#REAL STORIES FROM THE GROUND
#TOGETHER WE RISE
#DIGITAL INCLUSION
#LOCAL TO GLOBAL
#EDUCATION CANNOT WAIT
#COLLECTIVE POWER IN ACTION
#NATIVE COMMUNITIES
#WOMEN LEADERS FOR CHANGE
#INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT
#COMMUNITY LED CONSERVATION
#GRASSROOTS TO GLOBAL
#IMPACT DRIVEN STRUCTURES
#BUILDING BRIDGES
#DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DESIGN
#TOGETHER WE RISE
#BRIDGE THE GAP
#RURAL LEARNING
#HEALTH FOR ALL

Celebrating 15 years of
Collective Action and Impact

Reflecting on our 15-year journey fills me with pride and purpose. This collection of stories is not just a record of achievements; it is a tribute to the resilience, strength, and spirit of the communities at the heart of our work. We chose to narrate these stories through local tribal art, letting indigenous creativity bring each narrative to life. This art does more than illustrate; it honors the voices, struggles, and triumphs of those who live these stories, allowing readers to connect beyond words. Our picture-based format is a deliberate choice to capture the essence of grassroots movements—how they begin, grow, and thrive. As we share these experiences, I hope they inspire a global audience to see the potential of community-led solutions and the timeless relevance of art as a tool for change. This is our way of saying: these are our stories, our art, and our vision for a future where community voices lead the way.

Artwork: Nirupama Malik
(She incorporates elements of tribal art into her abstract creations, drawing from indigenous traditions to infuse her work with cultural significance and storytelling)
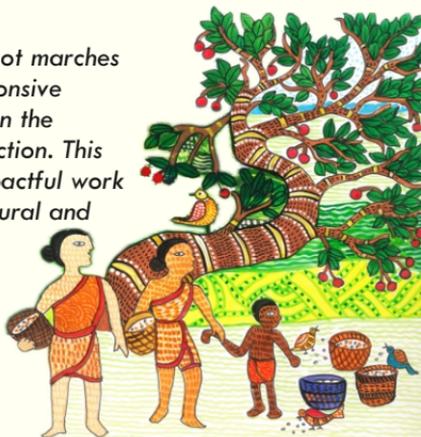
From postcards securing benefits for families to foot marches for safe water to tech-enabled advocacy for responsive government and more, Atmashakti Trust has proven the incredible power of collective and participatory action. This illustration book highlights some of their most impactful work influencing real change in the most marginalized rural and urban communities of India.

Sidney R. Hargro

Global Philanthropic Advisor, Educator, and Advocate for Investing in and Developing Transformative Impact Leaders.

Million Voices, One Change

POWER OF POSTCARD

KEY ACTIONS: SYNCHRONIZED ACTION, VOICES OF COMMUNITY, POLICY CHANGE, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Million Voices, One Change

When one million families united to send postcards to the Food Minister, they reshaped the course of food security. Each postcard carried the same request: a call to revise the inclusion criteria under the Food and Nutritional Security Act. The sheer volume of identical appeals made the government recognize the importance of the issue, leading to a pivotal policy change. This collective effort ensured over 100,000 additional families gained access to essential food benefits. It was a testament to the power of synchronized action—proving that when communities speak as one, their voices become impossible to ignore, turning challenges into opportunities and ensuring food security for all.

100 Cyclists, 1,000 Villages: The People's Manifesto

**KEY ACTIONS: CYCLISTS INITIATIVE, TOP-DOWN APPROACH,
ADVOCACY, POLITICAL CHANGE, UNITY, VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY**

100 Cyclists, 1,000 Villages: The People's Manifesto

In an extraordinary journey of change, 100 cyclists rode through 1,000 villages, collecting the real voices, concerns, and aspirations of grassroots communities. This effort reversed the traditional top-down approach to political manifestos, creating a true "People's Manifesto" where community demands took center stage. The initiative succeeded in bringing about a historic shift, as 5 major political parties integrated these grassroots priorities into their 2019 election manifestos. The People's Manifesto stands as a powerful symbol of how unity and on-the-ground advocacy can reshape the political narrative, proving that when the people lead, change follows.

Local Youth Volunteers Bridge the Education Gap

FINDING SOLUTIONS WITHIN: POWER OF LOCAL RESOURCES

KEY ACTIONS: HOME SCHOOLING, NATIVE LANGUAGES, LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, MO CHATSHALI

Local Youth Volunteers
Bridge the Education Gap

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when internet access and devices were scarce, education faced a severe setback, especially for tribal children in remote areas. Amid this crisis, 6,000 local youth, who had returned to their villages due to the pandemic, stepped up to teach 100,000 children in their native languages. This initiative, named Mo Chatshali (meaning "My Home School"), turned homes into classrooms, creating a comfortable learning environment and breaking down educational barriers. By tapping into local resources and leveraging the community's strength, this grassroots movement ensured that when schools reopened, not a single child had dropped out. Mo Chatshali is a testament to the power of local solutions, showing that even in challenging times, innovation emerges when communities come together.

