

# Voices of Strength

Women Transforming Community – Land, Livelihood & Leadership



**SEBAJAGAT**

**Burat, M.Rampur, Kalahandi, Odisha**



**Pawar Sachin Prakash, IAS**  
Collector & D.M., Kalahandi



Phone : 06670 - 230201 (O)  
06670 - 230233 (R)  
Fax : 06670 - 230303  
E-mail : dm-kalahandi@nic.in



## **MESSAGE**

I am very happy to inform that "Voices of Strength Women Transforming Community Land, Livelihood & Leadership "; a testament to the resilience and leadership of women in Kalahandi. This booklet will highlight their inspiring journey in securing land rights, building sustainable livelihoods, and strengthening their socio-economic condition

The women of Kalahandi have been playing a vital role in fostering self-reliance, sustainable farming, and community-driven development. Their collective actions have empowered themselves to advocate their rights, ensuring food security and economic independence in preserving cultural heritage, I hope their stories will inspire many women to step forward and led transformative change

My best wishes to Seba Jagat and all involved in bringing such stories to light

Pawar Sachin Prakash, IAS



**Satya Narayan Pattanayak**  
Secretary, Seabajagat



Phone : 9938141347  
E-mail : seabajagat@gmail.com  
Website : www.seabajagat.org



## **MESSAGE**

It is with great joy that we present the booklet *Voices of Strength: Women Transforming Community*. This collection of stories reflects the courage, determination, and leadership of women who are driving real change in their communities. Through their journeys, we see the struggles they have faced, the barriers they have overcome, and the lasting impact of their efforts on those around them. They have led the way for many, showing that change is possible through perseverance and collective action.

I extend my deepest gratitude to Sharada, Sanghamitra, and Rosnara for their invaluable contributions to this booklet. Their dedication to empowering women, strengthening communities, and ensuring that every woman's voice is heard has been truly inspiring. As strong advocates for women's rights,

More than just a collection of stories, this booklet stands as a testament to the power of women coming together, supporting one another, and transforming their communities. We hope these stories inspire many more women to rise, take charge, and create a brighter future for themselves and the generations to come. We are honored to share their experiences and contributions in this publication.

With heartfelt appreciation and respect,

Satyanarayan Pattanayak



## CONTENT

01. Journey of Learning and Empowerment	01
02. Transformation of Gadadi Village – From Struggle to Hope	03
03. Silent Struggles to Loud Victories	06
04. A Journey of Resilience and Service	08
05. Managing Commons with Unity and Resilience	10
06. A Leader of Change from Sanpitamal Village	13
07. Women and Forests: The Lifeline of Marding	15
08. A Journey of Leadership and Hope	17
09. From Struggle to Strength	19
10. The Inspiring Journey of Phulme Majhi	21
11. The way from the Forest to Leadership	23
12. The Journey of Strength and Change	25
13. Sukanti: The Power Within	27
14. Empowerment and Change	29
15. Malabati Puta: A Story of Strength, Hope, and the Forest	31
16. Jaila Itamu: A Story of Resilience and Change	33
17. Learning : Empowering Women ...	35



# Journey of Learning and Empowerment

Bdimbuli Majhi, a Panga Kondh woman from the remote village of Khaliyamunda in Kalahandi, has lived a life deeply connected to the forests and traditions of her tribal community. Born into a family that relied entirely on the forest for their livelihood, Bdimbuli grew up in an environment where formal education was neither accessible nor prioritized. From a young age, she learned to gather forest produce, tend to small patches of farmland, and manage household responsibilities. Like many women in her community, Bdimbuli's life revolved around survival, with little exposure to the world beyond her village. She never attended school and did not know how to speak Oriya, the dominant language of the region. Her only language was Kui, the native tongue of the Kondh tribe.



Despite these limitations, Bdimbuli possessed an innate curiosity and a strong desire to improve her life and the lives of those around her. This inner urgency to grow and develop became the driving force behind her remarkable journey. Her life took a transformative turn when she encountered a worker from Seba Jagat, working to empower tribal communities. The Seba Jagat worker, who learned to speak Kui, became a bridge between Bdimbuli and the outside world. Through their interactions, Bdimbuli began to learn about new ideas and practices that could help her community thrive.



One of the first lessons Bdimbuli embraced was the importance of cleanliness and hygiene. She learned that simple practices, such as washing hands and maintaining a clean living environment, could prevent illnesses. With great enthusiasm, she began to teach these practices to the women in her village. She also encouraged people to seek medical help when they fell ill, rather than relying solely on traditional remedies. This was a significant shift in a community where hospitals were often viewed with suspicion and fear. Bdimbuli's efforts gradually led to improved health outcomes and a greater awareness of the benefits of modern healthcare.

Bdimbuli's desire to bring about change did not stop there. She recognized the power of collective action and decided to form a women's group in her village. The group started small, with each member contributing just one rupee and a palmful of rice every week. This modest beginning marked the start

of a savings initiative that would eventually empower the women economically. The group became a platform for sharing ideas, solving problems, and supporting one another. Over time, the savings grew, enabling the women to invest in small businesses, purchase essential items, and even support their children's education.

When a school for child laborers was established in Khaliamunda, Bdimbuli saw it as an opportunity to transform the lives of the village children. She became the school's cook, preparing meals for the students, but her role extended far beyond the kitchen. Bdimbuli took it upon herself to ensure that every child in the village attended school. She would go from house to house, urging parents to send their children to school and explaining the importance of education. Her persistence paid off, and the school became a hub of learning and hope for the community.

Bdimbuli's commitment to education was not limited to the children of her village. She also ensured that her own children attended school, breaking the cycle of illiteracy in her family. This was a bold decision, as many in her community viewed education as unnecessary for tribal children. However, Bdimbuli believed that education was the key to a better future, and she was determined to give her children the opportunities she never had. One of Bdimbuli's most significant achievements was her involvement in the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in her village. Bdimbuli, with the help of Seba Jagat, guided her community through the process of applying for land titles under the FRA. Her efforts resulted in many families, including her own, gaining legal ownership of their ancestral land. This was a monumental step towards economic independence and security for the community.

With the land secured, Bdimbuli turned her attention to sustainable agriculture. She learned about organic farming and millet cultivation, practices that were both environmentally friendly and economically viable. She encouraged her community to adopt these methods, which not only improved their yields but also preserved the fertility of the soil. Bdimbuli's leadership in promoting organic agriculture and millet cultivation has had a lasting impact on the village's food security and economic stability.

Even as she approached the age of 70, Bdimbuli remained an active and influential figure in her community. She continued to advocate for education, urging children to attend school and parents to prioritize their children's learning. She also spoke out against the consumption of alcohol, a practice that had caused significant harm in her community. Bdimbuli's efforts to reduce alcohol consumption have contributed to improved health and social cohesion in the village. Bdimbuli's story is one of resilience, determination, and an unwavering commitment to the well-being of her community. Despite facing numerous challenges, she never lost sight of her goal to bring about positive change. Her journey from a forest-dependent woman with no formal education to a respected community leader is an evidence to the power of learning and the impact of grassroots initiatives.



# **Transformation of Gadadi Village - A Journey from Struggle to Hope**

## **Introduction**

Gadadi, a small Kutia Kondh village in Uraladani Panchayat, was once synonymous with struggle and despair., this forest-dependent community faced unimaginable hardships. With no land ownership and limited means of livelihood, they relied entirely on the forest for food, fuel, and survival. Adding to their woes, in 2002 a devastating outbreak of diarrhea claimed the lives of nine people in the village that year. This tragedy left an unforgettable mark on the community, as well developing a collective realization that they needed to bring change for a better future.



## **A Village Struggling to Survive**

The villagers of Gadadi lived in extreme poverty, with no land to cultivate or call their own. Education was almost nonexistent; most of the villagers were illiterate, with no awareness of their rights or access to basic services. They depended on the forest for sustenance, collecting minor forest produce like firewood, roots, and leaves to trade for essential items.

The outbreak of diarrhea further highlighted the community's vulnerabilities. Poor sanitation, lack of safe drinking water, and inadequate access to healthcare services made them more prone to diseases. The tragic loss of lives, especially of young children and elderly villagers, created a wave of grief and helplessness.

## **Small Steps Towards Change**

Despite the many challenges, the people especially women of Gadadi refused to give up hope. They understood that change would not come unless they worked together. A group of concerned determined women leading the way, came together to form a small community group. This group decided to start by addressing the basic health issues that had caused so much suffering in their village. They began with small but important actions that could make an immediate difference. First, they focused on ensuring that all children in the village were immunized against common diseases. This was a crucial step, as many children in the past had fallen sick or died from



# A Journey of Resilience and Service

Supriya was born in the small town of G. Udaygiri, in Kandhamal district. Her family was neither privileged nor deprived—they lived a modest life, striving to make ends meet. Supriya was a bright and curious child, always eager to learn and help others. After completing her schooling and intermediate education, she decided to pursue nursing, a profession she believed would get her assured job. However, life had other plans for her.

