, and sustained efforts to promote disability inclusion across the district.

Intervention

SADHANA, an organization actively working in the Suliapada and Baripada blocks of Mayurbhanj district, has been instrumental in strengthening grassroots disability inclusion. It supports a robust

network comprising 87 Village-Level Organisations of Persons with Disability (OPDs), 17 Gram Panchayat-Level OPDs, and 2 Block-Level Networks. Through this multi-tiered structure, SADHANA has helped build local leadership, promote disability rights, and enhance community-based support systems.

SADHANA shifted the focus of IDPD celebrations from the district to the grassroots level, to make disability awareness more inclusive and community-driven. With support from Gram Panchayat-level OPDs, and in collaboration with Panchayats they initiated Panchayat-level celebrations, empowering local communities to lead awareness efforts in their own villages. This shift ensured greater participation of persons with disabilities, especially those who with severe disabilities, by bringing the events closer to their homes and making them more accessible.

Key Overarching Goals

- *Ensure active participation of persons with disabilities in governance and village-level development activities.*
- *Strengthen and promote Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) at local, block, and district levels to amplify collective voices in decision-making.*
- *Build partnerships with Panchayati Raj Institutions, government departments, and community leaders to institutionalize disability inclusion in governance processes.*
- *Facilitate access to government schemes, rights, and entitlements that enhance empowerment and reduce marginalization.*
- *Create inclusive platforms for leadership, visibility, and representation of persons with disabilities in decision-making forums.*

In the initial year, SADHANA took the lead in organizing IDPD celebrations across all 17 Gram Panchayats, providing hands-on support, guidance, and coordination.

From the second year onwards, SADHANA shifted its role from being an implementer to a facilitator. The focus shifted to building the capacity of Gram Panchayat-level federations in key areas such as event planning, resource mobilization, and the effective organization of local awareness campaigns. The federations began contributing in-kind materials and took an increasingly active role in spreading awareness, demonstrating growing confidence and ownership of the process.

IDPD celebrations

The IDPD celebrations take place over a 10-day period, from 25th November to 5th December, at various designated locations. The events aim to raise awareness about the rights and contributions of persons with disabilities, promote inclusion by challenging stigma, and disseminate information on government schemes and support services available to them. Special focus was given to the intersectional discrimination faced by girls and women with disabilities, highlighting the double stigma of gender and disability. Key issues like limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and increased vulnerability to violence were taken up. Efforts ensured that girls and women with disabilities held leadership roles in their OPDs, allowing them to lead actions on both disability



Figure 57: Inclusive games on IDPD

The celebrations include a variety of activities:

- **Rallies and awareness meetings** led by local OPDs, schoolchildren, PRI members, and community volunteers. Participants carry banners, posters, and placards with empowering messages, moving through key village locations such as markets, schools, and Panchayat offices. These rallies are followed by awareness meetings that offer platforms for open dialogue, storytelling by persons with disabilities, and information sharing by resource persons, encouraging collective action toward building inclusive communities.
- **Competitions** such as musical chairs, pot breaking, balloon bursting, ball passing, singing and dancing, *jalebi* races, and Sabai grass rope-making. Persons with disabilities actively participate in every event, showcasing their skills, energy, and enthusiasm, which helps foster stronger community integration and acceptance. Prizes are awarded to the winners.
- **Community meals** where all participants come together, reinforcing the spirit of inclusion, equality, and solidarity.



Figure 58 Engaging children through games on IDPD

Changes achieved

By 2024, Gram Panchayat federations achieved self-reliance by independently mobilizing INR 1,34,000 and successfully organizing International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD) celebrations with strong support from the community and local governance. This milestone reflects the growing ownership of disability inclusion efforts at the grassroots level. Participation and visibility of persons with severe disabilities increased notably through their involvement in community events.

> *"Earlier, we used to hear about IDPD from others. Now, under the leadership of our own organization, we are observing it in our village. This change has given us the confidence that inclusion truly begins when the community itself takes responsibility."*
>
> *Saraswati Nayak, Treasurer, Pragati Madurga Panchayat-Level Sangha, Fania*

Out of 17 CSOs, 15 effectively mobilized funds from local stakeholders, showcasing enhanced leadership and resourcefulness. A total of 41 key leaders were identified across these Gram Panchayats, laying a solid foundation for ongoing and future disability inclusion initiatives.