A Powerful Protest for Safe Drinking Water

## SYMBOLIC ADVOCACY - METAPHORS IN ACTION

KEY ACTIONS: SYMBOLIC PROTEST, GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING, WATER SCARCITY, GOVERNMENT RESPONSE, PIPED WATER SUPPLY, COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

A Powerful Protest for
Safe Drinking Water

Armed with empty utensils and red paint, women from the community harnessed the power of visual metaphors to demand safe drinking water. The empty utensils symbolized the scarcity of clean water, while red paint was used to mark tubewells dispensing contaminated water, serving as a stark warning to others. This symbolic action brought the issue to the forefront, demonstrating that access to water must mean access to safe water.

From displaying dirty water in bottles to marking unsafe water sources, these visual symbols captured attention and underscored the severity of the problem. After persistent efforts over three years, their actions led to a significant breakthrough: the government introduced a scheme for piped water supply, along with improvements to other essential services. This movement is a testament to the power of creative, visual advocacy in driving lasting change. Their protest was not a one-time event but a coordinated effort, with people taking to the roads in multiple areas, using different metaphors to built pressure.
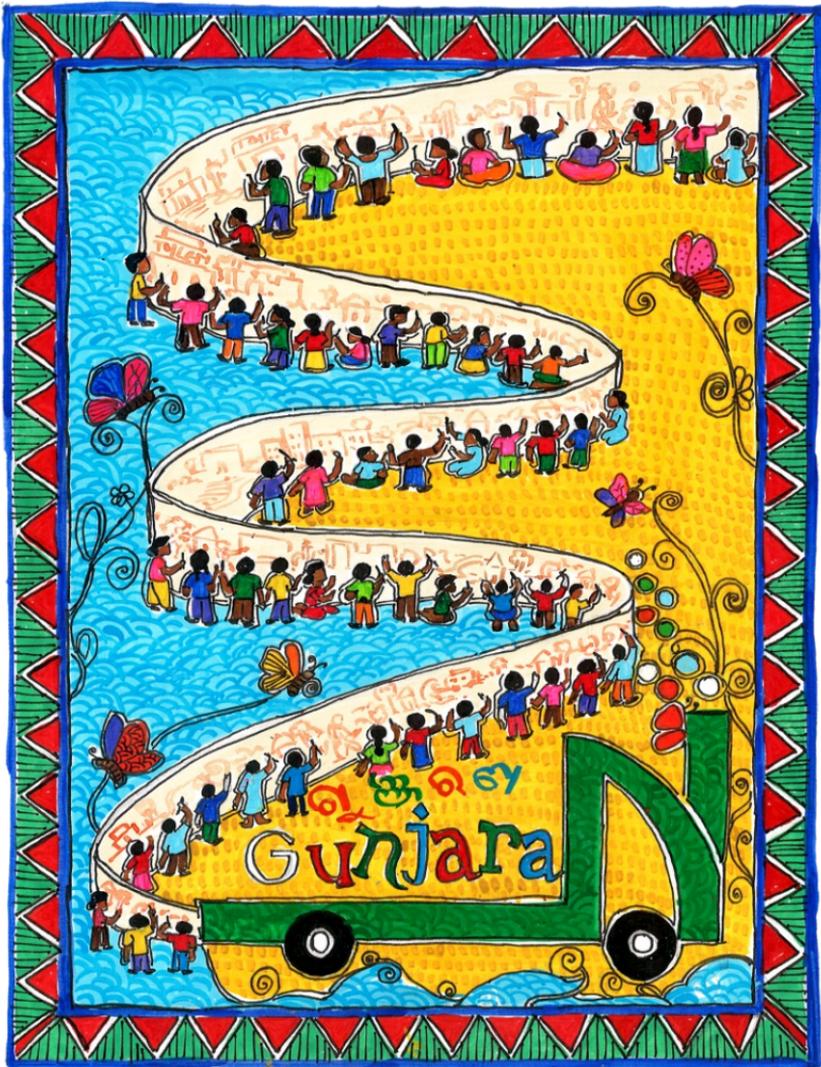
Elevating Children's Voices for Learning Recovery

STORYTELLING THROUGH FABRIC - VISUAL ADVOCACY

**KEY ACTIONS: LEARNING RECOVERY PLAN (LRP),
ODISHA EDUCATION INITIATIVE, VISUAL STORYTELLING**

Elevating Children's Voices for Learning Recovery

The Gunjaran truck, meaning "Buzz," became a symbol of hope and expression for children returning to school after the COVID-19 shutdown. For two years, many tribal children faced barriers to online learning due to lack of devices and electricity, leaving them disconnected from education. To understand their feelings and needs, a colorful truck traveled through villages, inviting children to share their stories on a 300-meter cloth. The fabric became a canvas for their experiences, fears, and hopes, capturing the voices of first-generation learners and students who missed critical years of schooling.

