Understanding Rural India,
Shaping Perspectives

VIVID LANDSCAPES

Village Immersion Program

CRISP
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Schemes and Policies

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"If the village perishes,
India will perish too.
The soul of India lives
in its villages."

-Mahatma Gandhi

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Conducted by

Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies (CRISP)
Hyderabad

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The findings and perspectives presented are intended to serve as a resource for understanding grassroots realities and fostering dialogue. Readers are advised to consider the context and use the information as a starting point for further exploration and analysis.

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Foreword

That India lives in its Villages is not just a truism; it is a deep reality. Village Panchayats vary in their powers, functions, capacities, and performance across the country. But everywhere, they are the first link of the citizen with governance. This is the interface that determines the character of governance and the citizens' response. It is the most critical facet of democratic functioning.

At the Village level, there is direct democracy through the Gram Sabhas and deliberative democracy through the Gram Panchayats. It is a locality where public services are delivered to the citizens, and their quality can easily be assessed. The CRISP Fellows have spent time in the Village Panchayats, learning things directly without statistics, reports, or any form of intermediation. They have observed reality with its beauty spots and warts.

It is this direct understanding of local life and local-level development that will build their capabilities and stand up in good stead throughout their life whatever their professional jobs.

The Village Immersion Reports from Assam and Meghalaya in the East, Rajasthan in the West and Telangana, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in the South convey a good picture of India's diversity and more importantly, the unity underlying this diversity. Most of the articles are rounded descriptions of Village governance focusing on development. They assess local institutions and processes like the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) including incorporating the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their content. Two studies bring out the rich social capital of the tribal regions of Bodoland and another report brings out the challenges of tribal development in Rajasthan. Similarly, the specialities of a coastal village are brought out in yet another case study from Tamil Nadu.

Village Panchayats represent political democracy at the cutting-edge level, the Self Help Groups (SHGs) embody social democracy. As Ambedkar had warned us, political democracy would be meaningless without social democracy. Therefore, there is a new initiative across States to bring about a synergetic partnership between the SHG network and Gram Panchayat. This is brought out well in a Report from Karnataka. Similarly, innovative initiatives like Crèches which are critical in empowering women to join the labour force and Libraries which have the functions of disseminating knowledge as well as bringing about a culture of debate and discussion at the Village level are well captured in two cases from Karnataka.

The compilation is an excellent document for anyone interested in village-level development and the functioning of local democracy. The quality of inputs is very high and mature inputs far beyond the age or experience of the Authors have enriched the case study.

Let me congratulate them for their meticulous work and wish them all success, their life in CRISP and beyond.

SM Vijayanand (IAS Retd.)
President,
Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies (CRISP)

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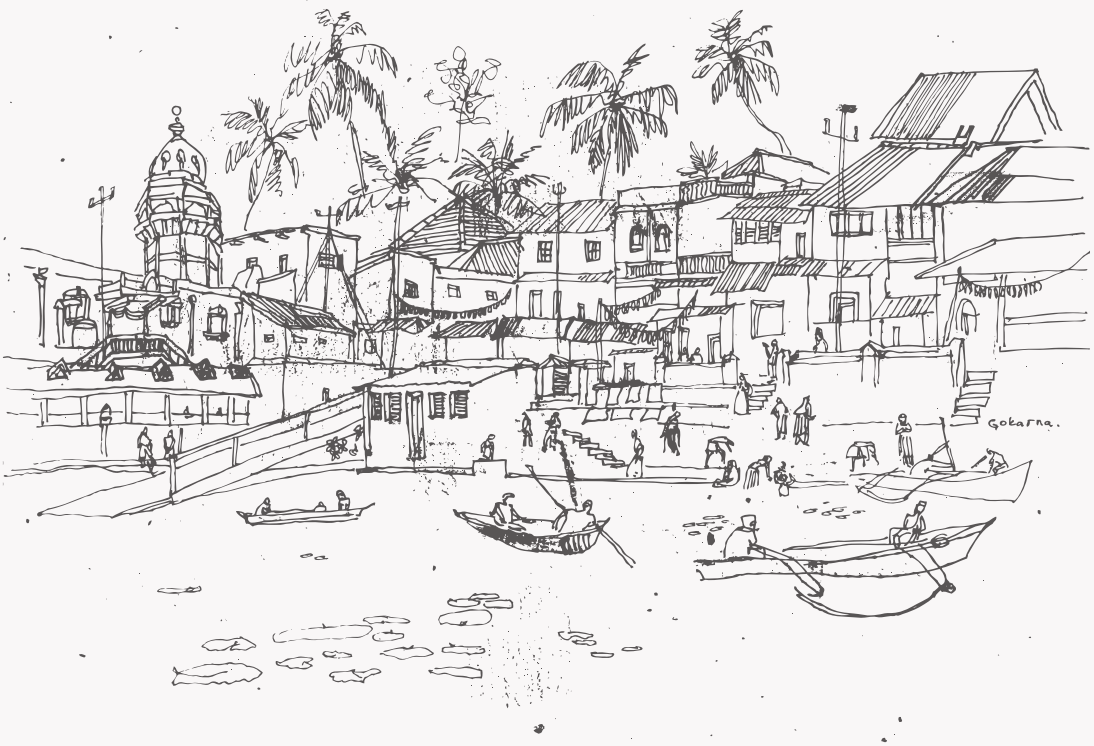
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Examining the Role of Self-Help Groups in Local Governance

The case of a Gram Panchayat in Karnataka

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▶ Abstract

This paper examines the role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in local governance based on a detailed study conducted in a Gram Panchayat (GP) in Karnataka. It begins by providing an overview of SHGs in the GP, followed by a critical review of its functioning. Further, an attempt is made to understand the meaning of the concept of convergence between GP and SHG. Based on field insights and interpretations of convergence from various stakeholders, the paper argues that the dissonance in the conceptual understanding of convergence among the stakeholders of GP and SHGs limits its successful implementation. Finally, the paper analyses the functioning of the Gram Sabha, and the preparation of Gram Panchayat Development Plan, discussing the involvement of SHGs in these activities.

▶ Introduction

This paper is based on a four-day village immersion done by the author in a Gram Panchayat (GP) in Karnataka[1] . During this, the functioning of the GP and other institutions such as the Anganwadi, Government Primary School, Health and Wellness Centre, and SHGs were closely studied. The GP serves a population of 5090[2] and consists of 13 elected members, representing 5 villages with a total of 1,344 households.

The role of SHGs in local governance is examined based on interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders associated with the GP, SHGs, Gram Panchayat Level Federation (GPLF), and mission staff of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) at the taluk and district level.