> *"When persons with disabilities and community members come together to celebrate, learn, and share experiences, barriers naturally begin to break down. Now, inclusion is not just a message, it has become a part of our collective practice."*
>
> *Himadri Nayak, Member, Pragati Madurga Panchayat-Level Sangha, Fania*

Internal challenges, such as the presence of distractor members within CSOs, were recognized and successfully addressed to strengthen organizational focus. Capacity building was also a priority:

A diverse group of 48 CSO leaders, including both women and men with a range of disabilities, gained event management skills, enhancing their ability to organize community-led initiatives. Among them, 27 leaders—balanced across gender and disability types—improved their writing skills for essential communications such as invitations and thank-you letters. Additionally, 15 leaders received training

in preparing utilization reports, strengthening accountability and transparency in managing community led activities.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of this practice came from empowering Gram Panchayat federations and developing strong leadership within Community-Based Organizations. These efforts fostered ownership, enabling local groups to mobilize resources and lead initiatives independently. Capacity-building in event management, communication, and financial reporting equipped leaders to run activities effectively and transparently.

Community engagement increased the visibility of persons with disabilities, reduced stigma, and promoted inclusion. Local fundraising further ensured sustainability without relying on external support. By addressing internal CSO challenges, organizational focus and impact improved.

SADHANA's journey in Mayurbhanj shows how grassroots initiatives, with the right support, can transform top-down efforts into sustainable, community-led change.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

This practice can be improved by strengthening ongoing capacity-building for CSO members, focusing on leadership and financial management. Mentorship and peer learning between experienced and emerging leaders would support knowledge-sharing and problem-solving. Expanding community awareness campaigns would also boost local support for disability inclusion.

For replication, the approach should be adapted to local cultural and socio-economic contexts, with early stakeholder engagement to build ownership. Clear guidelines on resource mobilization and transparent reporting will support sustainability and trust. Strong partnerships between Gram Panchayats, CSOs, and government agencies are essential for scaling up efforts and integrating disability inclusion into local governance.

32. Building leadership among Persons with Disabilities through OPDs

Topic area *- Access to decision-making and governance spaces / Inclusive action on social protection*
Organisation *– SADHANA. Mayurbhanj*
Target groups *- Persons with disabilities, OPDs, PRIs, Government departments, NGOs*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, leadership of women and girls*

Introduction



Figure 59: Block level network meeting of OPD members

Men and women with disabilities often face multiple barriers, including stigma, poverty, limited education, and inaccessible environments, which restrict their participation in social, economic, and political life. They are frequently excluded from leadership and decision-making roles. This is more pronounced in case of with women living in rural areas, and individuals with multiple disabilities.

Leadership is essential for building inclusive, just, and progressive societies. When persons with disabilities are supported to take on leadership roles, it not only empowers them individually but also brings valuable perspectives into decision-making spaces. Strengthening their leadership ensures that development efforts are truly inclusive, representative, and responsive to the diverse needs of the disability community.

Intervention for leadership development

The purpose of strengthening leadership among OPD members is to empower them to advocate for inclusion, address intersectional discrimination, reach underserved persons with disabilities, influence decision-making, and drive meaningful change within their communities. SADHANA's strategy included:

- Facilitating the formation of OPDs and encouraging participation of persons with disabilities with special focus on women, girls, and other marginalized groups, fostering inclusive spaces for interaction and support.
- Conducting regular group meetings to build confidence, share experiences (e.g., challenges faced by women with disabilities, rural poor, or persons from marginalized communities) and strengthen peer support.
- Raising awareness about rights under the RPwD Act (2016), gender equality, government schemes, and legal protections.
- Organizing exposure visits focused on livelihood, advocacy (e.g., with Samarth), and community engagement to broaden perspective and inspire action.
- Encouraging participation in seminars that address both disability rights and gender inclusion, enabling for knowledge-building and networking.
- Providing training in public speaking, advocacy, negotiation, record-keeping, and financial literacy
- with emphasis on creating equal opportunities for women and marginalized members to take leadership roles.
- Providing practical learning opportunities through accompanied visits to government offices to improve communication and build confidence.
- Developing writing skills to strengthen advocacy and reporting, ensuring women and marginalized members' perspectives are represented.
- Assigning responsibilities equitably among members, ensuring women and marginalized groups are actively supported to coordinate meetings, maintain records, represent the group, and lead initiatives.