While studying, Supriya's marriage was arranged to. Her groom had a secure job, which brought comfort to her parents, who believed she would have a stable future

After marriage, Supriya moved to her husband's village, leaving behind the comfort of her semi-urban life. As soon as she stepped into Khaliyamunda, she felt like she had entered another world. The village was far from any town, with no proper roads, poor electricity, and very basic healthcare facilities. Khaliyamunda was a place where poverty was rampant, and people struggled daily for their livelihoods. Health indicators were low, and many children were not immunized. Women lacked awareness about menstrual hygiene, and entitlements like land rights and government schemes were often out of reach for the marginalized. Supriya, who had grown up in a relatively better environment, was deeply moved by the struggles she witnessed. The people were kind and innocent, but they were struggling with poverty, lack of education, and health issues. She was struck by the stark realities of rural life



suffered because they did not have access to hospitals or skilled medical help. Seeing this, Supriya could not stay quiet. She knew she had to do something.

Supriya started small. She would talk to the women whenever she met them at the village well or in the fields. Slowly, she gained their trust. She began conducting small awareness sessions on menstrual hygiene, teaching women how to use clean cloth or sanitary pads instead of old rags. She explained the importance of washing hands, keeping their surroundings clean, and eating nutritious food during pregnancy. She even helped the women understand the need for hospital deliveries instead of risky home births.

As she became more involved with the village, she started learning about the issues beyond health. She saw that many families did not have land rights, and they lived in constant fear of being displaced. She met old villagers who told her about the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and how it could help them claim their ancestral land. Janaki, though new to village life, decided to learn more. She met government officials, attended meetings, and slowly understood the process of land claims.



Her efforts did not go unnoticed. The community admired her dedication and leadership. During the panchayat elections, they saw an opportunity to bring about real change. Despite facing opposition from more established candidates, Supriya's community members rallied behind her and elected her as their sarpanch (village council head). They believed in her vision and her ability to improve their lives.

As sarpanch, Supriya worked firmly. She focused on implementing the Forest Rights Act, ensuring that marginalized families received their land entitlements. She travelled to different villages, spreading awareness about health, education, and women's rights. Her work brought tangible improvements to the community, and she became a symbol of hope and progress. Yet, amidst all her responsibilities, Supriya never forgot her dream of becoming a nurse. She continued her studies, balancing her duties as a Sarpanch with her passion for learning. She knew that becoming a nurse would allow her to serve women in a more profound way, addressing their health needs and empowering them further. But for now, she continues to serve her village in every way she can— as a leader, a healer, and a true changemaker

# Story of Ketaki Dandia: A Leader of Change from Sanpitamal Village

Ketaki Dandia, a remarkable woman from the small village of Sanpitamal, always dreamed of making a difference in her community. Although her family was not as deprived as many others in the village, Ketaki grew up witnessing the struggles faced by her neighbors. From an early age, she showed a natural inclination to help those in need. Even as a child, Ketaki found small ways to assist people, igniting a sense of responsibility that only grew stronger with time.

Ketaki studied up to the 10th standard, which was considered a significant achievement in her village. However, her passion for social work went far beyond her formal education. She believed that real education was about understanding the needs of people and working to improve their lives.

Ketaki Dandia, a woman from Sanpitamal village, always nurtured a dream to serve her community. Though she was born into a family that was not as deprived as others in her village, she grew up witnessing the struggles of those around her. Even as a child, she would find ways to help people, a spark of social responsibility that only grew stronger with time. Ketaki studied up to the 10th standard, but her passion for social work far outweighed her formal education.

After her marriage, Ketaki found immense support in her husband, who encouraged her to continue helping others. This support became a pillar for her journey of community service. Ketaki started small by assisting women in the village to rectify errors in their Aadhaar cards and helping them access various government entitlements like pensions and ration cards. She recalls how deeply fulfilling it was to assist a family whose house had burnt down, helping them secure housing under a government scheme and additional support through the Member of Parliament Local Area Development (MPLAD) fund.

Her efforts earned her the respect and trust of the community. Ketaki joined the Maa Dharani Self-Help Group (SHG), where she worked with other women to initiate various entrepreneurial activities. Under her leadership, the SHG improved the financial conditions of its members and even took charge of the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) program in local schools, ensuring nutritious food for children.



Driven by her passion for development, Ketaki went on to become the Sarpanch of her village. As Sarpanch, she transformed Sanpitamal with her proactive approach and commitment. She regularly visited schools and Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) to ensure the welfare of children and women. During her tenure, she facilitated the installation of 17 tubewells to solve the village's water crisis and spearheaded land development initiatives under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). She extended her support to people with disabilities, ensuring they received necessary aids and entitlements.

Ketaki's dedication didn't stop even after her tenure as Sarpanch. She continued to support her community, such as helping two individuals who lost their hands secure plastic prosthetics, and identifying landless families to connect them with government entitlements and job cards under MGNREGA. Her tireless efforts earned her recognition as the **Best Sarpanch in the District** this year, a testament to her impactful work and unwavering commitment to her village's development.

- **Honey:** Wild honey was collected carefully by women. It was used both as food and as a natural remedy for colds and coughs.

### **Forest as a Source of Firewood**

The forest was also the main supplier of firewood, which women collected to cook meals and keep their homes warm. Firewood was an essential part of daily life, as it powered their traditional wood stoves.

### **Forest as a Source of Shelter and Building Materials**

Women depended on the forest for materials to repair or build their homes. They collected bamboo, leaves, and small timber to make walls, roofs, and fences. This connection with the forest meant that their homes were built using materials that were both natural and sustainable.

### **Forest as a Source of Herbal Medicine**

The women of Marding had deep knowledge of the medicinal plants in the forest. They used these plants to treat common health problems like fevers, stomach aches, skin infections, and wounds. For example:

- Leaves from certain plants were boiled to make teas that helped cure diarrhea.
- Herbal pastes made from forest plants were applied to cuts and injuries to prevent infection.
- Bark and roots of trees were used to relieve joint pain or treat coughs.
- Honey and specific herbs were mixed to treat cold and flu symptoms.

The forest has been integral to the women of Marding, serving not only as a source of food, fuel, medicine, and shelter but also as a cornerstone of their cultural identity and communal bonds. Gathering forest produce was a shared activity, reinforcing traditions and a deep connection to their roots. Losing access to the forest disrupts their way of life, undermining their well-being, cultural heritage, and resilience. Protecting this relationship is essential to sustaining their health, livelihoods, and sense of identity.



### **Bdimbuli's Testimony: Strength in Land Rights**

Bdimbuli, a mother of three, recently secured land rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), a historic milestone for 13 families in Marding. With tears of pride and determination, she shares:

*"For years, we depended on the forest for everything, but we lived in constant fear of losing access. When we received legal rights to our land, it felt like gaining a piece of our future. Now, I can grow millet, pulses, and vegetables for my children. With land in our names, we feel stronger. We can plan, we can dream, and we can protect our families."*

### **Bakeri's Testimony: Resilience through Forest Management**

Bakeri, a widow and a leader in her community, recalls the days when the forest gave them not just resources but hope. She says:

Her work extended beyond the SHG. Pana continued to engage in NTFP collection and wage labor in agriculture. These activities were not just a means of livelihood but also a way to stay connected to her roots and the land she loved. She knew the forests and fields intimately, and they provided her with both sustenance and a sense of purpose. Despite the physical toll of her work, she remained steadfast, driven by the need to provide for herself and her niece.



Pana's story is one of resilience and quiet determination. She faced numerous challenges—marriage that didn't work out, the loss of her parents, mistreatment from her brother and his wife, and the struggle to secure a home. Yet, she never gave up. She found strength in her independence and used her experiences to uplift others in her community. Her SHG became a platform for women to share their struggles and support one another, and her advocacy for single women's rights inspired many.

Today, Pana lives in her small house, built with her own hands and determination. Her brother's daughter, who chose to stand by her, is a constant reminder of the importance of family and solidarity. Pana continues to work in agriculture and NTFP collection. She remains committed to her SHG and the women she supports, always thinking of ways to improve their lives and secure their entitlements. Pana's story is not one of grand achievements but of quiet perseverance, resilience. In the face of adversity, Pana chose to rise, and in doing so, she became an inspiration for her community.