▶ Self-Help Groups, their functioning, and issues

Karnataka has a long history of self-help groups (SHGs) of poor women engaged in livelihood activities dating back to the 1960s[3]. In the GP under study, there are over 60 SHGs, with around 700 women members of these groups. Out of these, 57 SHGs, comprising of 655 women are registered under NRLM. Group discussions with 3 women members revealed that their main aim of joining these groups was to improve their financial status and support themselves and their families through livelihood enhancement. An enquiry into the kind of livelihood activities taken up by women revealed that most of them utilize the loans taken from SHGs to invest in agriculture related activities such as silk rearing, ragi cultivation, dairy farming, horticulture, and occasionally, setting up tailoring units. However, one of them remarked that since the monetary returns from silk rearing have gone down[4], many women made a shift towards wage employment in garment factories located in nearby Taluks. In general, there was less interest among them in taking up self-employment in the non-farm sector, as most women would prefer to take up wage employment that improves their financial position[5].

Thorp et al (2005) have argued that SHGs broadly focus on two goals; one is addressing market failures in the form of saving and credit provisions, and the second is achieving rights in terms of political participation and accessing resources. Interactions with SHG members in the GP under study showed that in general, most of them see the benefits of SHG membership in terms of economic empowerment, and the desire to achieve greater political participation was low.

One SHG member who has been part of her group since it was formed about 6 years ago told the author what changed for her. Born and brought up in a neighbouring district, she married a man from another caste and migrated to her husband's village. Initially, she was shunned by the villagers who discriminated against her for belonging to a Scheduled Caste community, to the extent that she could not even go out to collect milk in their presence. However, after she became a bookkeeper in her SHG, she improved her financial literacy. Impressed by her knowledge, SHGs in the area began seeking her help to maintain their record books. She says, "While joining the sangha has not significantly improved my economic status, it has certainly improved my standing in society. I have noticed that people in the village, including my ward member, pay more attention to what

The author in discussion with NRLM-Taluk Programme Manager, Block Resource Person for PRI-CBO Convergence, and Master Bookkeeper of GPLF

1 The name of the GP and respondents are not revealed to protect the privacy of respondents
2 As per the Census of India, 2011.
3 The Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA) played an instrumental role in the emergence of SHGs (Fernandez, 2022)
4 As per one local farmer who continues to do sericulture, the market prices of silk yarn have gone down to Rs. 300 per kg from around Rs. 1000 per kg last year.
5 One woman working in a garment factory said she made Rs. 500 per day, which is significantly higher than the daily wages under MGNREGS.

I have to say, and are more interested in helping me. This was not the case before." Interestingly, most of the loans she has taken from her SHG have been used for personal expenses, including for her daughter's education[6]. As a result, no asset-building or livelihood activities were undertaken by her, which is the primary focus under NRLM.

Does this mean that the SHG movement has failed? The excessive focus on economic empowerment of women has overshadowed the importance of social empowerment. For instance, even the SHG Policy of Karnataka's[7] mission statement and objectives are replete with words such as "doubling the income," "gainful employment," and "multiple livelihoods." The view that SHGs are mainly meant for improving livelihoods was reinforced by the NRLM Cluster Supervisor and Taluk Programme Manager. However, Deshpande and Khanna (2021) have shown through their survey of SHG women in Maharashtra that even though the livelihood impacts of SHGs was minimal, the main impact on the ground was "creation or enhancement of social capital." They argue that the solidarity forged amongst women by virtue of their membership in the SHGs instill in them "awareness of their rights and the confidence to tackle opposition within their families and community." In this context, it is important to note that policy documents on SHGs need to pay attention to not just material capital, but also social capital, which is mostly invisible but has long-term socio-political impact on women

A still from the monthly meeting of the Gram Panchayat Level Federation which the author observed and documented

Deshpande (2022) has noted that the initial mission statement of NRLM does not explicitly state empowerment of women as its objective. It is only in the report of 5th Common Review Mission[8] published in 2019 that NRLM is described as a program for "social and economic empowerment of women by forming collectives of rural poor women."[9] One of the questions the author hoped to find an answer to was whether women are the real beneficiaries of the SHG movement. An hour before the meeting of the executive committee of the Gram Panchayat Level Federation[10], my interaction with another SHG woman helped me understand how gender dynamics and power structures within the family act as an intervening variable between SHG loan disbursal and women's empowerment. The author was introduced to her by the Master Bookkeeper who cited her experience with the SHG network as a success story. Around two years ago, the said woman had availed a loan from her group which has received Community Investment Fund from NRLM. The loan amount was used for investing in agricultural inputs for growing sugarcane, which is one of the major crops in the area. The harvest yielded a decent supply, surpassing her family's expectations[11] and minor profits were made. She remarked "this was when I realised the value of my sangha." Later, when I asked her if she owned the land, and was the recipient of the profits from the sale of crops, she replied in the negative. Further interaction revealed that the assets being built with the help of SHG loans were owned by her husband.

While the woman sees transformative potential in the SHG movement, it has not significantly altered her financial standing or decision-making potential in her household. This phenomenon has been referred to as the "impact paradox" by

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6 A growing trend I noticed during my village immersion is that SHG members are taking loans specifically to finance their children's education in private English medium schools. My interaction with the local government school headmaster revealed that people's trust in government schools is diminishing. Adding to this is also the wish of the parents to see their child speak good English, which they feel won't be achieved if they study in a government school.

7 It is the first official policy on SHGs by Sanjeevini- Karnataka State Rural Livelihood Mission.

8 Common Review Mission is conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development to review its schemes. Since 2016, six such reviews have been conducted.

9 It is noteworthy that the Sixth Common Review Mission doesn't use the phrase 'empowerment of women' in the context of NRLM and has gone back to the original focus on enhancing livelihoods.

10 GPLF is the third tier of the community structure and is co-terminus with the GP.

11 The location of village immersion is prone to drought; hence an abundant supply of crops, especially sugarcane, is not always ensured.

Garikipati (2008) who, based on her study of SHGs in Andhra Pradesh, showed that while lending SHG loans to women has helped households "to diversify livelihoods and reduce their vulnerability to shocks, it has failed to empower the women concerned." The paradoxical nature of this case is also reflected in SHG related policy documents which mostly define their goal around 'households,' and not 'women.' A review of the section on Objectives, of Karnataka's SHG Policy is definitive of this phenomenon. For instance, it lists doubling the average income of poor "households" and having at least 2-3 income streams of livelihood per "household" as some of its objectives.

▶ SHG Federations and Community Cadres

Visit to an Anganwadi

Research has shown that SHG federations have a positive impact on workforce participation by women and on women's confidence, and household assets by reducing financial constraints (Kochar et al, 2020). In the GP under study, the GPLF was formed around 5 years ago. As per the GPLF President, "the disbursal of loans under the Community Investment Fund (CIF) has brought in more women to the fore. Some have started their own businesses and become more active in society." With this context, the author set out to examine the functioning of GPLF by attending a meeting of the GPLF Executive Committee.