This vibrant display was showcased at the state level, bringing together stakeholders to witness the reality of children's educational gaps. Their expressions contributed to the adoption of the Learning Recovery Plan (LRP) in Odisha, a focused 100-day initiative that reached over 4.39 million students across 55,745 government schools. By listening to the children and addressing their concerns, the community worked to ensure no child was left behind, demonstrating the power of visual storytelling to inspire action and build resilience.

"From Vision to Action:
Building Schools That Children Dream Of"

VISUAL NARRATIVES - DREAM VS. REALITY

KEY ACTIONS: INVITED, ILLUSTRATED, CONTRASTED, CAPTURED,
SHOWCASED, CREATED, REVEALED, ALLOCATED

"From Vision to Action:
Building Schools That Children Dream Of"

The Dream School campaign invited children across Odisha to visually contrast their 'Dream Schools' with the reality of their current schools. Over 500 students from 87 blocks painted their aspirations, illustrating vibrant, well-equipped schools and comparing them to the under-resourced facilities they currently attend. This visual storytelling captured the imagination of policymakers, bringing the children's dreams to life through powerful, visual advocacy.

These expressive artworks were showcased to government officials, creating a dialogue that revealed significant gaps in educational infrastructure, especially in tribal areas. The campaign's impact was profound, leading the Odisha government to allocate $11.4 million for renovations across 23 districts, ensuring better learning environments for 7,146 government schools. By channeling the hopes of children into a visual narrative, the initiative demonstrated how dreams, when expressed and seen, can drive tangible change.
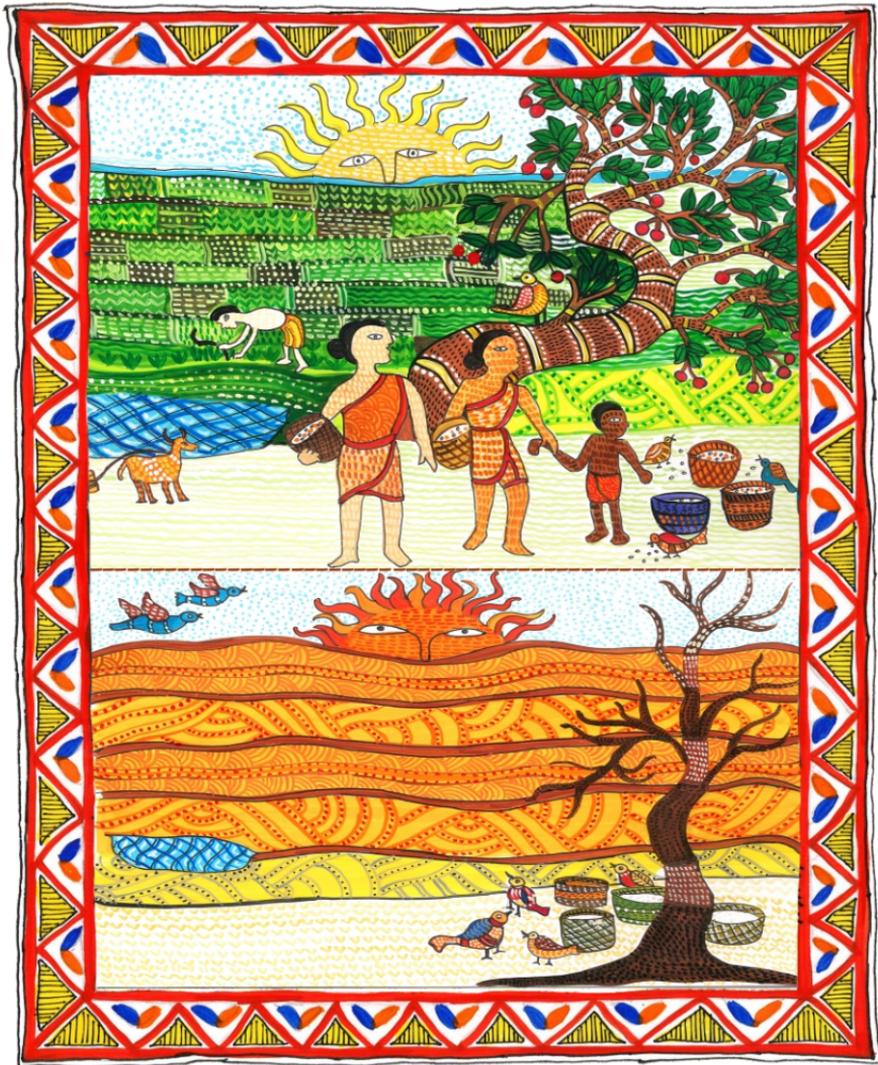
# Brown to Green: Empowering Marginalized Farmers