# The Inspiring Journey of Phulme Majhi

Phulme Majhi, a Kondh tribal woman from Rajendrapur village in Bandhapari Panchayat of Lanjigarh Block, Kalahandi, grew up in a world of challenges. Life in her remote village was tough—poverty was rampant, and opportunities for women were scarce. Yet, despite all odds, Phulme’s determination to bring change to her community transformed not just her life but also the lives of many around her.



## Early Life and Struggles

Phulme’s family depended on farming and daily wage labor to survive. In her village, education for girls was unheard of. Most girls were expected to stay home, work in the fields, or get married at a young age. But Phulme dreamed of something different.

Every day, she walked 4 kilometers to Bandhapari School. The journey was long and exhausting, but she never gave up. At home, she studied by the dim light of a kerosene lamp after finishing household chores. Many in her village mocked her efforts, saying education was useless for girls, and relatives pressured her parents to marry her off. Yet, Phulme’s determination remained unshaken.

After completing Class 9, she faced immense difficulties continuing her education. But in 2017, even while serving as a sarpanch, she achieved what seemed impossible—she passed her matriculation exams, becoming the first girl in her village to complete Class 10.

## Stepping Into Leadership

Phulme’s passion for helping others led her to work with a local civil society organization. She traveled to nearby villages, organizing women into groups and empowering them to demand their rights. She helped them understand government schemes and how to access them. People in her community began seeing her as a leader who genuinely cared for their well-being.

When panchayat elections were announced, her community encouraged her to stand for sarpanch. Initially hesitant, Phulme finally agreed, and with the overwhelming support of her villagers, she was elected as sarpanch—twice in a row. As sarpanch, she worked to solve the problems her village faced. She focused on land rights, helping many families get legal documents for the land they had been farming for generations. She also improved education in her area. Under her leadership, schools were built, and more children—especially girls—started going to school. Thanks to her efforts, nearly 500 children were able to study and dream of a better future.

Phulme also worked on roads, drinking water, and health facilities in the villages. She made sure the government schemes reached the people who needed them most.

Her leadership wasn't just about solving problems—it was about inspiring hope and dignity in her community.

### **Founding an NGO**

In between, Phulme felt the need to continue her work on a larger scale. She founded her own NGO, Unnayan, to address deep-rooted issues like land rights, women's empowerment, and sustainable livelihoods.

Through the NGO, Phulme organized legal aid camps, leadership training programs, and community awareness drives. She empowered women to take charge of their lives and fight for their rights. Her work not only brought tangible changes but also gave her community a voice.

### **Recognition and Awards**

Phulme's relentless efforts and commitment to her people earned her several prestigious awards: To mention few

1. Adivasi Pratibha Samman by the Government of Odisha for her exceptional contributions to tribal development.
2. UNICEF's Impactful Changemaker Award for her work in improving the lives of women and children, especially in education, health, and land rights.
3. Devagiri Award, which recognized her dedication to bringing positive change to her region.

These honors reflect the incredible impact of her work and the respect she has earned across different platforms.

### **A Role Model for All**

Phulme Majhi's story is a testament to the power of determination, courage, and resilience. From a young girl walking miles to school, to a sarpanch and changemaker who uplifted her entire community, Phulme has shown that nothing is impossible.

Her journey inspires women and youth across tribal areas, proving that with hard work and belief in oneself, dreams can come true. Phulme continues to fight for her people, creating opportunities for education, rights, and dignity, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Through her work and example, Phulme Majhi has become an example of hope, showing her community—and the world—that true leadership comes from the heart.





# The Journey from the Forest to Leadership

In Dedhsuli Panchayat, deep in the dense forests Jamuli village is situated. This is where Rama Majhi was born, the eldest of five children, to parents who depended entirely on the forest for their survival. Her family, like many others in the region, lived a life with nature in forest. They stitched leaf plates, collected mahua flowers, and gathered whatever the forest provided to make ends meet. Life was simple but hard, and education was a distant dream for most children in the village.

Rama's parents, however, were different. Despite their struggles, they believed in the power of education. When Rama turned six, her mother, though illiterate herself, made a bold decision. She sent Rama to a hostel located 10 kilometers away from their village so that she could attend school. This decision was not easy. Rama was just a child, and the thought of her living away from home was painful. But her mother knew that education was the only way to break the cycle of poverty. The journey to the hostel was not easy for young Rama. She would wake up at 2 a.m. and walk 10 kilometers through the dark, dense forest to reach the hostel. The path was treacherous, and the fear of wild animals was always present. But Rama was determined. She carried with her the hopes and dreams of her parents, who wanted a better life for her.

The first two years in the hostel were the hardest. Rama was just a little girl, far away from her family and village. She missed her parents, her siblings, and the familiar surroundings of Jamuli. The language barrier added to her struggles. In her village, people spoke Kui, a tribal language, but at the hostel, the medium of instruction was Odia, a language she barely understood. Rama spent many nights crying, longing for the comfort of her home. But there was a fighter inside her. Slowly, she began to adapt. She learned Odia, made friends, and started to excel in her studies. After completing her primary education, Rama moved to another hostel to continue her schooling. Her determination never wavered. Her hard work paid off when she completed her matriculation. Rama's journey did not end there. She went on to complete her intermediate education at Bhawanipatna Autonomous College. It was during her graduation that the Covid-19 pandemic struck. The world came to a standstill, and Rama's education was interrupted. Her family, worried about her future, decided to get her married. And life took a different turn with a positive note. Her husband, like her, had grown up in similar circumstances. He understood the value of education and supported Rama in completing her graduation. Together, they dreamed of a better future, not just for themselves but for their entire community.

One day, something unexpected happened. The people of Lubengarh, during panchayat election, elected Rama as their Sarpanch owing to her education and supportive nature. It was a role she had never imagined for herself. She was only 28 years old, a young tribal woman with big dreams but little experience in leadership. Yet, the community saw something in her—a spark, a determination, and a deep connection to their struggles. Rama accepted the responsibility with humility. She knew that being



a sarpanch was not just about holding a title; it was about making a difference. Her first priority was to ensure that government schemes reached the people who needed them the most. She worked tirelessly to implement the Forest Rights Act (FRA), which aimed to give tribal communities rights over the forest land they had depended on for generations. For Rama, this was personal. She had seen her parents struggle to make a living from the forest, and she wanted to ensure that others did not face the same hardships.

Rama's leadership style was unique. She did not believe in sitting in an office and giving orders. Instead, she walked through the villages, talked to the people, and listened to their problems. She organized meetings under the shade of trees, where everyone, regardless of age or gender, could voice their opinions. She encouraged women to participate in decision-making and inspired young girls to pursue education. It is also a learning for her. One of her biggest dreams was to see an educated community, especially women. She knew that education was the key to empowerment. She started encouraging parents to send their children to school. She also joined in different programmes of Seba Jagat to get new ideas, Rama's efforts began to bear fruit. Slowly but surely, the community started to change. More children, especially girls, were enrolled in schools. Women began to take an active role in village affairs.

But her journey was not without challenges. There were times when she faced resistance from those who were resistant to change. Some people questioned her ability to lead, simply because she was a young woman. But Rama never let these obstacles deter her. She remained focused on her goals and continued to work tirelessly for the betterment of her community.



She is fully aware that her tenure as Sarpanch is temporary and that she will not hold this position forever. However, her commitment to her community extends far beyond political office. Unlike those who seek leadership for personal gain or political ambition, her motivation comes from a dedication to the welfare and progress of her people. She does not see politics as a career path, nor does she have any aspirations for higher political positions. Instead, her heart lies in uplifting her community, advocating for their rights, and ensuring sustainable development.

Her vision is clear: she wants to see her village with better opportunities for education, healthcare, livelihoods, and social justice. Even when she is no longer in an official leadership role, she remains determined to continue working for the well-being of her people.

Rama's story is a testament to the power of determination and the impact of education. From a young girl walking 10 kilometers to school every day to becoming the sarpanch of Lubengarh, she has come a long way. Her journey is an inspiration to countless others, especially young tribal women, who dare to dream of a better future.

Her story is a reminder that change is possible, even in the most challenging circumstances. It is a story of hope, resilience, and belief in the power of education. Rama Majhi is not just a leader; she is inspiration for her community, guiding them toward a brighter future.

# **The Story of Sajana Majhi :**

## **A Journey of Strength and Change**

Sajana Majhi, a 70-year-old woman from Udegiri village, has spent her entire life surrounded by dense forests and farmland. Udegiri, a small village tucked away inside the forest, has always been a difficult place to live. The villagers depend on the forest and agriculture for their livelihood, but survival is never easy. The soil is tough, resources are scarce, and the changing seasons bring both hope and hardship. For many years, Sajana and her community struggled to make ends meet, living from harvest to harvest and often facing food shortages during difficult times.