During the meeting, one GPLF member complained that the President of one of the SHGs has not been distributing loans from the fund, to the needy, and was instead using it amongst the SHG representatives. Surprisingly, neither the Master Bookkeeper (MBK) nor the GPLF members knew how to deal with it except suggesting that it may be reported to the cluster supervisor of NRLM. The embezzlement of funds by the SHG functionaries is a serious concern and it has been argued, in the context of SHGs in Uttar Pradesh, that such financial improprieties could "sound the death knell of the scheme" (Shankar, 2011, p. 5).

The inaction of the GPLF in this case may not just be the result of the lack of knowledge among the functionaries, but also the lack of intent to maintain and improve the functioning of SHGs. This argument is based on the observations made about its functioning during the said meeting, and the interactions had with GPLF members and community cadre. It was observed that the meeting was conducted despite the absence of a quorum. Only 3 out of 15, members of the committee were present.[12] Further, the meeting was led by the Master Bookkeeper and the Taluk Panchayat Manager of NRLM, with limited interventions from the GPLF office bearers.[13] The lack of intent was also noticed in the fact that the composition of the fifteen member GPLF body, including that of the office bearers hasn't changed since it was set up over 5 years ago. Moreover, as per the MBK and other members, the President showed little interest in the activities of the GPLF to the extent that she had not attended a single meeting in the last year.

Karnataka's SHG Policy (2022) considers community cadres as the "backbone of the SHG movement" (p.94). Their role in improving social mobilization, financial literacy and livelihoods of the SHG members is an important one. Some of them also expressed their experience and feeling of empowerment. For instance, Pashu Sakhi explained that "After joining SHG, my confidence to face people has increased. My communication skills have improved, and I feel like I have achieved something

12 As per model GPLF bye laws in Karnataka, the quorum for conducting the meeting is 50%.
13 In Karnataka, GPLF has 5 office bearers: President, Vice-President, Secretary, and two Joint Treasurers.

big, despite my limited education" In the GP under study, it was observed that the community cadres faced several problems in their work.

The MBK remarked that the training provided to her did not help her in dealing with the actual work which she believes is much more complex. Apart from maintaining the accounts and records of the GPLF, she must also audit the accounts of each SHG and train SHG bookkeepers. She says "Apart from the complex nature of work related to accounts, I also find it difficult to go on field visits to the SHGs. Most of the women are not available during daytime as they are busy with work. So, we can only go meet them in the evening post 6 pm which poses a safety issue." Apart from the work burden, MBKs in Karnataka also face the challenge of spending out of pocket for travel during their field visits, as the SHG policy does not provide for a travel allowance. Further, the MBK pointed out that they are "treated differently" from other Community Resource Persons (CRPs) such as Pashu Sakhis and Krishi Sakhis who get a travel allowance.[14]

It was also revealed by the NRLM Cluster Supervisor that the two Local Community Resource Persons (LCRPs) appointed by the GPLF have been absent from their work for the last 2 months. This has impacted not just the mobilization of left out households in the GP[15] but also the functioning of SHGs since LCRP are responsible for providing "handholding support" to them. Lack of such oversight and support mechanisms could also mean that the 'Dashasutras' or ten principles may not be followed sincerely.[16]

▶ Unpacking convergence: the dynamics between GP and SHGs

Convergence has become a buzzword in policy and development studies. The concept was popularised in the context of emerging New Public Management (NPM) theories which posit that governments should develop an entrepreneurial spirit and focus on maximising efficiency (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).17[17] Implicit in this understanding is the assumption that institutions that are converging have the same conceptual understanding of their roles and responsibilities, with the end goal of accruing mutual benefits, thereby maximizing their utility.

In the context of convergence between Gram Panchayats and Self-Help Groups, official policy of the Ministry of Rural Development (DO #Secy (RD)/Misc/2018-GSA) states that the partnership should be "mutually beneficial and proactively facilitated." The Gram Panchayats are expected to benefit from utilization of SHGs for outreach, extension, service delivery, and feedback. On the other hand, SHGs are expected to learn the workings of democratic institutions, influence decisions through participatory planning, and promote public action for common good. Most importantly, both institutions are expected to engage on "equal terms." This section attempts to analyse the understanding of convergence among the representatives of GP and SHG, and associated stakeholders, based on both individual interviews and group discussions. All these interactions began with the basic question: "According to you, what does GP-SHG convergence mean?"

It was observed that almost all the stakeholders associated with SHGs who were interviewed found it difficult to express their understanding of convergence in the first instance. They began to share their thoughts only after being given some context of the policy and examples of its implementation in their GP. The President of the GPLF, explained that convergence meant that the "GPs should provide support to SHGs." When asked about what it meant, she referred to helping them in securing loans and improving livelihood activities.[18] It was not clear as to how she expects the GP to help SHGs in this regard, as aspects of credit linkage and livelihood enhancement come under the purview of NRLM. A member of GPLF, who had

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14 As per Karnataka's SHG Policy, CRPs working on Farm Livelihood get a TA of Rs. 750 per month alongside an honorarium. Both MBKs and Local Community Resource Persons do not get any TA.

15 The GP has 1344 households, out of which 800 households have come under the NRLM fold.

16 Sanjeevini-KSRLM has gone beyond the typical principles of Panchasutras to include institutional and social aspects. One of them includes active involvement in PRIs.

17 Such a functionalist view is opposed by social constructivists who argue that the focus should be on "normative appropriateness" rather than efficiency maximisation (March and Olsen, 1989).

18 The emphasis was mostly on agriculture related livelihood activities.

A snapshot from a Gram Sabha which the author attended

demonstrated a better understanding of SHGs and was also the most active participant in the GPLF meeting, noted that "like they (women's neighbourhood groups) do in Kerala, we too can help the GP in identifying beneficiaries for the work guarantee scheme (MGNREGS)." Her concern arose out of the larger issue that not enough women in the GP are selected as beneficiaries under the scheme, especially as worksite supervisors (called mates) who were mostly male, in turn choose mostly men for the work.[19] This problem of discrimination has been addressed under Kudumbashree, where the Area Development Societies (ADS) are institutionally integrated with MGNREGA. As a result, the mates for the programme are always women members from ADS in a particular ward. Here it is important to note that women don't just help GPs in identifying beneficiaries, but also prepare estimates in consultation with the engineer, provide tools to workers, prepare muster rolls, etc. (Muraleedharan, 2016). The case of Kudumbashree shows that women from SHGs have the scope to move beyond their much-stereotyped role as 'identifiers,' and become 'active facilitators' where they can develop leadership and organisational skills. However, such an understanding of the potential contribution of SHGs towards enabling convergence was absent during the author's discussions with SHG related stakeholders.