Changes achieved

The transformation brought about through the strengthening of OPDs has been both individual and collective. With regular engagement, training, and opportunities to lead, persons with disabilities gradually grew more confident and began participating actively in both group and community life.

Many OPD members, both women and men, assumed formal leadership roles such as President, Secretary, or Treasurer, gaining hands-on experience in governance and decision-making. Ensuring gender balance in these positions helped challenge traditional stereotypes and created opportunities for women with disabilities to step into public leadership. These roles not only boosted their public presence but also shifted their standing within their own households. Women, in particular, began taking initiative in managing finances, participating in family decision-making, and advocating for the needs of their siblings, while men developed greater awareness of shared responsibilities and inclusion. At the community level, members began engaging directly with Panchayat representatives, local officials, and service providers not just to resolve their own issues, but to advocate for others with disabilities. In doing so, they emerged as community leaders. Some were even invited to speak

at public events, serve as resource persons, or represent disability rights in local federations and campaigns.

Nishamani Naik - From marginalization to community leadership

Nishamani Naik, 58, from Rangamatia village in Mayurbhanj, faced early hardship, losing her parents young, remaining uneducated, and experiencing community rejection due to her locomotor disability.

Her life changed in 2006 when she joined an OPD formed by SADHANA and became president of the Samparka Vinnakhyama SHG. Through leadership training and exposure visits, she gained confidence and built connections with government officials.

Nishamani has since mobilized 120 disability certificates, facilitated 48 aids and appliances, supported safe institutional deliveries for women with disabilities, and promoted inclusive education. Now a respected community leader, she actively supports vulnerable people and advocates for disability rights, demonstrating the power of inclusive community action.

The OPDs also reached out to identify and include others who were vulnerable, ensuring that no person with a disability remained unheard. They became strong promoters of inclusive and respectful environments, challenging derogatory terms like "*chhota*" or "*kana*" and encouraging the use of language rooted in dignity.

Their practical impact has been far-reaching. OPD members helped people access disability certificates, pensions, assistive devices, and entitlements. They played a key role in advocating for ramps in schools and integrating children with disabilities into community events. Their participation in festivals and public programs reinforced the message that inclusion is not an act of charity, but a rightful place in society.

Nabin Naik - From struggle to social leadership

Nabin Naik, 46, from Birudihi village in Mayurbhanj district, has a locomotor disability and comes from a poor background. Forced to drop out of school after his father's death, he faced both economic hardship and social discrimination due to his disability.

His turning point came in 2008 when he joined an OPD meeting organized by SADHANA. Inspired, he formed the Samarka Vinnakshyam SHG and became its secretary. Over time, Nabin rose through leadership roles, from Panchayat level to Block level Federation President, due to his dedication and training in leadership, financial literacy, and organizational development.

Till date, he has successfully supported the formation and strengthening of 10 OPD groups and one WSHG.

In essence, OPDs have become incubators of leadership, where persons with disabilities evolve from recipients of aid to recognized decision-makers and agents of change in their own lives and communities.

Factors that made this practice successful

The success of this practice lay in its focus on building confidence and leadership from within the community of persons with disabilities. When SADHANA first began working with OPD members,

many were hesitant to speak in public or engage with local institutions. By creating inclusive group spaces through OPDs, individuals gradually gained the confidence to share their experiences and support one another.

Training sessions on rights, entitlements, and leadership helped members understand their roles as both OPD leaders and active citizens. Exposure visits and interactions with officials demystified government systems and empowered members to advocate more effectively.

As members took on roles like president, secretary, or treasurer, they developed communication, organizational, and record-keeping skills, fostering a strong sense of purpose and ownership.

Through active participation in Gram Sabha meetings and community events, OPD members began to shift the public perception, from being seen as passive recipients of aid to active contributors in village development. Consistent support from SADHANA helped nurture confident leaders now driving change in their communities.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

This practice could be improved by expanding outreach to remote and underserved areas to include more isolated persons with disabilities. Strengthening ongoing mentorship and follow-up support would help sustain the confidence and skills developed by OPD members over time.