Despite the challenges, Sajana never gave up. She observed how hard her fellow villagers worked and realized that they needed a better way to secure food and income. That was when she first learned about Self-Help Groups (SHGs). She saw that women in other villages were coming together, saving small amounts of money, and supporting each other during tough times. Inspired by this, Sajana decided to organize the women in her village and form their own SHG.



With a handful of determined women, Sajana started the Aam Jharan Self-Help Group. It all began with a simple act—each woman saved a palmful of rice. This small step was a big change for the village. The rice savings helped ensure that no family went hungry during times of scarcity. Slowly, the SHG began to grow, and the women started saving small amounts of money as well. With their savings, they were able to buy essential household items, support each other in emergencies, and even invest in small livelihood activities.

As the SHG became stronger, Sajana realized that they needed to learn new ways to improve their agricultural practices. The land was their only source of livelihood, but traditional methods often yielded poor results. Through training programs and exposure visits, she learned about compost pitting, magic compost, vegetable cultivation, and seed priming. She quickly shared this knowledge with the other women in her village. They started preparing organic compost, which improved soil fertility and increased their crop yields. Vegetable cultivation became more productive, ensuring a steady supply of nutritious food for their families. The SHG also learned about seed priming techniques, which helped in growing healthier and stronger plants.

Sajana's leadership did not stop at agriculture. She recognized the struggles women faced when it came to health. Many women in the village suffered from various health issues, but they rarely sought medical help due to lack of awareness and money. Sajana took the initiative to support women in need by connecting them to local health workers and government schemes. She encouraged pregnant women to visit healthcare centers and ensured that mothers and children received proper nutrition. Her efforts made a significant impact, and slowly, the health conditions in the village started improving.

Education was another issue close to Sajana's heart. She had seen how difficult life was for those who could not read or write. She firmly believed that education was the key to a better future, not just for the children but for the entire community. She made sure her own children went to school, even when it meant making sacrifices. She also motivated other families in the village to send their children to school, especially girls, who were often kept at home to help with household work. Thanks to her efforts, more children from Udegiri village began attending school, opening doors to new opportunities.

Through years of dedication, Sajana transformed not only her own life but also the lives of many others in her village. The Aam Jharan SHG became a model for women's empowerment, showing how small steps could lead to big changes. Today, even at the age of 70, Sajana continues to inspire younger generations. She believes that with unity, knowledge, and determination, even the most challenging situations can be overcome.

Her journey is a testament to the power of collective strength and the impact of one woman's vision. Sajana Majhi's story is not just about survival; it is about resilience, learning, and creating a lasting change for the community.

# Sukanti : A Story of Strength and Change

Sukanti Majhi, a 45-year-old mother of five from Kaupadar village, is a true example of resilience and determination. Born into a family steeped in poverty, Sukanti's childhood was marked by hardship. She would wake up at 3 a.m. to dehusk rice by hand, a hard and tiring task that took hours. By sunrise, she would head to the forest to collect firewood, fruits, and leaves to help her family survive.



Like many women in Kaupadar, Sukanti's life revolved around the forest. The work was tough, the days were long, and food was often scarce. Schooling wasn't an option for her—she had to leave school after only a few years to support her family. Despite her limited education, Sukanti grew up with a deep understanding of life's hardships and empathy for others.

As she grew older, Sukanti's responsibilities only increased. Married at a young age, she had five children to care for, and her days became even more demanding. From tending to household chores to gathering forest produce and ensuring her children were fed, her life was an endless cycle of toil. Yet, Sukanti remained steadfast, determined to provide a better life for her family and her community.

In 2021, Seba Jagat, conducted a women's drudgery analysis in Kaupadar. During the discussions, Sukanti shared her struggles with dehusking paddy. She explained how it consumed hours of her day, leaving little time for anything else. The repetitive, labor-intensive process was a major challenge for most women in the village, as they relied on manual methods to prepare rice for their families and for sale. It was a time-consuming and physically exhausting task that left little room for anything else.

Recognizing the need to address this issue, Seba Jagat, approached Livelihood Mission and SELCO Foundation, introduced a solar-powered rice huller in the village. The machine, powered by renewable energy, could dehusk large quantities of rice in a fraction of the time it took manually. This innovation had the potential to transform the lives of the women in Kaupadar, and Sukanti stepped forward to take the lead in managing it.

Despite her humble background and limited education, Sukanti's leadership qualities shone through. She was chosen to oversee the operation and management of the solar rice huller. At first,

she was nervous—managing machine seemed frightening, and she had never taken on such a responsibility before. However, with training and encouragement, Sukanti quickly learned the ropes.

Sukanti's innate determination and willingness to learn made her an ideal leader. She ensured the machine was well-maintained and operated efficiently. Women from the village began bringing their rice to the huller, and Sukanti managed the schedules, ensuring that everyone benefited equally. The machine not only saved time but also reduced the physical burden on the women, allowing them to focus on other productive activities.

### **A Better Life for the Women of Kaupadar**

The solar rice huller brought significant change to the women of Kaupadar. What once took hours of manual labor could now be done in minutes. Women who used to spend their mornings dehusking rice could now dedicate that time to other tasks, such as farming, caring for their children, or even taking much-needed



rest. For many, it was the first time they felt a sense of relief from their relentless daily drudgery.. They started exploring new ways to improve their lives and incomes. For Sukanti, managing the rice huller was more than just a responsibility—it was a journey of personal growth. She found immense satisfaction in helping others and took pride in the fact that her efforts were making a tangible difference in the lives of the women in her village

The women of Kaupadar began to see Sukanti not just as the manager of the rice huller but as a leader and a symbol of hope. They admired her for her courage and dedication and often sought her guidance on other issues. Sukanti's work brought a sense of unity and empowerment to the women of the village. They started organizing themselves, discussing ways to improve their lives, and exploring new opportunities for income generation.

# A Journey of Empowerment and Change

Iva Majhi was born into a Kondh tribal family in Risida village, located in the Kalahandi district of Odisha. The Kondh tribe, one of the largest tribal communities in Odisha, is known for its rich cultural traditions and close-knit social structure. However, the Kondh people have historically faced challenges such as poverty, lack of access to education, and limited opportunities for economic and social advancement. Despite these challenges, Iva was fortunate to grow up in a family that valued education and believed in its transformative power.



Iva's parents, though not highly educated themselves, understood the importance of schooling. They recognized that education could open doors to a better future for their children and help break the cycle of poverty that had affected their community for generations. This belief was not common in their village, where many families prioritized immediate economic needs over long-term investments like education. However, Iva's parents were determined to give their children the best possible opportunities. They worked hard to ensure that all their children, including their daughters, attended school and completed their education. Iva, along with her brothers and sisters, studied diligently and successfully graduated. This was a significant achievement, especially for a girl from a tribal community in a region where many children, particularly girls, dropped out of school early to help with household chores or work in the fields. Iva's family became an example of how education could transform lives, and their story inspired many in the village. Iva's parents' commitment to education laid the foundation for her future endeavors and instilled in her a deep sense of responsibility towards her community.

After completing her studies, Iva married and moved to her husband's village, Jakabahali, located in M. Rampur block of Kalahandi district. While Risida, her native village, had its share of challenges, Jakabahali presented a different reality. The village was marked by extreme poverty, lack of basic amenities, and limited access to education and healthcare. The people of Jakabahali struggled to make ends meet, and many families lived in conditions of deprivation. Iva was deeply affected by the contrast between her upbringing and the situation she now found herself in. She realized that while her own family had prioritized education and progress, many others in the region had been left behind due to systemic neglect and lack of awareness.

Determined to make a difference, Iva began to engage with the women in her new community. She noticed that many of them were eager to improve their lives but lacked the resources and guidance to do so. Iva decided to strengthen a Self-Help Group (SHG). Iva's SHG started small, with just a handful of women, but it quickly grew as more and more women joined, inspired by her vision and determination. Through the SHG, Iva helped women access various government entitlements and schemes designed to support marginalized communities. She educated them about their rights and guided them

through the often-complicated process of applying for benefits. This included everything from healthcare subsidies to agricultural support programs. Iva's efforts began to bear fruit as families started to see improvements in their living conditions. The SHG became a platform not just for economic empowerment but also for social change, as women gained confidence and a sense of agency.

Iva's work did not go unnoticed. Her leadership skills and dedication to the community earned her the respect and admiration of the villagers. When the time came for the election of the Sarpanch in M. Rampur, Iva was encouraged to contest. Despite initial hesitation, she decided to step forward, driven by her desire to bring about larger-scale change. Her campaign focused on issues like education, healthcare, and land rights, all of which were close to her heart. Iva's message resonated with the people, and she was elected as the Sarpanch of M. Rampur.