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

KEY ACTIONS: AGRICULTURAL TRANSFORMATION, LIVELIHOOD ENHANCEMENT, LAND REVITALIZATION, FOOD SECURITY, ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Brown to Green:
Empowering Marginalized Farmers

Mobilizing farmers to cultivate rice fallow land for a second crop has revitalized barren fields and led to sustainable agricultural practices. This initiative engaged 3.1 lakh (310,000) farmers, transforming 74,400 hectares through pulse cultivation. By reactivating previously underutilized land, farmers were able to enhance productivity while promoting soil health and environmental sustainability. The focus on growing pulses as a second crop not only improved agricultural diversity but also increased food security and boosted farmers' livelihoods. This movement exemplifies the power of community engagement in fostering sustainable agriculture and creating significant economic and ecological benefits for rural communities.
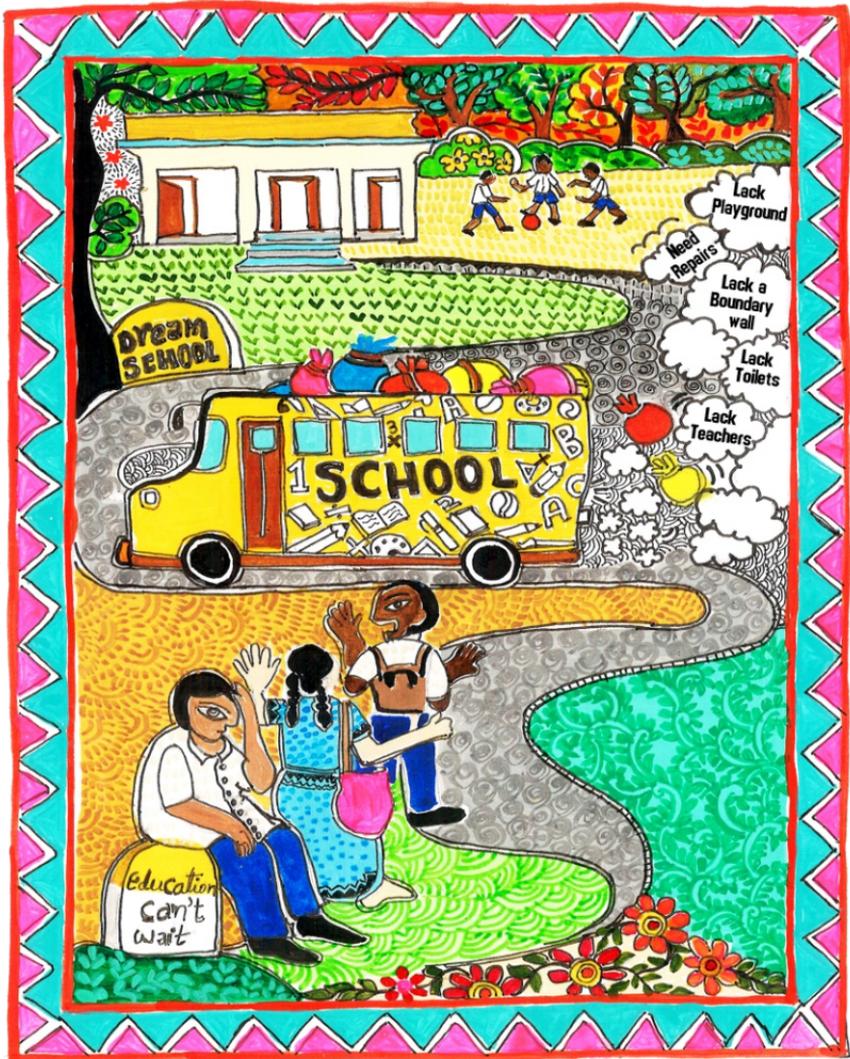
"Education Can't Wait: Ensuring Every Child Learns"

DATA-DRIVEN ADVOCACY - BUILDING GRASSROOTS NARRATIVES

KEY ACTIONS: COLLECTED, HIGHLIGHTED, MOBILIZED, ENGAGED, FOSTERED, ADVOCATED, PRIORITIZED, RESPONDED

"Education Can't Wait: Ensuring Every Child Learns"

The Education Can't Wait campaign highlighted the urgent need for equitable education by leveraging comprehensive data and grassroots narratives. With the help of local communities, detailed data was collected from 1,921 schools, focusing on critical issues like infrastructure gaps, teacher shortages, and the challenges faced by 244 dropouts and 152 migrant children. This evidence-based approach enabled a 360-degree engagement program that brought together all stakeholders, from local leaders to policymakers, fostering dialogue and mobilizing support for change.