Karnataka's SHG Policy (2022) highlights convergence with Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) as a key strategy, in the capacity building of SHGs, to take part in service delivery. One major area of convergence in Karnataka is that of encouraging SHG women (via GPLF) to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with GPs for end-to-end Solid and Liquid Waste Management (SLWM). In the GP under study, an MoU was signed between GPLF and GP thereby establishing the foundation of convergence. However, the agreement has now expired and not been renewed. Based on my interactions with the GP PDO and GPLF representatives, it was observed that there was a lack of willingness to work together.[20]

There is evidence, based on field insights from other districts in Karnataka, that when GP and SHGs are willing to work together, socio-economic empowerment of women is possible. For instance, under GP-SHG convergence, in Bilikere GP (Mysuru district), 14 Scheduled Tribe (ST) women set up a millet-based food production unit. This was possible because of the active role of GP in providing land, building, and its role in arranging for women's training (Rekha, 2023). The facilitative role of NRLM was also important for the success of this convergence.

However, in the GP under study, lack of willingness among the parties to convergence has resulted in poor coordination between them. During interaction with GPLF members, it was revealed that the GPLF did not play an active role in the identification of driver and helper for SLWM work, as Karnataka's SWM policy envisages. Instead, it was the GP PDO who identified them. Moreover, it was found that one of the women who was selected as a waste collector was not even a member of a SHG. In trying to understand the potential long-term impact of this (poorly implemented) convergence, my interaction with the women involved in waste management revealed that they see themselves merely as workers of the GP. The government circular on SWM conceives GPLFs to evolve as a micro enterprise, where women can go beyond waste collection and segregation, and focus on achieving financial sustainability of SHGs. However, it was clear through my interactions that they do not view this service delivery through an entrepreneurial lens. The absence of user fee collection for their services

19 This issue is widespread in the GP under study and was a topic of discussion in the Gram Sabha as well.

20 During the author's interactions with the GPLF members, it was revealed that the GPLF President and GP PDO have not communicated with each other since over a year.

also has long term consequences for the sustainability of SHGs as an enterprise. This case illustrates the skewed nature of convergence, where the benefits are mostly accruing to the GP. This prevailing notion that the SHG women are workers of the GP, points to the underlying nature of power relations in the realm of convergence. As Biswas and Narendranath (2015) have noted, "the institutions are by design, not equal." This is because Gram Panchaytas are "inclusive institutions" with a much wider geographical and demographic jurisdiction, while SHG federations are "exclusive institutions," as they are organisations of poor women. In that sense, the latter is a subset of the former (p. 27).

However, this underlying power asymmetry in convergence is not just a function of the inherent nature of these institutions, but also the perceived superiority of the GP. Interactions with the Panchayat Development Officer (PDO)[21] revealed that the GP does not consider SHGs as equal partners in convergence. Echoing the hierarchical nature of the current partnership, she proposed that the GP should be given the power "to have control over them (GPLF)." She further added that responsibilities of the GPLF should be more clearly defined so that the GP can "monitor" their work under convergence. It was observed that this skewed understanding of a hierarchical, vertical relationship was legitimised during the GP's General Body meeting where phrases like "order the GPLF to..." and "we 'let them' provide this (waste management) service" were used by the elected members.

While the notion of 'control' should have no place in this setting, the case for monitoring of convergence activities is significant. In fact, the bye laws for Community Development Society (CDS) under Kudumbashree provide for an evaluation committee comprising of representatives from both GP and CDS, who meet once every three months to ensure smooth functioning of their convergence activities (Community Structure, n.d.). This model of monitoring convergence activities should be adopted in Karnataka, leading to the institutionalisation of GP-SHG convergence as a partnership of equals.

Convergence is also popularly understood as a tool for dissemination of information. This view was held by the Block Resource Person (BRP) for PRI-CBO Convergence[22] who said that SHGs can help the GP in "spreading awareness" of the government schemes. Surprisingly, when asked about the role of convergence in improving service delivery and empowering women, the BRP showed limited awareness. The importance of the role of SHGs as information disseminators was also echoed by the MBK, but she also added that SHGs via GPLF can provide value added services such as maintaining a vermicompost pit using wet waste and sell the manure in the market. However, she added that such ventures may not be actualised due to the lack of communication between GP and GPLF.

The MBK also pointed out the "lack of respect" that GPLF members and community cadres receive from the GP, especially the elected members. She explained that the dependence of GPLF on the GP resources explains this phenomenon. For instance, under convergence in waste management, the GP provides space for a segregation shed, a vehicle for collecting waste including its insurance, and other items such as masks, gloves, and shoes for the sanitation workers. In this context, she adds that "maintaining our (organisational) identity is difficult." The question of maintaining identity and autonomy of SHGs is a significant one. In this case, the model of convergence is such that dependence of SHGs on the state (GP) cannot be escaped. Future policies on convergence need to address this challenge with the aim to manage the resource dependence of SHGs on the GP, while not affecting their autonomy to take decisions that benefit women.

The issues observed in the implementation of convergence in waste management, such as poor monitoring, lack of an entrepreneurial mindset among GPLF functionaries, and poor coordination in user fee collection, stem from the lack of an understanding by the GP and GPLF regarding their roles and responsibilities. Therefore, without addressing the dissonance in the conceptual understanding of convergence among stakeholders of GP and SHG, the scope for achieving success in its implementation is limited.

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21 The PDO is an officer of the government and is assisted by the Secretary in overseeing the functioning of the GP.

22 BRPs for PRI-CBO Convergence have been appointed in 34 pilot blocks in Karnataka. The GP under the study comes under one of these blocks.

▶ Challenges in local democratic governance and development planning in Panchayats

In this section, an aspect of the Panchayat functioning, namely the Gram Sabha, and the preparation of the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) are analysed.

Gram Sabha

The Gram Sabha (GS) which is a forum of direct democracy is an integral part of the Panchayat system. The author observed the working of the GS which was held on the first day of village immersion. It was organised in the premises of the Panchayat office, a location known by almost all households in the GP. However, it was observed that the meeting of the GS was conducted in the absence of a quorum. The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act 1993 states that the quorum should not be less than one-tenth of the total number of voters in the Gram Sabha, or one hundred members, whichever is less (section 3G, clause 3).[23] The attendance of elected members was also poor, as only 3 elected members including the GP President attended. Kothari (1998) had visualised the GS as a "watchdog" against the "politician-bureaucratic nexus," thereby promoting accountability (cited in Nambiar, 2001). However, during the meeting, several people wanted to raise infrastructure related issues in their area but could not do so due to the lack of absence of elected members from their ward. As a result, some of them expressed cynicism at the efficacy of these meetings.

