

Atmashakti to YOU



Celebrating Community-Led Solution



Dear Friends,

As we reflect on the past quarter, it's clear that it was a time of significant transition, with elections in India reshaping the landscape of our work. Our collective leaders took this opportunity to engage with the newly elected government, laying the groundwork for a collaborative relationship. We've spent time understanding the new dynamics and reimagining our community-inspired initiatives in alignment with the Local Sustainable Development Goals (LSDGs).

Our commitment to becoming a key player in supporting tribal communities and strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions, particularly in PESA areas, is stronger than ever. By aligning our efforts with current government programs, we aim to contribute meaningfully to the vision of a Viksit Bharat—a developed India.

Viksit Bharat, the current government's roadmap to making India a developed nation by 2047—cannot be truly realized unless grassroots communities are included in decision-making processes and their ideas are aligned with mainstream development efforts. Our work aims to ensure that these communities are not only heard but actively participate in shaping the future.

In our journey towards creating sustainable and empowered communities, I'm continually inspired by the remarkable stories emerging from our work on the ground. One such story comes from the heart of Sundargarh

district, led by women like Manju Prabha Barla, a 42-year-old URMI leader. Manju's journey from a dedicated volunteer with Mahila Sangram Samiti to a beacon of grassroots leadership is a testament to the transformative power of women's voices in local governance.

This success mirrors the impact we see across other initiatives, whether it's Lopamudra's informal school in Brahmani village, ensuring children continue their education during the pandemic, or the "School Fera Abhiyan" in Nuapada district, which brought hundreds of dropouts back to school. Each of these stories underscores a vital truth: sustainable change happens when communities take ownership of their solutions.

Stay tuned to our next edition to discover how the "Brown to Green" campaign is fueling the "Hariyali ki Dusri Kranti" (Second Green Revolution). With solar-powered water tanks and innovative practices, we're supporting tribal farmers like Sulochana Sethi, keeping fields green year-round and enhancing climate resilience. Meet Sulochana and many more farmers like her in our upcoming stories from the field.

As we continue our mission, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved—our dedicated team, local leaders, and community members—for your tireless efforts. Together, we are not just addressing challenges; we are building a brighter, more sustainable future for all.

Warm regards,

 Ruchi Kashyap



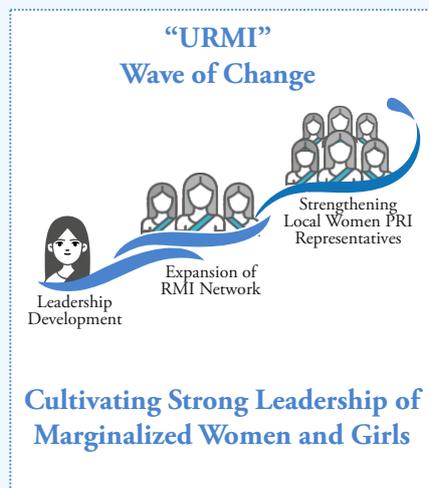
From Grassroots to Governance: The Impact of Women Leaders in Odisha

"Isn't it time we recognize that when women lead, they not only take control of their lives but also transform the entire community? That's exactly what we felt when 50 of us came together to discuss our lives—the realization that no one else can truly understand or prioritize our issues like we can."

- Manju Prabha Barla

In the heart of Sundargarh district, a quiet revolution is taking place, led by women like Manju Prabha Barla, a 42-year-old URMI leader. Manju's journey from a dedicated volunteer with Mahila Sangram Samiti to a beacon of grassroots leadership is a testament to the transformative power of women's voices in local governance.

On June 26, 2024, something remarkable happened in Odisha. Across the state, more than 85% of Mahila (women's) Grama Sabhas successfully convened, a feat that was unimaginable just a few years ago. These gatherings weren't just meetings—they were moments of change, where women came together to discuss their lives, their communities, and their future.