Integrating technology, such as mobile communication platforms like WhatsApp or other social media groups, could enhance coordination among members and allow sharing of resources, success stories, and timely information.

To replicate the model, a clear step-by-step guide can be developed outlining the formation of OPDs, key training modules, and strategies for community engagement. Partnering with local government bodies and other NGOs early on would ensure better access to resources and legitimacy.

Additionally, involving family members and caregivers in some activities could deepen support systems around persons with disabilities, creating a more enabling environment both at home and in the community.

Overall, sustained capacity building combined with strong local partnerships would help replicate this model successfully in diverse geographic and socio-economic contexts.

33. Inclusion in action – How OPDs are driving village development

Topic area - Capacities of marginalized groups to participate in local development process/ Inclusive action on social protection
Organisation – Pragati OPD, Chandanpur and SADHANA, Mayurbhanj
Target groups – Persons with disabilities, Caregivers, OPDs, CBOs, Local governance bodies and officials
Criteria for good practice - Achievement of positive changes, recognition of diversity and intersectionality, effective collaboration with authorities

Introduction

Men and women with disabilities often face physical barriers, social exclusion, and limited opportunities to participate in community life, making their challenges even more complex. In rural areas like Mayurbhanj, these difficulties are often heightened by limited access to basic services and support. Standard government programmes may not fully address the diverse and specific needs of individuals. This is where OPDs play a vital role. They help identify real challenges on the ground and work with local leaders, families, and service providers to create simple, practical solutions. By doing so, OPDs help make village development more inclusive, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Kumbharduvi is a small tribal village in Chandanpur Gram Panchayat in Baripada block of Mayurbhanj district, primarily inhabited by the Santal community. Most families live below the poverty line and depend on agriculture, goat rearing, and seasonal wage labour for their livelihood. The village faces significant infrastructure challenges, with poor road conditions and frequent waterlogging restricting mobility. The *kutcha* road made tricycle movement impossible, preventing children with disabilities from attending school, while the absence of steps at the pond limited access to basic hygiene. For persons with disability, this often meant being confined to their homes, with little to no mobility outside the village.

Intervention

Pragati Panchayat Stariya Bhinnakhama Sangha (OPD) has been actively involved in the development of Kumbharduvi and nearby villages. Established in 2010, the OPD is a group of 15-members from Scheduled Tribe (ST), all living Below the Poverty Line (BPL) and identifying as persons with disabilities. The group includes 7 males, 7 females, and 1 transgender person, with members aged 19 to 64 years. The members have taken a leadership role in addressing infrastructure and accessibility issues in the region, actively working to improve conditions for marginalized communities.



Figure 60 New access road

It has consistently raised issues affecting persons with disabilities and the larger community, working collaboratively with local governance bodies to find solutions. It has consistently raised issues affecting persons with disabilities and the larger community, working collaboratively with local governance bodies to find solutions.

A notable intervention addressed the long-standing road connectivity issue in Kumbharduvi. OPD members held discussions with the *Sarpanch* and submitted a formal application to the Block Development Officer (BDO). After sustained follow-ups, road construction began in 2017, and six months later, the village finally had a reliable access road, significantly improving mobility for the community members, especially for persons with disabilities.

The OPD also played a vital role in ensuring disability-inclusive infrastructure. In Chandanpur village, a school lacked a ramp for students with disabilities. Pragati OPD submitted an application to the District Education Officer (DEO), resulting in the ramp being constructed within three months.



Figure 61 Providing wheelchairs for the disabled

Beyond infrastructure, Pragati OPD has actively supported persons with disability in obtaining disability certificates, wheelchairs, bicycles, and pensions. It has emerged as a strong collaborator for their rights and needs.

Changes achieved

The intervention of Pragati OPD brought positive changes to Kumbharduvi and nearby villages. Through persistent advocacy and collaboration with local governance structures, the OPD played a key role in improving essential infrastructure. Their efforts led to the construction of a tube well for clean drinking water, steps at the village pond for safer access, a ramp at the local school to support children with disabilities, and the repair of the main road, ensuring year-round accessibility for all residents. These developments significantly improved daily life, especially for persons with disabilities.