As Sarpanch, Iva worked to address the needs of her community. She prioritized education, also focused on improving healthcare access, working to bring government programs to the village. Even after her tenure as Sarpanch ended, Iva continued to work for her community. She remained actively involved in the SHG and other local initiatives, ensuring that the momentum for change was sustained.. Land ownership is a critical issue for tribal communities, as it provides not just economic security but also a sense of identity and belonging.

Her efforts to secure land rights for the tribal families in Jakabahali with determination and persistence paid off when, after years of advocacy and legal battles, 38 families in Jakabahali were granted ownership of 100 acres of land. This was a monumental achievement, as it provided these families with a stable foundation for their future. The land enabled them to practice sustainable agriculture, build homes, and plan for the education and well-being of their children. Iva's role in this achievement was pivotal, and it cemented her reputation as a leader who could deliver real change.

Iva's journey is a demonstration to the power of education, determination, and community leadership. Born into a family that valued learning, she carried those values forward, using them to uplift not just herself but an entire community. Her story is one of resilience and hope, showing that even in the face of immense challenges, change is possible when driven by a strong sense of purpose and a commitment to collective well-being. Today, Iva Majhi is a respected figure in M. Rampur and beyond. Her work has inspired countless others to take charge of their lives and fight for their rights. She remains a quiet yet powerful force, proving that one does not need to be loud or aggressive to make a difference. Iva's legacy is one of empowerment, proving that with the right support and opportunities, even the most marginalized communities can rise and thrive



## **Strength in the Face of Loss**

Malabati's life, however, has been marked by personal tragedy. She lost her only son at a young age, a loss that could have easily broken her spirit. But instead, Malabati found strength in her grief. She believed that her son would have wanted her to continue her fight for the forest and for the people of their village. Carrying his memory in her heart, she used her pain as fuel to push forward.

## **Empowering Women**

Malabati knew that the strength of a community lies in its people—especially its women. She united the women of her village, encouraging them to participate in decision-making and community activities. Many women, who once remained silent in village meetings, found their voices under her guidance. They began working on sustainable farming techniques and other initiatives to improve their livelihoods.

Together, they not only protected the forest but also created a stronger, more resilient community. The women of Sindhiguda became role models for others, proving that change is possible when people come together with shared determination.

## **A Legacy of Hope**

Malabati's story is not just about protecting a forest; it is about resilience, hope, and the power of community. She has shown that with courage and determination, even the greatest challenges can be overcome. Her efforts have ensured that the forest, which is the heart of her community, will continue to provide for future generations.

Her life is a testament to the strength of women, the value of community, and the importance of protecting the environment. For the people of Sindhiguda, Malabati Puta is more than a leader—she is their hope for a stronger, greener future.

to school. The women pooled resources to provide school supplies and uniforms, ensuring no child was left behind. Today, many girls from the federation's villages are completing their studies and dreaming of brighter futures.

### **Promoting Health :**

The federation recognized that improving health was vital for the well-being of their families and communities. They organized awareness campaigns on hygiene practices, emphasizing the importance of clean drinking water, proper sanitation, and personal cleanliness to prevent common illnesses. Realizing the risks associated with home deliveries, the women actively promoted institutional childbirth, encouraging pregnant women to access healthcare facilities for safe delivery. Additionally, they collaborated with local health workers to ensure children received timely immunizations, protecting them from preventable diseases and building a healthier future for the community.

### **Land Rights and Livelihoods:**

Equally committed to economic empowerment, the federation focused on securing land rights and enhancing farm-based livelihoods. They fought collectively to challenge patriarchal norms, advocating for women's ownership and inheritance of land—a crucial step in breaking cycles of dependency. Once land rights were established, the women used their resources to adopt sustainable farming practices, cultivating diverse crops, and engaging in integrated farming systems. Leveraging government schemes like the Millet Mission and MGNREGA, they not only improved agricultural productivity but also created stable income sources. These initiatives empowered women to achieve economic independence and strengthen their role within their households and communities.

### **Building Enterprises for Sustainable Livelihoods**

As their confidence grew, the women ventured into **enterprising activities** to boost their incomes. They started small businesses—processing forest produce, cultivating vegetables, and making turmeric, spices and other value addition work. Supported by government schemes and NGOs, these ventures provided a steady income and strengthened the federation's financial foundation.



### **A Symbol of hope of Change**

Jaila Itamu Women's Federation is a the power of unity and perseverance. What began as a handful of rice has grown into a movement that has transformed lives. The federation stands as a beacon of hope, proving that even in the face of adversity, collective action can bring lasting change.

# **Learning: Empowering Women through Land Rights, Livelihoods, and Sustainable Practices**

## **Introduction**

In 15 villages of M. Rampur, Kalahandi, Seba Jagat implemented the programme to empower women by securing land rights, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and reducing dependency on non-timber forest products (NTFPs). The project specifically addressed systemic challenges faced by women focussing single women. Through a holistic approach, we integrated millet cultivation, sustainable farming practices, and intergenerational knowledge sharing. These efforts not only strengthened women's economic conditions but also fostered social cohesion and resilience within the community.

## **Land Rights and Entitlements**

A major achievement of the project was securing land rights for 211 individuals, including women. This was accomplished through their continuous engagement. The process involved educating the community about their rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and guiding them through the application process. The successful acquisition of land titles has provided these families with a sense of security and the foundation for sustainable livelihoods.

## **Strengthening Women's Associations**

The project emphasized the need to strengthen women's associations, particularly Single Women Associations, to enhance their collective power and ability to advocate for their rights. These associations provided a platform for women to share experiences, build leadership skills, and collectively access government entitlements. Strengthening these associations helped create a strong support system that empowered women to take on leadership roles and address community challenges more effectively and linkages with larger networks and federations amplify their influence and access to resources.

## **Millet Promotion and Integrated Farming**

The programme got the opportunity for integrated millet cultivation through the Sri Anna Abhiyan programme and integrated farming practices. Millet was well-suited to the local agro-climatic conditions. Training sessions on integrated farming techniques were conducted, emphasizing the importance of crop diversification, organic farming, and soil health. These practices have not only improved food security but also increased the income levels of the participants.

- Crop diversification reduces risks associated with climate variability and market fluctuations.
- Sustainable agriculture practices, such as organic farming, enhance soil fertility and long-term productivity.

## Experience and Learning from Developing a Women Resource Centre and IEC Materials

Our experience in developing a **Women Resource Centre (WRC)** has highlighted the critical role of a dedicated space for women to access information, training, and support. Establishing the WRC has reinforced the importance of **community-driven capacity-building**, where women not only receive training but also take ownership of their development. One key learning has been the need for **localized and culturally relevant approaches**, ensuring that knowledge is accessible to all, regardless of literacy levels. The process of creating **Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials** has underscored the importance of **visual storytelling, participatory design, and multilingual content**. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern practices, we have found that women engage more effectively and retain information better. Additionally, **collaborations with experts, local leaders, and government departments** have strengthened the effectiveness of the WRC, making it a sustainable model for long-term impact. These learnings will guide the expansion and refinement of the initiative, ensuring greater empowerment and self-reliance among women.

### Broader Insights and Recommendations

#### 1. Empowerment Through Collective Action

- Organizing women into formal groups enhances their bargaining power and access to resources.
- Women's associations should be linked to larger federations and networks for broader influence and support.

#### 2. Land Rights as a Foundation for Livelihoods

- Land ownership provides economic security, increasing women's ability to invest in sustainable farming practices.
- Ongoing legal support and training are necessary to navigate land tenure complexities.

#### 3. Sustainability in Livelihoods

- Diversifying income sources reduces economic vulnerability.
- Encouraging climate-resilient crops like millet strengthens food security.
- Strengthening market linkages ensures better income opportunities for women farmers.

#### 4. Integrating Cultural and Environmental Practices

- Traditional cultural events can be leveraged to promote conservation and sustainable practices.
- Programs should respect and integrate indigenous wisdom while introducing scientific advancements.

preventable illnesses. The group encouraged mothers to take their children to nearby health centers for vaccinations. Second, the group worked on improving sanitation in the village. They promoted the construction of small pits for waste disposal, reducing the chances of disease outbreaks. They also educated their neighbors about the importance of hygiene practices like washing hands with soap before eating and after using the toilet. These simple practices were



unfamiliar to many in the community but gradually started making a difference. Finally, the group made it a priority to ensure that mothers and their young children received immunizations and basic health checkups. They encouraged families to overcome their fears of health facilities and explained the long-term benefits of better health for their children.