The strength of the campaign lay in its ability to turn raw data into compelling narratives, creating a powerful case for immediate action. By showcasing the real experiences and needs of marginalized children, the initiative spurred the government to prioritize educational improvements, ensuring that every child has access to meaningful learning recovery. The popular tagline, Education Can't Wait, resonated across communities and decision-makers, underscoring the urgency of the issue and driving impactful responses.

What About Our Rights?

STRATEGIC BRAND ADAPTATION - ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH POPULAR ENGAGEMENT

KEY ACTIONS: COMMUNITY-DRIVEN MOVEMENT, POLICY CHANGE, MOBILIZATION, APPOINTMENT OF DOCTORS, APPOINTMENT OF TEACHERS

What About Our Rights?

The What About Our Rights? campaign united nearly 10,000 people to demand government accountability in education and health. By gathering 1 million signatures, the campaign transformed collective action into a powerful voice for change. The unique strategy lay in adapting the Odisha government's popular "Mo Sarkar" branding, which means "My Government." The campaign reframed this to assert, "If you are my government, you must be accountable for my problems." This clever use of the government's own messaging helped amplify the demand for better services.

As a result, the campaign prompted the government to appoint 1,038 doctors and 1,781 teachers, demonstrating how a unified, strategic approach can lead to significant policy changes. By capturing the essence of the "Mo Sarkar" initiative, this movement highlighted the power of community-driven advocacy and the importance of holding authorities accountable.
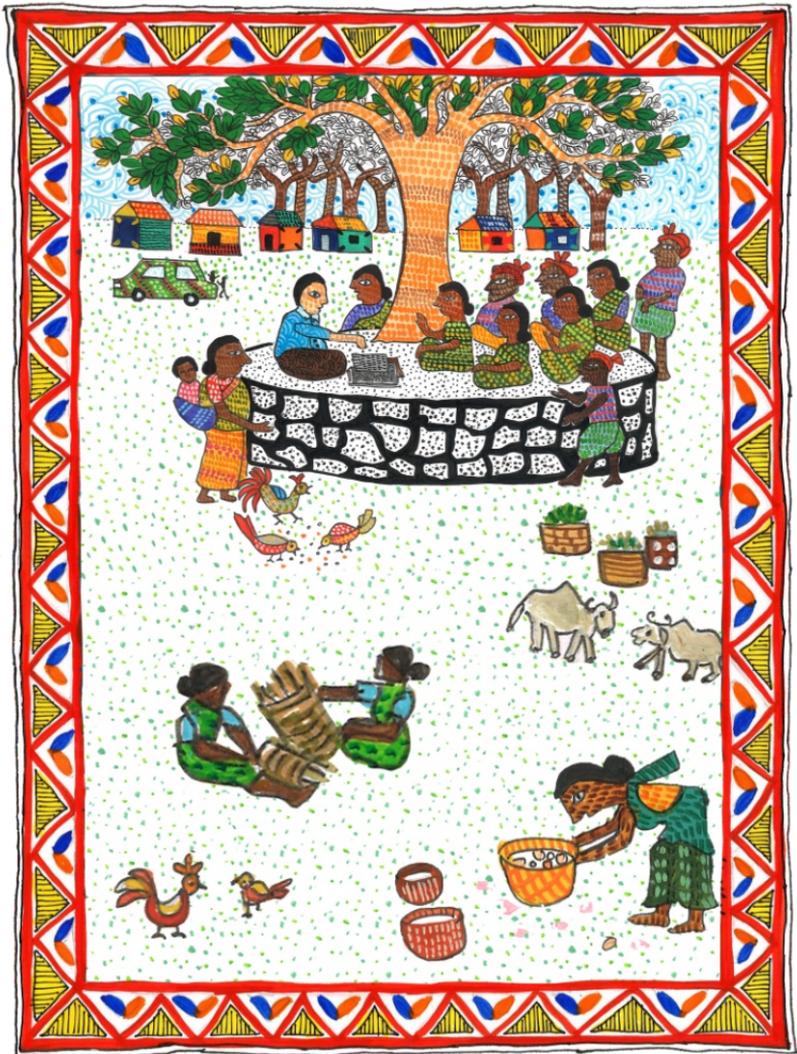
Empowered Women, Empowered Communities: Leading the Change Together

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING - WOMEN-LED RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

KEY ACTIONS: UNITED, ADVOCATED, MOBILIZED, SECURED, NEGOTIATED, EMPOWERED LED TRANSFORMED

Empowered Women, Empowered Communities: Leading the Change Together

In Podapathar, a village in Odisha, India, women have emerged as a powerful force for community transformation. By uniting to confront exploitation and advocate for their rights, they shifted the dynamics of local governance. Their strategic approach focused on collective bargaining, enabling them to secure at least 33% representation in village water and sanitation committees. This representation empowered them to lead essential water management initiatives, giving them a platform to address critical community needs.