Mobility through infrastructure development

Phagu, 24, a resident of Kumbharduvi village, lost his ability to walk properly after a bicycle accident at the age of 9. Because of poverty, the remoteness of his village, and limited access to medical care, he was unable to receive timely treatment and became permanently disabled. Although he began using a wheelchair in 2012, the poor condition of the village road prevented him from going to school or moving around freely. After the road was improved through the efforts of the GP Level OPD, he was able to attend school regularly. With greater mobility and connection to the outside world, he later became an active member of the village level OPD and played a key role in overseeing several infrastructure projects in the village.

Beyond physical infrastructure improvements, the initiative empowered persons with disabilities. OPD members gained self-confidence, leadership skills, and a stronger sense of ownership in community development. By leading these efforts, they not only advocated for their own rights but also demonstrated their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the progress of the village.

This work also led to a shift in social attitudes. Persons with disabilities, often viewed as passive beneficiaries, are now seen as capable and valuable contributors to development. The recognition of their efforts helped reduce stigma and encouraged a more inclusive mindset among the wider community.

Pragati OPD's active participation in Gram Sabha meetings and village planning forums ensured their voices were included in local decision-making processes. Their approach, addressing not only disability-specific concerns but also broader community issues, strengthened their leadership and positioned them as a vital part of the village's growth and governance.

Factors that made this practice successful

Several key factors contributed to the success of Pragati OPD's efforts in improving infrastructure and promoting inclusion. First, the group's strong leadership and consistent engagement with local governance bodies ensured that issues affecting persons with disabilities were brought into mainstream development agendas. Their ability to identify community needs and follow up with authorities such as the Sarpanch and Block Development Officer, demonstrated effective advocacy and persistence.

Second, the OPD's inclusive approach, addressing both disability-specific and broader community concerns, helped build wider support and legitimacy. This approach fostered solidarity and encouraged collaboration with other community members.

Third, the members' growing confidence and capacity, gained through training and exposure, enabled them to engage effectively in forums like the Gram Sabha. Both women and men with disabilities increasingly emerged as visible leaders and agents of change and leaders. Their proactive involvement shifted perceptions about persons with disabilities, showcasing them as leaders and changemakers rather than passive recipients of aid.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

The Pragati OPD's development model can be improved by strengthening member training in governance, advocacy, and disability rights. Formal inclusion in Gram Sabha and village planning processes would ensure sustained influence.

Facilitating peer learning through OPD federations can help replicate the model in other areas.

34. Adapting assistive devices for better utility for persons with disabilities

Topic area *- Access to decision-making and governance spaces/ removing participation barriers*
Organisation *– SADHANA, Mayurbhanj*
Target groups *- Persons with disabilities, Caregivers, Healthcare and rehabilitation professionals, OPDs, Government and non-government organizations involved in disability services.*
Criteria for good practice *- Achievement of positive changes*

Introduction

Assistive devices are essential tools that empower individuals with disabilities by improving mobility, promoting dignity and independence, and enabling active participation in daily life. These tools include wheelchairs, tricycles, hearing aids, and adaptive technologies that help individuals overcome their limitations. While persons with disabilities often receive assistive aids and support devices through government schemes or donor programs, standardized solutions often fall short of addressing the unique needs of each user. To bridge this gap, adapting and customizing assistive technologies has become increasingly important. By tailoring these devices to individual needs, participation barriers can be reduced, enabling fuller inclusion in education, employment, and community life.

According to the Mayurbhanj district website, the district has a population with disabilities of 54,661 (over 2.17% of its population). Although government-provided support is well-intentioned, they often fall short of meeting individual needs. For example, standardized wheelchair models rarely consider variations in body structure, type of disability, or specific posture requirements. As a result, many users, particularly those with cerebral palsy or severe locomotor impairments, experience discomfort, instability, and limited functionality. Without proper customization, daily tasks become challenging, mobility is reduced, and dependency increases. Financial limitations prevent families from exploring better alternatives, while the lack of ongoing assessment means that users' evolving needs often go unmet.