These small steps, though modest, brought a sense of purpose and unity to the village. The efforts of the community group marked the beginning of a journey toward self-reliance. They showed the villagers that change was possible when they worked together and took small, practical steps to improve their lives.

### **The Fight for Land**

The villagers realized that without access to land, they could not achieve long-term sustainability. With guidance from local grassroots organizations, the community group decided to apply for land rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). For the villagers, this was a hard task. They had never navigated government processes before, and most of them were unaware of their legal entitlements.

The process began with a series of meetings and awareness sessions. The villagers were informed about their rights under FRA, which allows forest-dwelling communities to claim ownership of the land they have been cultivating for generations. The community members, despite their limited literacy, showed immense courage and determination.

### **Joint Verification: A Milestone**

After months of hard work, the villagers submitted their claims under FRA. This was followed by a joint verification process, where government officials visited the village to assess the claims. The process was not easy; it required the villagers to provide evidence of their dependence on the forest and the land they used for cultivation.

The women, in particular, played a crucial role during this time. They guided the officials through the forest paths, showed the landmarks that generations had relied on, and narrated their stories of survival. Their voices, filled with raw emotion and honesty, moved the officials to acknowledge the community's plight.

## A Step Towards Education

Recognizing the importance of education for their children's future, the villagers of Gadadi took another remarkable step. With their limited resources and immense collective effort, they constructed a small house in the village to serve as a space for children to study. Built with bamboo and mud, the house symbolizes the community's determination to break the cycle of illiteracy. Though simple, it is filled with hope and dreams. For the first time, the children of Gadadi have a chance to imagine a future beyond the forest, filled with possibilities and opportunities. This small house stands as hope, lighting the way toward a brighter tomorrow.

## A Community Rebuilt

Today, Gadadi stands as a testament to the power of collective action and resilience. While they are still a poor community, they are no longer helpless. They grow vegetables, millet, and other crops, reducing their dependence on the forest. The small steps they took in health and sanitation have saved lives. Diarrhea cases have reduced significantly, and the villagers are more aware of preventive measures. Children are now immunized, and the sight of smiling, healthy children playing in the village is a stark contrast to the despair of 2009.



## Emotional Reflection of a Grassroots Worker

As someone who closely observed the journey of the people of Gadadi, their transformation inspires immense pride and gratitude. The grief in their eyes after losing loved ones to diarrhea and the hopelessness in their voices as they spoke about their struggles are unforgettable. Yet, amidst the despair, their determination gradually emerged, stronger and more resolute. The turning point came when the women of the village stood up and declared, "We will not let our children die like this again." They took the lead, teaching others about the importance of hygiene, standing firm during the land verification process, and claiming on the land they could finally call their own. Their courage and persistence brought tears to the eyes of those who witnessed their transformation.

The story of Gadadi is not just about securing land or improving health. It is about hope, resilience, and the unyielding strength of a community that refused to accept defeat. They demonstrated that even in the face of overwhelming challenges, change is possible when people unite and fight for what they rightfully deserve.

## Conclusion

Gadadi village is still a work in progress. The journey to development is long, and many challenges remain. But the transformation they have achieved is a hope for other forest-dependent and marginalized communities. The people of Gadadi have proven that with determination, unity, and the right support, even the most disadvantaged communities can carve out a path to a brighter future.

# Silent Struggles to Loud Victories

Gitanjali Patra is a young woman from the Gond tribal community in Nuamunda village, located in Utladani panchayat of Odisha. Like many women in her village, Gitanjali's life revolved around household chores, taking care of her children, and helping her family in agriculture. But Gitanjali was different. She had a desire to do something more for her community. Despite her busy schedule, she took on the challenge of bringing change to her village. Her efforts led to 22 families receiving land pattas (land titles) under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), the formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and increased awareness about health and hygiene. Her story is one of determination, resilience, and hope.

## Life in Nuamunda Village

Nuamunda is a small village surrounded by forests. The Gond tribal community, like many other tribal groups in India, has lived in harmony with nature for generations. They depend on the forest for their livelihood—collecting forest produce, farming small patches of land, and raising livestock. However, they have no legal rights over the land they have been cultivating for years. Few families had land. Gitanjali grew up in this environment. She was married young, like most girls in her community, and soon became a mother. Her days were filled with household work, caring for her children, and helping her husband in the fields. But Gitanjali was not content with just this. She wanted to do something for her village, something that would improve the lives of her people.

The turning point in Gitanjali's life came when she learned about the Forest Rights Act (FRA) that recognizes the rights of forest dwelling communities over the forest land they have been living on and cultivating for generations. Gitanjali realized that this law could change the lives of the people in her village. She decided to take the initiative to help her community claim their rights.

At first, it was not easy. Gitanjali had little formal education, and she had never dealt with legal matters before. But she was determined. She attended meetings and workshops organized by NGOs and government officials to understand the process of filing claims under the FRA. She learned how to fill out application forms, gather necessary documents, and present the case to the authorities.

## Fighting for Land Rights

Gitanjali started by talking to the people in her village. She explained the importance of having legal rights over their land. Many were hesitant. They feared that claiming land rights would lead to conflicts with the forest department or outsiders. But Gitanjali patiently explained that the FRA was their right, and it would protect them from exploitation.

Twenty three families in her village prepare their claims. This involved collecting evidence of their occupation of the land, such as old documents, testimonies from elders, and maps of the area. After months of hard work, the efforts paid off. The 22 families received their land pattas. It was a historic moment for Nuamunda village. For the first time, the villagers had legal ownership of the land

they had been cultivating for generations. This not only gave them security but also opened up opportunities for government schemes and subsidies.

### **Joining VDK and SHGs**

Gitanjali's work did not stop with land rights. She realized that economic empowerment was equally important for the women in her village. She joined the Van Dhan Vikas Kendra (VDVK), a government initiative that helps tribal communities utilize forest produce for income generation. Through VDK, She learned how to process and market forest products like tamarind, sal seed. She shared this knowledge with the women in her village, helping them start small businesses. She explained the benefits of SHGs to the women in her village. She told them how they could save small amounts of money regularly and use it to start small businesses or meet emergencies. The SHGs became a source of financial independence for the women. They started earning their own money, which gave them a sense of confidence and empowerment.

Gitanjali also focused on improving health and hygiene in her village. She noticed that many people, especially children, often fell sick due to lack of clean water and proper sanitation. She organized health awareness camps with the help of local health workers. She taught the villagers about the importance of clean drinking water, handwashing, and immunization. She also encouraged pregnant women to go for regular check-ups and avail of government health schemes.

### **A Role Model for Her Community**

Gitanjali's work has made her a role model in her community. She has shown that even a young woman with little formal education can bring about significant change. Her efforts have not only improved the lives of the people in her village but have also inspired others to take initiative.

Today, Gitanjali continues to work for her community. She is actively involved in the SHGs and VDK, helping women become economically independent. She also continues to raise awareness about health and hygiene. Her dream is to see her village prosper and for every child in her village to have access to education and a better future. Gitanjali's story is a reminder that even the smallest steps can lead to big changes, and that every individual has the power to make a difference.



# Managing Commons with Unity and Resilience

In the midst of the dense forest locally called Telangana jangle, surrounded by trees, Jarka village in Utladani Panchayat of Kalahandi district is inhabited. This small tribal village is home to the **Panga Kondh community**, a group of resilient people who have lived in harmony with nature for generations. Life in Jarka has never been easy, despite their deep connection with the environment —most families struggle with poverty, relying on agriculture and the collection of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) to survive. The forest, which had once been their lifeline, is under threat due to unregulated exploitation by outsiders and poor management. But despite their hardships, the



women of Jarka have shown amazing strength and leadership in transforming their village. The remarkable transformation led by its women. Recognizing the critical role of commons like water and forests in their lives, they took it upon themselves to restore and protect these resources, paving the way for a sustainable and secure future.

The people of Jarka depend on natural resources for their survival. From the forest, they collect fruits, seeds, honey, and leaves, which they sell in nearby markets to earn a living. They grow crops on small plots of land to feed their families. But over time, Jarka faced growing challenges that threatened their way of life.

The village pond, a crucial source of water for drinking, farming, and livestock, had fallen into neglect. Clogged with mud and waste, it could no longer hold water through the dry season, leaving the villagers struggling to meet even their basic water needs. Simultaneously, parts of their forest were being degraded by illegal logging and overextraction of resources by outsiders, diminishing the availability of NTFP. These hardships painted a grim picture of the future, and the community knew they had to act to protect their lives and livelihoods.

## Taking the Lead

The spur of change began with a group of women who gathered under the shade of a large tree to discuss their worries. “If we don’t act now, our children will have no future,” said Bdimbuli, one of the women who voiced their shared concerns. Inspired and supported by Seba Jagat, a grassroots NGO, they formed an association and took on the responsibility of addressing the challenges themselves.