Through persistent efforts and strategic mobilization, these women also succeeded in obtaining fund for pond renovation under India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). It is a government program that ensures at least 100 days of paid work annually to rural households willing to engage in unskilled manual labor. The program focuses on creating sustainable infrastructure like water conservation projects, which not only provide employment but also promote local development. By accessing resources through MGNREGA, the women demonstrated how effective community engagement can lead to tangible benefits, turning them into active stakeholders in sustainable development.

This movement is a testament to how unity, persistence, and resource mobilization can lead to significant changes, proving that empowered women can drive solutions that benefit entire communities.

Foot March for Change

GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATION - MARCHING FOR COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY

**KEY ACTIONS: SAFE DRINKING WATER, COLLECTIVE ACTION,
HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE, AWARENESS RAISING**

Foot March for Change

In 2017, a monumental foot march in Odisha, India, united 848,326 families across 285 villages, bringing 5,000 citizens together to demand access to safe drinking water. Drawing inspiration from India's historical use of foot marches as a tool for social and political change, this grassroots movement became a powerful demonstration of solidarity. Participants walked side by side through rural areas, raising awareness about the critical need for clean water in their communities.

This unified action amplified their collective voice, compelling the government to address the issue. Their efforts led to the launch of the $120 million Basudha Water Scheme, designed to provide piped water to 70% of rural households. By harnessing the strength of grassroots mobilization, the foot march showed that when communities come together, they can drive significant government action and bring about tangible improvements.

The movement was not just a protest; it was a symbol of unity, determination, and hope, proving that step by step, communities can create meaningful change and secure essential resources for a better future.

Education is Our Right: Accountability Begins Here

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN ACCOUNTABILITY - BRINGING SCHOOLS TO GOVERNMENT PREMISES

### KEY ACTIONS: UNITED, STAGED, DEMANDED, DREW, PROMPTED, APPOINTED, INTRODUCED, ENSURED

Education is Our Right: Accountability Begins Here

In Petarbadi village, India, parents of 38 primary school students took a bold step to ensure their children's right to education. When three teachers failed to show up for duty, the parents staged a sit-in at the Block Development Office (BDO) during the matric exams, drawing immediate attention. Their peaceful protest brought the issue directly to the government's premises, forcing officials to address the problem.

This strategic act of pressure-building resulted in the swift appointment of two new teachers the next day, but the impact didn't stop there. The government, recognizing the need for greater accountability, introduced a color-coded uniform system for teachers, making it easier to identify whether they were fulfilling their duties. By bringing the school's concerns from the village to the BDO, the community demonstrated that they could hold authorities accountable, driving change through direct engagement.