Gram Sabha in session

The main agenda of the meeting was to approve the identification of activities under MGNREGS. Apart from that, the meeting also covered the following activities: presentations on various schemes by officials from line departments, a plea by the PDO to people to pay their taxes, a short awareness session on HIV and dengue cases in the GP and a presentation by the PDO on the financial statement of the GP. It was observed that a vibrant deliberation was held when issues related to public resources were brought up. For instance, a lively debate ensued between the PDO, an elected member and several villagers on the suitable location for the construction of a field bund. However, for the rest of the topics on the agenda, participant interest, and thereby discussion, was found to be poor.[24] This finding concurs with Rao and Sanyal (2009) who argue that rather than being a forum of consensus building, the Gram Sabha in practice functions mainly as a forum of competition for the "public pie" (p.36).

The question of 'who participates?' and 'who speaks?' is central to the functioning of a deliberative body such as the Gram Sabha. Interestingly, majority of the participants were women,[25] most of whom were workers under MGNREGS. However, it was observed that attendance did not necessarily lead to participation. Men, seated on the front rows, did most of the talking, and in many cases expressed opinions on behalf of women. Poor participation by women was also a result of the

23 The total attendance was less than 60. However official minutes of the meeting recorded the number of attendees as 180.

24 The elected members also showed poor interest. In fact, 2 out of the 3 elected members present in the meeting left after the discussion on MGNREGS work.

25 Over 80% of the total attendees were women.

lack of a strategy by SHGs or GPLF to bring forth their issues in the GS.[26] There is evidence that when SHG members do so, a positive outcome is achieved in terms of "access to individual rights and entitlements by women" (Sinha, 2021, p. 61). During the GPLF meeting, when asked as to why SHG members did not attend the meeting, some women responded that they were not willing to forgo their daily wages for it. The GS also turned out to be a missed opportunity to discuss GP-SHG convergence in waste management, in which poor adherence by the villagers in terms of waste disposal and user fee collection are pressing problems.

Planning

The Constitution of India, under Article 243G, mandates GPs to prepare plans for "economic development and social justice." This is referred to as the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), whose preparation is envisioned as a participatory process, in which people's needs and priorities are matched with available resources. In Karnataka, section 309B of the KPR Act 1993 mandates GPs to prepare a five-year vision plan. Based on this long-term perspective plan, GPs are required to come up with an Integrated Participatory Annual Action Plan (IPAAP)[27] for each year.

In the GP under study, the recent vision plan was created for the period 2023-2024 to 2027- 2028.[28] The process was set in motion with the formation of planning committees not just at the GP level, but also at the level of individual villages. At the village level, the committee was headed by an elected member of the Panchayat, with representatives from milk federations, farmer's organisations etc., as members. Moreover, these committees had 2 members each from SHGs.[29] To mobilize the community, and create a planning environment in the GP, an Orientation Gram Sabha was held.

The PDO shared that the Gram Sabha did not draw enough people, as the village level committees failed to generate enough awareness. "However," she adds, "the committees did a good job in collecting data from people and line departments." Data was collected under 8 themes. This is part of a situational analysis exercise, in which both primary and secondary data is collected. For instance, under the 'Healthy Village' theme, data was collected on the number of children in a certain age group who received vaccination, number of people with certain serious illnesses, vacancies in Health and Wellness Centres, etc. Further, primary data was collected based on group discussions with women, elderly, farmers, youth groups, children and SHGs. The final plan has a healthy mix of both 'low cost/no cost' and as well higher cost activities. For instance, under the theme of education, low-cost activities such as a campaign for the uptake of registration of migrant children in primary schools and creating awareness among children on the Right to Education Act during the Children Sabhas were listed.

One of the responsibilities of SHGs as part of convergence with GPs, as envisioned in the NRLM framework, is the preparation of Village Prosperity Resilience Plan (VPRP) which is to be integrated with the GPDP. As per the GPLF MBK and the GP PDO, the demands were collected from the SHGs and were uploaded on the VPRP app. However, once the plan was submitted, they did not have access to it.[30] When asked about this problem, both the Cluster Supervisor and the Taluk Programme Manager had no clear answer. The lack of access to VPRP meant that it was not integrated with the GPDP.

Even in the absence of VPRP-GPDP integration, the PDO revealed that the GP has been able to record the demands of some SHGs as far as it relates to the entitlement plan component[31] of the VPRP, such as demand for job cards under MGNREGS. However, demands under the livelihood plan were not recorded. Such gaps may be addressed by taking inspiration from the convergence model of Tamil Nadu, in which the Village Poverty Reduction Committee under the 'Pudhu Vazhvu Project' has

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26 From the GPLF, only the MBK was present during the GS meeting. However, she did not bring up any issues related to SHGs or GP-SHG convergence.
27 In Karnataka, the term IPAAP is used instead of GPDP.
28 The information on preparation of the plan is based on interview with the PDO, and a document prepared by the GP on the planning process.
29 But there was no SHG representation in the GP level planning committee.
30 As per them, they did not get any support from NRLM mission staff at the Taluk and District level in this matter.
31 VPRP has 4 components: entitlement plan, livelihoods plan, public goods & services and resource development plan, and social development plan.

an "in-built linkage with the village panchayats to improve access to welfare benefits" (Deshpande, 2022, p. 18).

▶ Conclusion

This paper has shown that there is a complex interplay between the Gram Panchayat and Self- Help Groups. Apart from underscoring the need to strike a fine balance between the social and economic dimensions of empowerment, the paper has highlighted how (resource) dependence on the GP leaves little room for SHGs to negotiate and manoeuvre their path towards empowerment. At the ground level, there is a need to reframe the discussion on the meaning of convergence along the lines of mutual respect, where both GP and SHGs see each other as equal partners. To realize this, capacity building of both parties needs to be done, leading to an institutional mechanism where both can meet regularly and resolve issues. Additionally, focus should be devoted to train SHGs so that they can play an active role in the planning process, especially through the Gram Sabha, instead of merely serving as an implementation arm of the GP. With both entities on the same page, they can realize their full potential in making local governance, and thereby local democracy, work.

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Rural Reflections-Immersive Insights from the Village

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▶ Abstract

This paper presents the insights gained from my experience of life in a rural setting during a Village Immersion exercise. This was undertaken chiefly with the objective to understand local governance within the context of sociocultural, political and economic dimensions of the village. Through participant observation and interviews, I have attempted to capture the strengths and challenges of villagers in the Malnad region of Karnataka and to understand how local governance unveils at the ground level. A combination of quantitative and quantitative analysis of the various aspects of the functioning of a Gram Panchayat and various village-level institutions, have been used to examine how decentralisation works in action.