Despite the 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the road to active participation has been steep. Women often find their roles limited by traditional gender norms and the influence of men in local governance. Yet, as of 2023, over 1.3 million women hold elected positions in PRIs, making up nearly 46% of all

members. But numbers alone don't tell the story. True participation comes when women like Manju lead the way, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are prioritized.

Manju and her fellow URMI leaders understood that for women's voices to truly matter, they needed to create spaces where those voices could be amplified. Through initiatives like the "DUS Ka Dum" (Power of ten) campaign, they did just that—mobilizing women across 12,235 villages in 17 districts to participate in these special Gram Sabhas.

The significance of these Mahila Gram Sabhas goes beyond mere participation. A study by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in 2018 found that development projects initiated through Gram Sabhas had a higher success rate and greater community satisfaction because they directly addressed the specific needs of the community. For example, in Odisha, over 60% of the water and sanitation projects approved in Gram Sabhas were directly linked to issues identified by women participants.

Manju's leadership, and the collective power of the women she inspires, are building a new kind of governance in Odisha. In over 1,000 villages, this approach is transforming local governance, making it more responsive, more inclusive, and more effective.



Jyoti and Hemraj's Journey Back to School: Mainstreaming School Dropouts

In the heart of Brahmantara village in Odisha's Nuapada district, Jyoti is a bright eyed girl who was on the verge of taking her 10th Board exams and her brother, a student of Class 5, once faced a daunting challenge that threatened to strip away their dreams. After the untimely death of their father, their mother, with no source of income, made the difficult decision to migrate to Bangalore with her children to work as a construction laborer. The siblings' promising future seemed to vanish overnight, swallowed by the harsh cycle of poverty and migration.

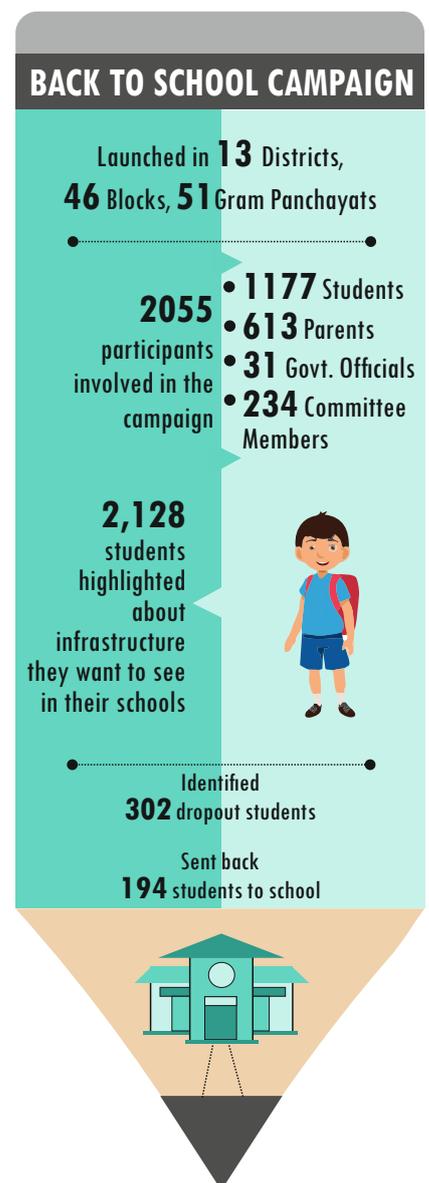
But in every dark cloud, there is a silver lining. For Hemraj and Jyoti, that hope came in the form of the "School Fera Abhiyan" (Back to School Campaign), a powerful initiative driven by Shramajeebee Mancha, a people's collective in Nuapada. The campaign was launched to combat the growing number of school dropouts in the region, offering a lifeline to children whose education had been disrupted.

Through tireless efforts, the campaign brought Jyoti and Hemraj back to their village and re-enrolled them in school. This initiative was more than just an opportunity for the siblings to continue their education—it was a beacon of hope for their future. The campaign, which started in Nuapada, quickly expanded to involve 10 other people's collectives, covering 50 Gram Panchayats across 45 blocks. With a focus on 82 villages, where 302 children had dropped out of school, the campaign worked to bring them back to the classroom.