This movement exemplifies how local communities can unite to demand educational rights, ensuring a better future for their children.
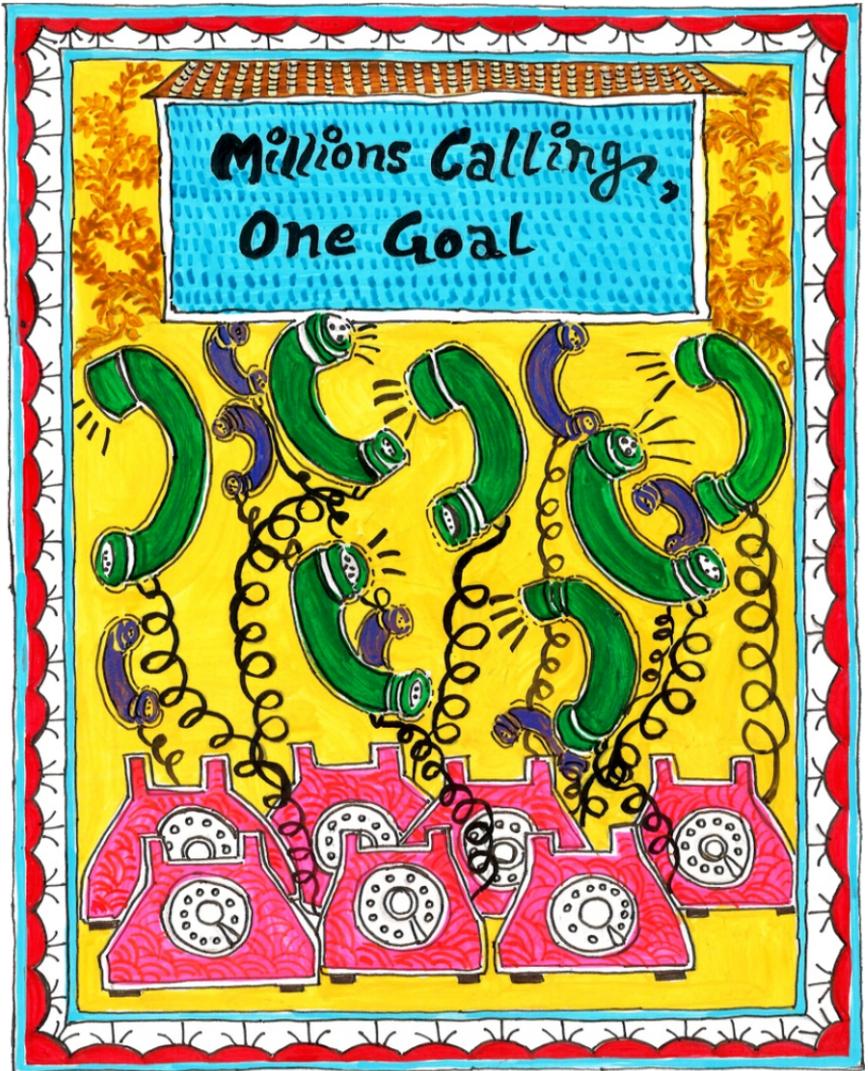
Dial for Change

COLLECTIVE ACTION THROUGH COORDINATED PHONE CAMPAIGNS

KEY ACTIONS: COORDINATED CALLS, COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION, PRESSURE BUILDING ON GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES

Dial for Change

The Phone Bajao (Ring the Phone) Campaign demonstrated how a simple tool—the phone—can be a powerful catalyst for change. Originating in India, this grassroots initiative mobilized people from 17 districts, who made over 300 coordinated calls to government help desks, demanding urgent action on critical issues such as learning loss and inadequate school infrastructure. By dialing in from multiple locations and consistently raising the same concerns, the community created pressure that authorities could not ignore.

This strategic use of phones not only highlighted the seriousness of the issues but also revived the use of defunct helplines, forcing government agencies to pay attention. The campaign exemplifies how sustained, coordinated communication can generate a sense of urgency and accountability, prompting officials to take necessary actions. The campaign showcases how communities can leverage collective effort, even through low-cost, accessible methods, to advocate for their rights and drive meaningful change. It stands as a model of how simple, united actions can create a ripple effect, influencing policy and governance on a larger scale.

12 Baje 12 Minute

FROM COLLECTIVE TO CONNECTIVE - AMPLIFYING GRASSROOTS VOICES

KEY ACTIONS: MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES, COLLECTIVE ACTION, COMMUNITY ADVOCACY, DIGITAL SKILLS TRAINING, SOCIAL MEDIA ACTION GROUPS

12 Baje 12 Minute

12 Baje 12 Minute *(12012minutes)* is an innovative grassroots platform that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, transforming how marginalized communities address local issues. Traditionally driven by collective action, the initiative evolved into a connective model, leveraging digital tools to bridge the gap between grassroots voices and government agencies. By empowering community collectives to advocate for socio-economic and political rights through social media, *12012minutes* enabled communities, even in the most remote areas, to amplify their concerns directly to authorities.

The platform trains rural youth in digital skills, creating networks of social media action groups that coordinate campaigns to raise awareness and drive accountability. This shift from on-ground gatherings to digital advocacy allows communities to speak with one unified voice, even from isolated regions. The low-cost, impactful approach enhances traditional advocacy by supplementing it with digital reach, making it possible to envision 4.5 million families—representing 10% of rural India—united on a single platform. *12012minutes* showcases how innovation during challenging times can lead to scalable, sustainable solutions for marginalized communities worldwide.

Women Collectives Usher Change

## EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LEADERSHIP - COMMUNITY-LED ADVOCACY

KEY ACTIONS: LOCAL GOVERNANCE, SKILL DEVELOPMENT, MODEL VILLAGES, SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Women Collectives Usher Change

The Urmi initiative, meaning "Wave of Change," empowers grassroots women in rural India to become leaders and advocates for their communities. By providing a platform for women to voice their concerns and engage directly with policymakers, Urmi recognizes the vital role of women in driving social transformation. Through strategic partnerships with local departments and forums like Mission Shakti and the Odisha Social Forum, the initiative bridges the gap between rural women's lived experiences and government policies, ensuring their needs are heard and addressed.