Their first priority was the village pond. With guidance from the NGO and support from the men of the village, the women led the effort to clean and restore it. Armed with simple tools like spades and baskets, they worked tirelessly for weeks. They removed mud, weeds, and garbage, often carrying heavy loads of soil on their heads. Trenches were dug to deepen the pond, ensuring it could store enough water even during the dry season. Gradually, the pond came back to life, filling with clean, fresh water. It became a lifeline for the village once again, providing water for drinking, farming, and livestock throughout the year.

### Protecting the Forest

The women knew that restoring the pond was only part of the solution. The forest, which they called the heart of their village, needed urgent attention. Without a healthy forest, their efforts to secure water and sustain livelihoods would be in vain. The forest is not just a source of food, firewood, and income for the people of Jarka—it is a part of their identity and heritage.

Determined to protect it, the women formed a village forest protection group. They took it upon themselves to guard the forest against illegal logging and overextraction of resources. Patrolling the forest in small groups, they ensured that outsiders could no longer exploit their land. In areas where trees had been cut down, they planted saplings, allowing the forest to regenerate.

To gain formal control over the forest, the community applied for Community Forest Resource (CFR) and Individual Forest Rights (IFR) under the Forest Rights Act. With the support of Seba Jagat, they learned about the legal process and prepared detailed maps of the forest areas they depended on. They documented their traditional use of the land and filed applications to secure legal ownership. This step gave them the authority to manage their forest sustainably and protect it from exploitation.



The women also adopted sustainable harvesting practices for NTFP such as mahua flowers, sal leaves, tamarind, and honey. By collecting these resources responsibly, they ensured that the forest could continue to provide for future generations..

### Unity and Progress

The women of Jarka didn't stop with water and forests. They began organizing regular meetings to discuss other community issues such as health, education, and livelihoods. Children

were sent to school, and families started participating in government programs for agriculture and nutrition. The sense of unity and collective purpose grew stronger, transforming not just the village's resources but also its social fabric.

As Bakeri, one of the women, says, "We are no longer helpless. The forest is our mother, and the pond is our lifeline. We have learned to take care of them, and in return, they take care of us."

### **A Model for Sustainability**

The story of Jarka is not just about restoring a pond or protecting a forest. It is a powerful testament to the strength of collective action and traditional wisdom. By managing their commons with care and foresight, the people of Jarka have shown that even the poorest communities can achieve sustainable development when they come together with unity and determination.

Jarka village now stands as example, reminding us all the importance of respecting and nurturing the natural resources that sustain us. It is a shining example of resilience and resourcefulness, proving that with unity, even the most challenging obstacles can be overcome.



# Women and Forests: The Lifeline of Marding

For the women of the remote village of Marding, the forest has always been an inseparable part of life. It provided food, firewood, medicine, shelter, and a sense of cultural identity. The forest is their lifeline, meeting essential needs and supporting their families' survival. Marding, a small tribal village in Utladani Panchayat of Kalahandi district, Odisha, is home to 35 Kondh Panga families. These families, especially women, have long depended on the forest for food, income, and cultural traditions. For generations, the forest was not just a source of fuel but also a vital part of their daily lives. It provided nutrition, medicines, and a sense of identity. However, deforestation and restricted forest access have severely affected their way of life, leaving women and children particularly vulnerable to malnutrition, poverty, and poor health. For the women of the remote village of Marding, the forest is more than just a resource; it's their identity, culture, and lifeline. From food and firewood to shelter and medicine, the forest provided everything these families needed to survive and thrive.

## Women's Connection with the Forest

For the women of Marding, the forest has always been their lifeline. It provided not just food but also essential resources like firewood, medicines, and even materials for building shelter. Women played a central role in collecting and managing these forest resources, ensuring their families had everything they needed to survive and thrive.



## Forest as a Source of Food

The forest was like a natural food store for the women of Marding. During difficult times, especially when farming failed or food stocks ran low, they turned to the forest for nourishment. Some key foods included:

- **Tubers and Roots:** These were like a backup plan during tough times. Tubers and roots, like yam and wild potatoes, were dug up and cooked to provide energy when there was no rice or other crops.
- **Fruits, Flowers, and Nuts:** Seasonal produce such as mahua flowers, char seeds, kusum nuts, jamun berries, and tendu fruits were gathered by women. These not only added flavor to meals but were also packed with nutrients like vitamins and proteins that kept families healthy.
- **Leafy Greens:** Wild leafy vegetables, such as barada and kuler leaves, were collected from the forest. These greens were rich in iron, which was particularly important for women and children to avoid anemia.

# A Journey of Leadership and Hope

Jurakhaman village situated in Urladani Panchayat in Kalahandi district in Odisha is home to the indigenous Kondh community, is a treasure of natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and timeless traditions. In Jurakhaman village **Nrupati Majhi** was born. Her family faced immense hardships, grappling with poverty and the daily struggles of survival in a remote and underdeveloped region. Yet, even in the face of adversity, Nrupati stood out for her determination, quiet strength, and a burning desire to make a difference in her community.



The story of Nrupati Majhi is one of resilience, courage, and hope. From a shy adolescent girl to a community leader, she has shown that one person can spark change. Her journey continues to inspire not only the women in her village but also everyone who believes in the power of grassroots leadership. In Nrupati's own words, "When women are united, there is nothing they cannot achieve. A happy woman is the foundation of a happy family and a strong community."

## Early Life and Adolescence

As a child, Nrupati was shy yet curious. She completed her education up to 10th grade, which was a significant achievement for a girl in her community at that time. During her teenage years, Nrupati joined an adolescent group formed in her village. This group became a turning point in her life. She began participating in regular adolescent meetings where issues like hygiene, menstruation, and nutrition were discussed openly—a rare and courageous effort in a conservative setting. Nrupati quickly emerged as a leader among her peers. She encouraged other girls to break the silence around menstruation, teaching them about hygiene and the importance of good health practices.

## Witnessing Change in Her Village

During her adolescence, Nrupati observed an important process in her village—the submission of Forest Rights Act (FRA) land applications. It was the first time she saw women and men working together to claim their ancestral land rights. This experience left a deep impact on her. She realized the importance of collective efforts and how vital land ownership was for the survival and dignity of tribal families.

## Inspiration from Her Sister-in-Law

One of Nrupati's biggest inspirations was her sister-in-law, who was a social worker. She watched her sister-in-law tirelessly help women in the community, guiding them to access government schemes and entitlements. Nrupati admired her work and dreamed of following in her footsteps.

Nrupati was devastated by the sudden and untimely death of her elder brother. His passing was not just a personal loss but a tragic event that shook the very foundation of her family. He had been a guiding force, a pillar of strength, support in her life. His absence created an emotional void that was difficult to fill, and the grief weighed heavily on her heart. The sorrow was overwhelming, but amidst her own pain, she knew that she had to be strong for the family, especially for her parents and sister-in-law, who was left alone to face an uncertain future.

Rather than succumbing to despair, Nrupati chose to stand firmly beside her sister-in-law. She understood the immense burden that had suddenly fallen upon her also worrying about the well-being of her children and the family's livelihood. She became a source of strength, providing both emotional and practical assistance. Whether it was handling household responsibilities, offering financial help, or simply being a comforting presence during the darkest moments, Nrupati made sure her sister-in-law never felt abandoned. She encouraged her to remain strong, to find resilience in the face of adversity, and to rebuild life despite the immense loss.

### **.Life After Marriage**

When Nrupati got married and moved to her husband's village, she carried her passion for helping others with her. Her new community faced similar struggles—lack of awareness about government entitlements, poor access to pensions, and limited opportunities for women. Nrupati decided to take action.

She began organizing women in her in-laws' village, teaching them about their rights and helping them apply for pensions and other government benefits. She also supported families in filing FRA land applications, just as she had witnessed in her own village. Her dedication and commitment earned her the respect of her community.

### **Becoming a Community Resource Person (CRP)**

Recognizing her leadership skills and dedication, Nrupati was selected as a Community Resource Person (CRP). In this role, she worked even harder to support her community. She conducted awareness campaigns, organized training sessions for women, and helped families navigate complex paperwork to access government schemes.



Through her efforts, many families in her village received pensions, land titles, and other essential entitlements. Women who had once felt powerless began to find their voice and stand up for their rights.