The impact of this initiative was profound and it addressed critical issues such as inadequate school infrastructure, lack of safe drinking water and creating a more supportive environment for education. However, the success of the campaign was a result of collective action. Over 2,689 individuals—including students, parents, School Management Committee (SMC) members, sangathan members, government

officials, teachers, and media—rallied behind the cause. Their efforts brought nearly 200 children back to school, including Jyoti and Hemraj.

The "School Fera Abhiyan" continues to carry the hopes and dreams of countless children, offering them a path to a brighter future. Jyoti and Hemraj's story is a reminder that when a community comes together, even the most daunting challenges can be overcome, paving the way for a more equitable and just world.





Harnessing Solar Power, Empowering Communities

“Every drop of water came with a price—my time, my strength, and sometimes even my safety. For 30 years, fetching water defined my life. Now, with a clean source nearby, I finally feel free.” - Martha Mandal

For many in the bustling cities, the idea of fetching water seems straightforward, almost mundane. But for Martha Mandal and countless women in the remote village of Gurupada in Odisha's Kandhamal district, it was an ordeal that defined their lives. Imagine waking up every day, knowing that the next few hours would be spent on a grueling journey just to collect water—water that might not even be safe to drink. And then think of the physical strain, the time lost, and the constant fear of harassment or assault in the lonely stretches of forest they had to traverse.

This is the reality for many tribal women in Odisha. Despite India's technological advancements, basic necessities like safe drinking water remain out of reach for millions in rural areas. A 2023 study by Atmashakti Trust found that 40.93% of tube wells and 48.6% of standposts across 9,856 villages in Odisha were defunct. With no reliable infrastructure, villagers were forced to rely on contaminated sources, leading to

widespread health issues, including chronic anemia and malnutrition among women and children.

In such challenging conditions, innovative solutions like solar-powered water systems are not just beneficial—they are essential. For villages like Gurupada, located in hilly, remote areas where traditional infrastructure is impractical, solar energy provides a sustainable and reliable alternative. Solar water pumps can function independently of erratic power supplies, ensuring that even the most isolated communities have access to clean water.

The introduction of solar-powered water tanks in three blocks of Kandhamal district, through the persistent efforts of Jeebika Surakhya Mancha and local authorities, marked a turning point for these communities. No longer did women like Martha have to trek miles for water; instead, clean, safe water was available near their homes. This not only eased the

physical burden but also significantly improved the community's overall health and well-being.

The impact of such initiatives is profound. By harnessing solar power, villages are not only addressing immediate water needs but are also laying the groundwork for sustainable, long-term development. In many parts of India, over 82% of villages still lack access to piped water, and for remote tribal communities, solar pumps represent a viable and effective solution to this challenge.

At Atmashakti Trust, our mission goes beyond simply providing access to water; we focus on ensuring that the water is safe and that the solutions we implement are sustainable. By identifying remote areas in need, working closely with the government, and promoting community ownership of these projects, we empower villages to take charge of their own development. The success of solar water initiatives in Odisha is a testament to the power of collective action and the importance of tailored solutions that meet the specific needs of local communities. It has led to large-scale impact as out of 1039 villages, 42.16 percent of villages have received access to solar water tanks.

Martha's story is just one of many, but it highlights the broader narrative of resilience and innovation in India's tribal regions. As we continue to support and expand these initiatives, we are not only bringing water to those who need it most—we are helping to build a future where every village has the resources it needs to thrive.



Let Her Aspire!

“Engaging children in classroom learning can be challenging, so I use songs, dance, stories, and games to make the experience more vibrant and interactive. These creative methods help keep the children focused and excited about coming to our center regularly.”