Urmi's approach is centered on empowerment through leadership. It focuses on equipping women with the skills, knowledge, and connections to navigate local governance and collaborate with sectors such as Health and Agriculture. The initiative has identified 140 model villages across 15 regions, where women leaders integrate government programs to make support more effective and accessible. By strengthening leadership, Urmi not only addresses immediate community needs but also creates a lasting impact on social development. This initiative demonstrates how empowering women can lead to significant, sustainable change, transforming communities through informed advocacy and collaboration.
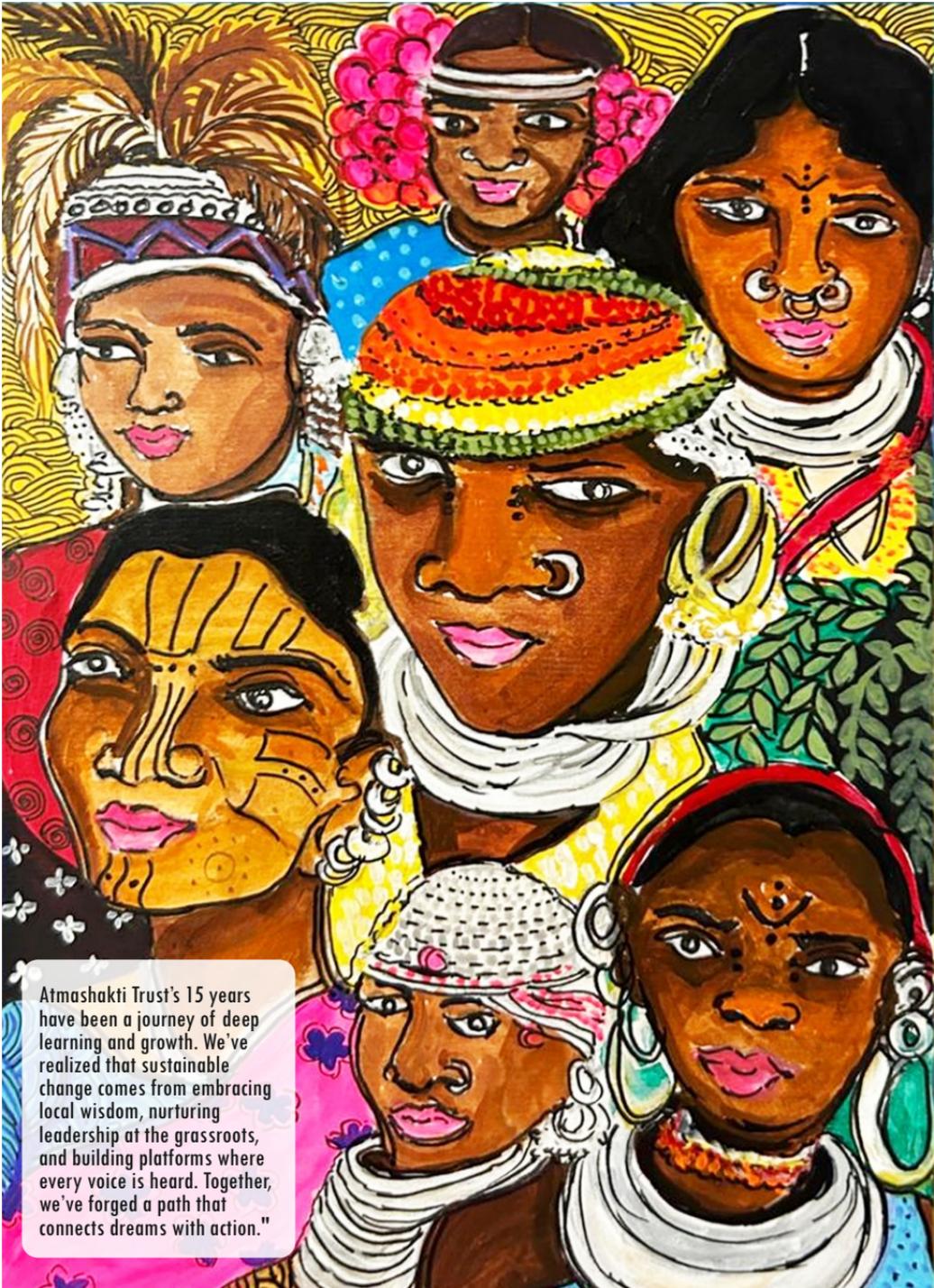
Atmashakti Trust's 15 years have been a journey of deep learning and growth. We've realized that sustainable change comes from embracing local wisdom, nurturing leadership at the grassroots, and building platforms where every voice is heard. Together, we've forged a path that connects dreams with action."