▶ Introduction and Background

The Malnad, (land of rain in Kannada), is a region marked with hills, mountains, rivers, waterfalls, lush green forests, breath-taking landscapes and abundant rainfall. Nestled amidst these beautiful views and the verdant Western Ghats is Shivamogga, a district rich in culture, history, heritage, nature and wildlife. As part of my village immersion, I embarked on a journey to a small, quaint village located in the Shivamogga Taluk around 22km from the District Headquarters. The Gram Panchayat Village, with a population of approximately 6000 residents, with its intricate patterns of daily life along with its traditional practices and social structure gave me an insight into a new world. I stayed with a family of 4 – a father, his son and daughter in law and their 3-year-old toddler, who made my visit even more eventful and fun!

I visited the place during the peak monsoon season and experienced what life is like in a place that receives continuous rainfall throughout the day and how people go about their daily activities undeterred by the rain. I was either wearing a raincoat or always carrying it in my bag due to actual rain or in constant anticipation of it and at all times holding an umbrella above my head, as I hitchhiked my way around the village asking for lifts from villagers going in the direction I needed to go. Often, I walked. This circumstance provided a wonderful opportunity to engage in informal conversations with people from various walks of life and diverse backgrounds. As I walked the roads of the village, the scenic beauty stretched as far as my eyes could see. For me, it was a four-day long journey in a lush green paradise.

During my visit, I was able to interact with the village administration about the functioning of the Gram Panchayat (GP) and its various activities. I engaged in conversations with women from Self-Help Groups (SHG), visited the Anganwadi, the Primary School, the Primary Health Centre (PHC), rural library, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) worksite, Solid Waste Management (SWM) shed, and spoke with concerned stakeholders at large, to understand how a GP functions through the various channels of service delivery and how multiple schemes and programmes of the government are implemented at the field level.

Methodology

The data and information were largely gathered through observations, document review and in-depth interviews with the Gram Panchayat staff and officials, the Anganwadi teacher and helper, the Principal of the Government Primary School, students and a parent, the library supervisor, Solid waste management workers and members of the community.

▶ Functioning of the Gram Panchayat

The Gram Panchayat (GP) forms the backbone of rural governance and plays a crucial role in local administration and development. In Karnataka, the structure of the Gram Panchayat is as follows:

- Elected Representatives – The President (Adhyaksha), Vice President (Upadhyaksha) and the Ward Members
- The Office Staff - Panchayat Development Officer (PDO), Secretary, Second Division Accounts Assistant, Data Entry Operator, Water Operators, Attenders, Cleaners and the Librarian
- Gram Sabha- The Gram Sabha is a general body comprising all eligible voters within the Gram Panchayat area. It serves as a forum for discussing local issues, to review development plans, and approve budgets proposed by the Gram Panchayat.

Gram Sabha Meeting Area

The Gram Panchayat I visited has 17 elected representatives as ward members. The President's post has been reserved under the Scheduled Caste woman category for the current ongoing term. According to The Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, the term of office and conditions of service of Adhyaksha and Upadhyaksha shall be five years from the date of election. However, in the Karnataka Gram Panchayat (Amendment) Act 2020, the term of office of Adhyaksha and Upadhyaksha has been revised to two and a half years. This provision ensures that the leadership of the Gram Panchayat rotates periodically, allowing for new leadership and ideas to come into the governance of the Panchayat.

The Gram Panchayat is required to hold a General Body meeting at least once a month with a quorum of one-third of the members. The objective of these meetings is to discuss governance, development projects, budgeting, accountability and to involve the community to ensure democratic decision-making and effective local governance. I was told that although the meeting is held every month, it is mostly attended only by the GP officials and staff. Decisions are made even in the absence of elected members' quorum. The decisions are largely taken by the staff and the community is not involved. Often, decisions are dominated by the Panchayat members themselves, which undermines the democratic process. As Biswas (2020) summarises, despite the intention of promoting democratic governance at the grassroots level, community involvement in Gram Panchayat meetings continues to be significantly low. When probed about why the community is not involved, one of the GP staff very nonchalantly said, "Involving too many people makes it very chaotic, long drawn and cumbersome for us, and hence, we try and take the decisions by ourselves to keep the process smooth sailing." This has been very well summed up by Arul (2023). He talks of how GP members view involving the community as a hindrance, in the conviction that it complicates and prolongs the decision-making process. The idea of democracy becomes superficial and is undermined greatly when decisions are made by a few people rather than through a participatory approach.

The Gram Sabha which needs to be held at least twice a year, with no more than a gap of six months, has not been held for over nine months now. It was last held on October 2nd, 2023. It is compulsory for a Gram Sabha to be held on Gandhi Jayanti. Although the Department of Panchayat Raj Rural Development of the Government of Karnataka makes it mandatory for the Gram Sabha to be held twice a year and the proceedings of the meeting to be uploaded on the website, the GPs upload a document with old photos alongside new decisions taken by the Gram Panchayat, without an actual Gram Sabha being held. This shows serious lacunae in the monitoring aspects of the government. Research by Mukherjee and Vishnu (2017) in their paper "Governance, Accountability, and Service Delivery: Evidence from India" points out instances where local officials may falsify records of Gram Sabha meetings to comply with legal requirements or to avoid penalties, when meetings are not taking place. The reason given by the staff for not conducting the Gram Sabha is that the assembly more often leads to war between people with differing political ideologies and the actual agenda to be discussed gets sidelined. Ramachandran (2014) points this out saying there is evidence suggesting that in many cases, Gram Sabha meetings are not effectively monitored by local government bodies. This lack of oversight contributes to discrepancies between reported and actual meeting occurrences. Nair (2016) emphasizes the importance of robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure the authenticity and meaningfulness of Gram Sabha meetings. Effective overseeing by governmental and nongovernmental bodies is crucial in addressing these issues and promoting genuine community engagement in local governance.

My interaction with the President of the GP was short lived as she did not seem very keen on talking to an outsider. When asked questions, she seemed a little distant and did not appear to be actively involved in the functioning of the GP. When I asked one of the GP staff if the President is proactive and takes initiative, he was quick to confirm that she was not very active. He said she comes to the office only when there is a meeting or if her signature is required. The perception of the other staff was also that she does not actively participate in the happenings of the GP. They openly stated that she is not taken very seriously because she is from a lower caste. I also heard that her husband even though not directly involved with the GP work, exerts considerable influence through his wife, on various decisions and on identifying beneficiaries in the village. In their study "Women's Political Participation and Empowerment in India" Sharma and Devi (2018), talk about how women from marginalized communities, often face social and psychological barriers that hinder their confidence and assertiveness in political roles. This lack of confidence can result in them being perceived as nominal leaders even as they hold formal positions of power. Nair (2016) indicates that while reservation policies have increased the representation of women from SCs in local governance, they still face systemic challenges such as lack of support networks, discriminatory attitudes, and limited access to resources. Desai and Dubey (2012), in their paper "Political Empowerment of Women: The Case of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India," say that there is evidence suggesting that husbands of elected women often exert significant influence over decision-making processes within the Gram Panchayats. This undermines the autonomy and agency of women leaders, especially those from SC backgrounds. Therefore, while reservations in the political system, gives them an opportunity to come out and take up leadership roles, it is of little use unless they are empowered socially and educationally to discharge their duties autonomously and with greater confidence.