- Lopamudra

In a world where compassion and community are increasingly rare, Lopamudra from Brahmani village in Balangir district is a powerful reminder that one person alone can also ignite meaningful social change. Her story is of resilience, courage, and a deep commitment to the well-being of others. Embodying the spirit of a true "Young Eagle" volunteer, she has become a beacon of hope, inspiring young people across her village and beyond.

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept across rural Odisha, it left a trail of disruption in its wake. Schools were closed and children from underprivileged families faced the harsh reality of moving behind others in education. The risk of losing years of learning was a great threat to their future. In this period of crisis, Lopamudra—a young graduate from a modest farmer's

family—chose not to sit back and watch but to act.

Understanding the critical importance of education, she stepped forward to establish a 'Chatashali'—an informal school in her village. With limited resources but an abundance of determination, Lopamudra dedicated her time and skills to bridge the educational gap that the pandemic had created. Her efforts ensured that the children of Brahmani could continue learning, despite the challenges they faced.

Her initiative did not go unnoticed. Jana Jagruti Mancha, a local people's organization, was mobilizing youth across Balangir district to set up similar informal learning centres. Inspired by Lopamudra, other young people began to follow in her footsteps, volunteering to support the

education of underprivileged children in their respective villages. Soon, organisations like Odisha Shramajeebi Mancha and Mahila Shramajeebi Mancha Odisha were identifying and empowering volunteers to run "Chatashalis" throughout the region.

Lopamudra's story is more than just a tale of individual heroism; it is a testament to the power of community-driven social change. By stepping up to fill a critical need, she has not only safeguarded the education of marginalized children but has also challenged traditional gender roles, inspiring other young women to take on leadership positions in rural Odisha.

Today, Lopamudra has set an example for those determined to make a difference with their individual effort. Her journey continues to inspire positive social change, proving that with dedication, courage, and a belief in the power of community, even the most daunting challenges can be overcome.



Sulochana Sethi's Journey from Brown to Green: A Story of Hope and Resilience

In the heart of Boudh district, Odisha, Sulochana Sethi stands as a beacon of hope and resilience. As a dedicated farmer, Sulochana faced the tough challenge of growing crops without the luxury of irrigation facilities. Yet, her determination led her to embrace the "Brown to Green" campaign, an initiative aimed at transforming the lives of tribal and Dalit farmers through sustainable agricultural practices.

In 2023, despite the harsh conditions, Sulochana decided to plant a second crop of green gram on her 1.5-acre plot of land. Her efforts bore fruit—literally and metaphorically. The harvest yielded 130 kg of green gram, bringing her an additional income of Rs 13,000. This new source of income allowed Sulochana to make significant improvements in her life. She

repaired the ceiling of her house and made valuable contributions towards her children's education. Her story is a powerful testament to how sustainable farming practices can have a profound impact on the lives of marginalized farmers.

"I had never attempted a second crop before because we lacked irrigation facilities. But as a member of Aadim Adivasi Ekta Manch (AAEM), I was encouraged by my peers to try the Zero Irrigation Second Crop, a method that had benefited others in our community the previous year. I am thrilled I took their advice. The additional income from the surplus production not only allowed me to repair my roof but also contributed to my children's education."

**- Sulochana Sethi, Kirasira,
Boudh, Odisha**

The "Brown to Green" campaign, launched in 2024, is dedicated to motivate 7 lakh marginal farmers to cultivate a second crop in 2.8 lakh hectares of rice-fallow land to enhance food security and the economy of Tribal and Dalit farmers in Odisha. This ambitious campaign expanded its reach significantly, distributing free seeds to 3.4 lakh farmers across 16 tribal and rural areas. This expansion built on the success of a pilot project that had previously provided seeds to 23,000 farmers. A 2023 study highlighted the success of these efforts, showing that 88% of the initial beneficiaries continued to plant Rabi crops with their own seeds, resulting in an average income increase of Rs. 15,454 per farmer.