Disability type	**Number of individuals**
Blind	25,199
Deaf	5,950
Speech impairment	4,306
Physical Disabilities	13,917
Mental Disabilities	5,289
Total disabled population	**54,661**

Source – https://kvkmayurbhanj.org.in/district-profile/

Intervention

Recognizing these challenges, OPDs, caregivers, and local rehabilitation workers began exploring simple, cost-effective adaptations to improve the usability and engagement of assistive devices. During regular community visits and meetings, members of Village-Level OPDs and SADHANA field workers actively consulted boys, girls, men, and women with disabilities, ensuring their voices were heard. Through these consultations, they identified key issues such as discomfort, postural instability, and limited mobility, ensuring that the adaptations were tailored to meet the specific needs and preferences of the individuals directly affected. Prioritizing these concerns, OPD members also consulted parents, special educators, and community-based rehabilitation workers to gain deeper insight into the daily challenges faced by persons with disabilities using these devices.

With technical support from SADHANA, locally adapted solutions were developed, focusing primarily on modifying wheelchairs to better accommodate each individual's posture and functional needs. These modifications enhanced seating comfort, stability, and overall usability. For example, attaching a simple work board to a child's wheelchair enabled independent eating, playing, and writing, demonstrating how low-cost, personalized adaptations can significantly enhance quality of life.

All modifications were crafted using affordable, locally sourced materials, ensuring sustainability and easy replication within the community.

Changes achieved

These small but thoughtful adaptations brought meaningful changes in the lives of persons with disabilities and their families. With modified wheelchairs, users are now able to sit comfortably for extended periods without slipping or losing balance. They can move independently, visit nearby places, and participate more actively in daily life. Daily living skills such as eating while seated, engaging in activities, and maintaining posture have all improved significantly.

Children who received modified wheelchairs began using them more willingly. A particularly effective adaptation involved attaching a detachable work board to the wheelchair's armrest. This simple modification allowed children to play with toys, stimulating attention and cognitive development; eat meals independently; and draw or write with ease, integrating learning into therapeutic routines.



Figure 62 Narayan Naik and Jharana Mohanta using modified wheelchairs

Jharana Mohanta, 19, lives with Cerebral Palsy and faced severe mobility issues due to bent limbs, confining her to bed and impacting her health. Although she received a standard wheelchair through a government scheme, it was ill-fitting, causing her to slide and lose balance, rendering it ineffective.
In 2024, with support from SADHANA, her wheelchair was modified with custom posture support, a proper backrest, and secure seating to ensure comfort and stability.

Jharana's mother says, "Now she can sit comfortably, her digestion has improved, and she can move more freely."

Naran Naik, 52, from Orachandabilla village in BC Pur Panchayat, has a locomotor disability and relies fully on a wheelchair. However, his standard wheelchair did not fit his body well, causing frequent sliding, discomfort while eating, and reduced independence in daily activities.

These challenges were raised during a village level OPD meeting, which brought the issues to the attention of SADHANA. In January 2025, SADHANA provided Naran with a modified wheelchair tailored to his specific needs.

Naran says, "After modification to the wheelchair, I can sit comfortably, eat properly and move on my own. I am able to manage daily life better now."

These adaptations not only support independent functioning but also boost self-esteem and encourage families to become more involved in the child's everyday learning. Parents began to see assistive devices as tools for participation and empowerment, rather than as burdens.

This experience reaffirmed the importance of user-centred design and showed that even minor adjustments can lead to major improvements in functionality, acceptance, and quality of life.

The factors that made this practice successful

The success of this practice stemmed from user-centred design, tailoring adaptations to individual needs through careful assessment rather than standard wheelchairs. Using locally available materials made solutions affordable, accessible, and sustainable, fostering community innovation. Active family involvement, with training and support for caregivers, improved device use and therapy at home. Collaboration between community organizations and professionals ensured quality modifications and consistent follow-up, combining technical expertise with local knowledge for meaningful impact.

Measures to improve and replicate this practice

This practice can be improved by conducting regular user assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of assistive devices, training local artisans in adaptive design, and providing comprehensive training for users and caregivers.

Going forward, such inclusive and user-centred approaches should be integrated into all disability support programs to create meaningful and lasting impact.

For replication, understanding local contexts, engaging community organizations, ensuring availability of materials and skills are key to adapting the model successfully in new areas. Strengthening partnerships with government programs will help institutionalize support and expand the reach of these innovations.