### **A Vision for the Future**

Now in her early 30s, Nrupati is a mother of two children and continues to be a pillar of strength for her community. Despite the challenges she has faced, she dreams of a world where women are truly happy—where they are educated, empowered, and free to pursue their dreams. For Nrupati, happiness means seeing women in her community break free from the cycle of poverty and ignorance. She wants every woman to have access to education, healthcare, and the dignity of owning land. Her vision extends beyond her village—she dreams of inspiring women everywhere to unite and fight for their rights. From a shy adolescent girl to a community leader, she has shown that even the smallest voices can make the biggest changes.

## From Struggle to Strength

Pana Patra was born and raised in Borbhata village, part of the D Kar lakhunta Panchayat. Like many women in her community, her life was shaped by tradition, hardship, and resilience. She married young, as was customary, and moved to her in-laws' house. However, life there was not easy. She faced challenges that made it impossible for her to stay. Pana never complained openly about her struggles, simply saying, "Time was like that." She returned to her parents' home in Borbhata village, where she resumed her life as it had been before her marriage.



Back in her village, Pana worked alongside her parents in agriculture and non-timber forest product (NTFP) collection. These were the primary sources of livelihood for her family, and she was no stranger to hard work. She toiled in the fields, gathered forest produce, and contributed to the household as best as she could. Her parents were her anchor, and she found solace in their company. But life took another turn when her parents passed away, leaving her vulnerable to the changing dynamics of her family.

After her parents' death, Pana's brother and his wife took over the household. Their behavior toward her was harsh and unwelcoming. Pana, who had always been strong-willed, could not bear the constant rudeness and mistreatment. She made a bold decision: she chose to live alone. Her brother's daughter, perhaps sensing the injustice, decided to stay with her. This young girl became Pana's companion, and together they faced the challenges of life.

Despite her struggles, Pana was determined to build a life of dignity. She was homeless, but she refused to let that define her. She applied for homestead land under the Mo Jami Mo Diha scheme, a government initiative aimed at providing land to the landless. Her application was successful, and she was granted a small plot of land. This was a turning point in her life. With the land in her name, she constructed a modest house, a place she could finally call her own. Her brother's daughter continued to stay with her, and the two formed a small but resilient household.

Pana's strength and determination did not stop at securing a home. She recognized the power of collective action and organized a Self-Help Group (SHG) for women in her village. Through the SHG, she raised awareness about women's rights, financial independence, and the importance of education. She became a voice for single women like herself, advocating for their entitlements and encouraging them to stand up for their rights. Pana believed that single women, often marginalized in society, deserved respect and opportunities to lead dignified lives.

# **Malabati Puta: A Story of Strength, Hope, and the Forest**

Malabati Puta, a Gond tribal woman from Sindhiguda village in the Manikera Panchayat of Odisha's Kalahandi district, has become a symbol of strength and resilience. Her village, surrounded by dense forests, depends heavily on the land and its resources. Growing up, Malabati understood this connection deeply—the forest was more than just a source of firewood or food; it was the soul of their community.

As the years went by, however, the forest faced growing threats. Illegal logging, rampant deforestation, and frequent fires began to destroy the land that sustained her people. Malabati watched in pain as her once-lush forest began to fade. But she was not one to stand by silently. She knew that the survival of the forest and her community were intertwined.

## **A Journey to Leadership**

Malabati's journey as a leader began when she became a ward member of her village. It was during this time that she realized how much she could do for her people, especially as a woman. Her determination led her to become the Naib Sarpanch of the Panchayat, a role that allowed her to take even bolder actions for the betterment of her village.

But the road was not easy. When Malabati first started her mission to protect the forest, many from nearby villages mocked her. "What can a woman do?" they would say. Yet, she never allowed their words to deter her. She believed in her mission and in the strength of her fellow women.

## **Uniting the Community**

One of Malabati's first steps was to educate her community about the dangers of forest fires and the long-term impact of deforestation. She knew that awareness was key. Together with the women in her village, she began patrolling the forest to prevent fires and curb illegal logging.

Malabati and her group of women, often working in silence and without recognition, became the village's unacknowledged heroes. They fought forest fires with their bare hands and used simple tools, braving smoke and heat to protect their beloved land. They also introduced strict rules for the use of forest resources, allowing only the collection of deadwood while strictly prohibiting the cutting of live trees.

These efforts bore fruit. Over time, illegal deforestation reduced significantly, and though the forest had not returned to its former glory, its coverage began to grow again. The women's determination became an inspiration not only to their village but also to neighboring communities.



# Jaila Itamu

## A Story of Resilience and Change

In the remote tribal hamlets of Urladni Panchayat in Kalahandi, where survival often seemed threatened on the edge of scarcity, a small group of women dared to dream of a better tomorrow. It began with a handful of rice. The women, drawing from the wisdom of their ancestors, decided to set aside a portion of their daily grain to create a community fund. They called this initiative **Jaila Itamu**, a phrase in the Kui language meaning “*save the life*”. The name embodied their shared vision—to ensure no family went hungry during hard times and to save lives through collective strength.

### The Birth of a Federation

What started as a humble effort to combat food insecurity soon grew into something far greater. The women began meeting regularly, using the gatherings to discuss the challenges they faced—not just hunger, but the pervasive inequalities that kept them in cycles of poverty and oppression. The Jaila Itamu Women’s Federation was born, uniting women across villages in their fight for dignity and justice.



### Championing Equal Wages

One of their first battles was for **equal pay for equal work**. Women who toiled in the fields alongside men were often paid less for the same labor. The federation organized marches, petitioned local authorities, and mobilized their communities. Their persistence paid off. Over time, they succeeded in securing fair wages for women laborers, setting a precedent for other villages to follow.

### Fighting Alcohol Abuse

The federation soon turned its attention to another pressing issue—alcoholism. Rampant alcohol abuse among men had devastated families, leading to domestic violence and financial ruin. The women of Jaila Itamu launched a campaign to shut down illegal liquor shops. They held rallies, confronted bootleggers, and worked with local leaders to enforce prohibitions. Their efforts brought relief to countless households, restoring hope and stability.

### Education for Girls

Recognizing that education was key to breaking the cycle of poverty, the federation began advocating for girls’ education. They went door to door, convincing parents to send their daughters

- Millet is a climate-resilient crop with high nutritional value, making it an ideal alternative for food security and income generation.

### **Interaction with Line Departments**

Regular interactions with line departments were organized to ensure that the community members were aware of and could access various government entitlements and schemes. These interactions facilitated a better understanding of the available resources and how to leverage them for community development. The engagement with government officials also helped in building a supportive ecosystem for the project's initiatives.

- Proactive engagement with government agencies helps communities leverage existing support systems more effectively.
- Regular dialogues build trust and increase the likelihood of sustained institutional support.
- Understanding bureaucratic procedures and policy frameworks is crucial for accessing entitlements efficiently.

### **Rakhi Tying Ceremony in the Forest**

A unique and symbolic activity undertaken by the project was the Rakhi tying ceremony in the forest. Women tied rakhis (traditional bracelets) around trees as a gesture of interdependence and respect for nature. This activity highlighted the deep connection between the community and the forest, emphasizing the need for sustainable practices to preserve this relationship for future generations.

- Cultural practices can be powerful tools for promoting environmental conservation and community cohesion.
- Emotional and symbolic connections to nature strengthen sustainable resource management practices.
- Recognizing and integrating traditional values into project activities enhances community participation and ownership.

### **Intergenerational Knowledge Sharing**

The project facilitated intergenerational knowledge-sharing sessions where elder people shared their traditional knowledge and practices with the younger generation. These sessions covered a wide range of topics, from traditional farming techniques to the medicinal uses of local plants. The exchange of knowledge ensured that valuable cultural heritage was preserved while also integrating modern sustainable practices.

- Traditional knowledge provides valuable insights for sustainable agriculture and natural resource management.
- Facilitating intergenerational exchanges fosters a sense of continuity and cultural pride.
- Combining traditional wisdom with modern practices leads to more holistic and context-specific solutions.

## 5. Strengthening Institutional Linkages

- Strong partnerships with government agencies improve access to schemes and entitlements.
- Multi-stakeholder collaboration enhances the sustainability and scalability of interventions.

## Conclusion

The project successfully empowered women through land rights, sustainable livelihoods, and intergenerational knowledge sharing. The formation of Single Women Associations, securing of land titles, and promotion of millet cultivation have not only improved economic conditions but also strengthened community resilience. By integrating cultural traditions, environmental conservation, and institutional support, the initiative has demonstrated a holistic approach to sustainable development. Moving forward, these learnings will guide future programs in enhancing women's rights, food security, and ecological sustainability.





# **SEBAJAGAT**

**Burat, M.Rampur, Kalahandi, Odisha**

**e-mail-[sebajagat@gmail.com](mailto:sebajagat@gmail.com)**

**website- [www.sebajagat.org](http://www.sebajagat.org)**