The success of the "Brown to Green" campaign was fueled by extensive stakeholder engagement. The campaign formed part of a larger legislative advocacy effort led by the National Consortium to Combat Malnutrition (NCCM). This involved critical discussions with the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Agriculture, and state governments in Odisha, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh,

Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh. These collaborative efforts resulted in budget assurances aimed at providing pulse seeds to 7 lakh farmers across these states.

With over 92,000 farmers benefiting last year alone, the "Brown to Green" campaign is on track to make an even greater impact. As the initiative continues

to grow, it promises to turn barren lands into vibrant fields of opportunity and hope for the future.

Sulochana Sethi's journey illustrates the transformative power of sustainable agriculture, showcasing how a dedicated campaign can uplift lives and create a brighter, more prosperous future for farmers across the region.

RESOURCE

‘Digital Empowerment: Transforming Community Growth, Health, Economic Development, and Conservation through Innovative Technologies.’

In June, we proudly released a special edition of the Social Innovation Journal (SIJ), focusing on the theme of "Digital Access and Equity." This edition marked a significant milestone in our collective journey to document and share groundbreaking work and transformative ideas in social innovation.

We explored the impact of digital practices on various sectors, from labor and healthcare to education, showcasing powerful stories of empowerment through digital access in grassroots communities and technology-driven advancements in the developing world.

A highlight of this edition was our Author's Meet on July 11th, where participants had the unique opportunity to engage directly with the brilliant minds behind these contributions. The discussions were rich, inspiring, and deeply rewarding, adding layers of insight to our ongoing discourse.

Thank you to everyone who joined us on this journey. Your support fuels our mission to drive social change and innovation across the globe. Stay tuned for more impactful stories and ideas in our upcoming editions!

#SocialInnovation #DigitalEquity #SIJ2024
#CommunityEmpowerment #AuthorMeet

Link to the edition:

<https://socialinnovationsjournal.com/index.php/sij/issue/archive>

“Brown to Green”



Zero Irrigation Second Crop

UPDATES

Expansion of Board

MS. R. K. CHANDRIKA is the newest board member. She has been producing, directing and scripting socially and environmentally relevant films since 1989. After a Post-graduate Diploma in Mass communication from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, Delhi she has made diverse films on health, women's empowerment, governance, development, culture, art, trades, religion, agriculture, environment, philosophy, history and literature of different regions and people of India. Her films has been telecast on popular channels including the Discovery Channel, for which she directed a short film series called, 'Discovery People'.

Expansion of Team

In this quarter, new Management team members and field team members have joined the team. Some of the key positions include Lead Communication, Manager Campaign and Advocacy, Pillar Lead – GAIT and a Cultural team in Uttar Pradesh.

Engagement of Youth Volunteers

Collaboration with UNICEF, Youth for Water, NYP, Radio BulBul, RSETI, Lighthouse for engagement and training of youth volunteers. Biren Bhuta from Disom oriented URMI and YE volunteers for inner strength for bring change outside. This orientation session was a three day long process where the center was on working in the inner self.

Atmashakti Trust acknowledges the contributions of its team members from the ground who cover 'Stories of Change'. **BACK TO SCHOOL:** Rumati Harijan, Nuapada; **MO CHATASHALEE:** Rajendra, Bhubaneswar; **WOMEN GRAM SABHA:** Laxmi Bag, Sundargarh; **HARNESSING SOLAR POWER:** Santanu Patra, Kandhamal; **BROWN TO GREEN:** Rajesh Mallik, Boudh.

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TRUST

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Atmashakti, meaning "**power of the soul**," reflects our belief that the strength of a community lies in its collective spirit. Registered in 1995 and actively working since 2009, we've been channeling this inner power to unite and empower marginalized communities, with a focus on reaching 10% of the rural poor, especially among Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. As a catalyst for change, we build/facilitate community's agency within these communities, enabling them to assert their rights, influence policy, and ensure their voices shape inclusive development. Through collective action and shared agency, Atmashakti transforms grassroots strength into powerful, transformative change.

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