When it comes to administrative efficiency, some of the community members I interacted with had a positive response. They said the GP staff ensure that the services are delivered within the stipulated time without delay. *The image below shows the duration within which services need to be delivered (between 3 and 45 days depending on the nature of the service).* The various services include issuing building licenses, provision of drinking water and street lights, MGNREGA work and so on.

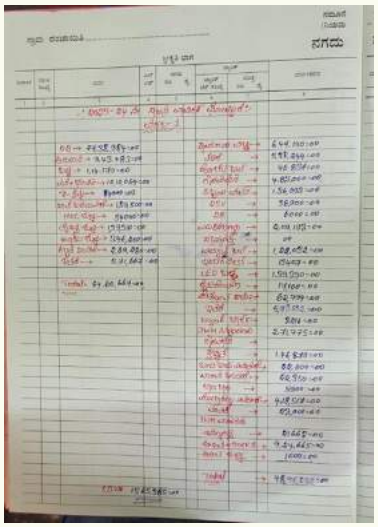
The Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (RDPR) has also introduced Panchamitra, an online platform designed to facilitate the efficient delivery of services by Gram Panchayats, enhance transparency, accountability, and accessibility in rural governance and to serve as a hub for information dissemination and grievance redressal, ensuring better citizen engagement with local government bodies.

Grama One is another initiative that intends to provide a one-stop service centre for rural citizens, aiming to deliver government services efficiently at the village level. The program includes a network of centres across villages to provide various services in different areas:

- **Revenue:** Issuance of various certificates like caste, income, and residence.
- **Social Welfare:** Access to social security schemes and welfare programs.
- **E-Governance:** Digital access to government services, reducing the need for citizens to visit district headquarters.

These centres are equipped to handle tasks related to documentation, disburse applications for government schemes, and other administrative services to enhance accessibility and convenience for rural populations.

▶ Financial Management



The Panchayat has two sources of revenue:

1. Own Source revenue – funds received from direct tax, trade licenses, rental income from GP buildings and from water bodies rented out for pisciculture.

The picture below shows the income and expenditure statement of the GP for the year 2023-24. As shown, the total income from various "own" sources stands at Rs 64,60,667 and the expenditure towards salaries, GP expenses and services like street lighting, solid waste management, sanitation, etc. is Rs 48,95,282.

2. 15th Finance Commission Funds

Gram Panchayats receive grants from the 15th Finance Commission of India. These funds are aimed at ensuring a minimum level of efficiency in services such as water supply, sanitation, and solid waste management. The allocation is based on population and area, with performance based grants to encourage better governance and service delivery. The grants are given in the form of tied and untied funds. While tied funds are specifically allocated for certain purposes such as sanitation, solid and liquid waste management and supply of drinking water, untied funds can be used by the GP for development work based on the local priorities, needs and requirements.

The Panchayat has been granted Rs 34,00,000 from the 15th Finance Commission out of which Rs 20 lakhs is tied and the remaining is untied grants. The expenditure of the funds by the GP for various purposes is as given below:

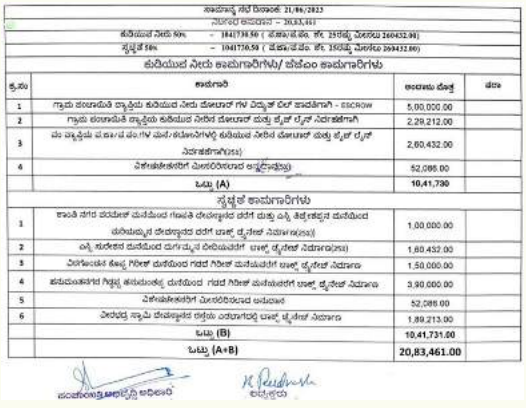
UTILISATION OF GRANTS

Statement of Expenditure 2023-24

15Th Finance

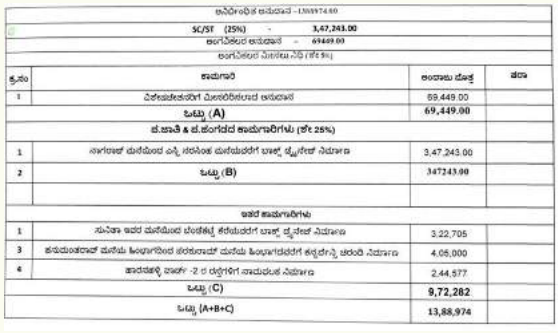
Receipt	Rs.	Expenditure	Rs
OB	28,44,515=00	1) Water Supply	12,87,142=00
1st Installment	2,00,000=00	2) Infrastructure (Drainage & roads)	8,48,347=00
2nd Instalment	5,22,500=00	3) Tax	72,774=00
3rd Instalment	6,50,244=00	4) Bank charge	1889=00
4th Instalment	10,01,945=00	5) Electricity Bill Payment	13,57,410=00
Bank Int.	60,828=00		
Total	52,80,032=00	Total	35,67,562=00

I was told that a Rs 20,00,000 grant had been used for works related to the Jal Jeevan Mission to the tune of 50% for drinking water and 50% of the funds for cleanliness and sanitation. The breakup of which is given below:



ಕ್ರ.ಸಂ	ಕಾಮಗಾರಿ	ಅಂದಾಜು ಮೊತ್ತ	ಷರಾ
1	ಗ್ರಾಮ ಪಂಚಾಯಿತಿ ವ್ಯಾಪ್ತಿಯ ಕುಡಿಯುವ ನೀರು ಪೂರೈಕೆ ಗಳ ವಿದ್ಯುತ್ ಬಿಲ್ ಪಾವತಿಗಾಗಿ - ESCROW	5,00,000.00	
2	ಗ್ರಾಮ ಪಂಚಾಯಿತಿ ವ್ಯಾಪ್ತಿಯ ಕುಡಿಯುವ ನೀರಿಗೆ ಪೈಪ್‌ಲೈನ್ ಮತ್ತು ಕೈ ಪಂಪ್ ರೈಸಿಂಗ್ ನಿರ್ವಹಣೆಗಾಗಿ	2,29,212.00	
3	ಪಂ ವ್ಯಾಪ್ತಿಯ ಪ.ಜಾ/ಪ.ಪಂಗಡ/ಮಹಿಳೆಯರಿಗೆ ಕುಡಿಯುವ ನೀರಿಗೆ ಪೈಪ್‌ಲೈನ್ ಮತ್ತು ಕೈ ಪಂಪ್ ರೈಸಿಂಗ್ ನಿರ್ವಹಣೆಗಾಗಿ(25%)	2,80,432.00	
4	ವಿಶೇಷಚೇತನರಿಗೆ ಮೀಸಲಿರಿಸಿರುವ ಅನುದಾನ(5%)	52,086.00	
	ಒಟ್ಟು (A)	10,41,730	
	ಸ್ವಚ್ಛತೆ ಕಾಮಗಾರಿಗಳು		
1	ಕಾಂತಿ ನಗರ ಪರಮೇಶ್ ಮನೆಯಿಂದ ಗಂಜಿತಿ ದೇವಸ್ಥಾನದ ರಸ್ತೆ ಮತ್ತು ಎಸ್.ಟಿ ತೆಪ್ಪಕಟ್ಟಿನ ಮನೆಯಿಂದ ಮೇರುಬಟ್ಟೆಗೆ ದೇವಸ್ಥಾನದ ರಸ್ತೆ ಬಾಕ್ಸ್ ಡ್ರೈನೇಜ್ ನಿರ್ಮಾಣ(25%)	1,00,000.00	
2	ಎಸ್.ಸಿ ಸುರೇಶ್ ಮನೆಯಿಂದ ಮಾಣಿಮೈಲ ವೀರಾಂಜನೇಯ ಬಾಕ್ಸ್ ಡ್ರೈನೇಜ್ ನಿರ್ಮಾಣ(25%)	1,80,432.00	
3	ವಿಶೇಷಚೇತನ ಕೆಳಪ್ಪ ಗೌಡರ ಮನೆಯಿಂದ ಗಡಿಪ ಗೌಡರ ಮನೆಯವರೆಗೆ ಬಾಕ್ಸ್ ಡ್ರೈನೇಜ್ ನಿರ್ಮಾಣ	1,50,000.00	
4	ಪರಮಯಂತಪಗಲ ಗಿಪ್ಪಳ್ಳ ಕರುಂಬಯ್ಯ ಮನೆಯಿಂದ ಗಡಿಪ ಗೌಡರ ಮನೆಯವರೆಗೆ ಬಾಕ್ಸ್ ಡ್ರೈನೇಜ್ ನಿರ್ಮಾಣ	3,90,000.00	
5	ವಿಶೇಷಚೇತನರಿಗೆ ಮೀಸಲಿರಿಸಿರುವ ಅನುದಾನ	52,086.00	
6	ವಿವಿಧಡೆ ಸ್ಥಾಪಿ ದೇವಸ್ಥಾನದ ರಸ್ತೆಯ ಎರವಗಾರರಲ್ಲಿ ಬಾಕ್ಸ್ ಡ್ರೈನೇಜ್ ನಿರ್ಮಾಣ	1,89,213.00	
	ಒಟ್ಟು (B)	10,41,731.00	
	ಒಟ್ಟು (A+B)	20,83,461.00	

25% of the untied funds have been used for development works for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population in the village and 5% for the specially-abled. The remaining funds have been used for various other development works in the village. The image below shows the breakup of fund utilisation.



ಕ್ರ.ಸಂ	ಕಾಮಗಾರಿ	ಅಂದಾಜು ಮೊತ್ತ	ಷರಾ
1	ವಿಶೇಷಚೇತನರಿಗೆ ಮೀಸಲಿರಿಸಿರುವ ಅನುದಾನ	69,449.00	
	ಒಟ್ಟು (A)	69,449.00	
	ಪ.ಜಾತಿ & ಪ.ಪಂಗಡದ ಕಾಮಗಾರಿಗಳು (ಶೇ 25%)		
1	ಸಂಗಬಳ ಮನೆಯಿಂದ ಎಸ್.ಸಿ ಸರಸಿಂಹ ಮನೆಯವರೆಗೆ ಬಾಕ್ಸ್ ಡ್ರೈನೇಜ್ ನಿರ್ಮಾಣ	3,47,243.00	
2	ಒಟ್ಟು (B)	347243.00	
	ಇತರೆ ಕಾಮಗಾರಿಗಳು		
1	ಸುನಿತಾ ಇತರ ಮನೆಯಿಂದ ಬಂಡಕಟ್ಟೆ ಕೆರೆಯವರೆಗೆ ಬಾಕ್ಸ್ ಡ್ರೈನೇಜ್ ನಿರ್ಮಾಣ	3,22,705	
3	ಪರಮಯಂತಪಾಡಿ ಮನೆಯ ಹಿಂಭಾಗದಿಂದ ಪರಕಲಾಯಡಿ ಮನೆಯ ಹಿಂಭಾಗದವರೆಗೆ ಕಲ್ಲಚರಿಪ್ಪಿ ಚರಂಡಿ ನಿರ್ಮಾಣ	4,05,000	
4	ಹಾರಮಣಿ ಬಾಲಕ -2 ರ ರಸ್ತೆಗಳಿಗೆ ಗಾಯಾರುಬಲ ನಿರ್ಮಾಣ	2,44,577	
	ಒಟ್ಟು (C)	9,72,282	
	ಒಟ್ಟು (A+B+C)	13,88,974	

How much should be spent on what work is unanimously decided by the members during the meetings. I was told that when it comes to financial aspects, the members engage in discussions and deliberations making it a democratic process. Behar and Kumar (2017) summarise this well when they say that while community involvement in decision-making processes

is generally low, financial decisions within Panchayats are an exception. These decisions typically involve thorough discussions and deliberations among the Panchayat members, ensuring a democratic approach to financial planning and expenditure. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) also found that financial decisions often see higher levels of internal consultation and participation among Panchayat members. These deliberations help in aligning financial expenditures with community needs and available resources, reinforcing the democratic nature of financial decision-making.

▶ Gram Panchayat Development Plan

The Gram Panchayat Development Plan is formulated every year. It has been made mandatory for Panchayats to prepare a detailed comprehensive plan for the overall sustainable development of the village. I was told that the Panchayat convenes a Sabha with all the elected representatives, staff of line departments (health, education, sanitation, infrastructure, agriculture and forestry), frontline officials of departments and the community and the Panchayat Development Officer acts as the facilitator every year.

Discussions are held on the following components:

- **Needs Assessment** – the community and line departments discuss in detail the needs of the village.
- **Resource Mobilization:** financial and non-financial resources are identified for implementing the development activities – funds from central and state governments, local resources and NGO and private contributions.
- **Sectoral Planning:** Specific plans are made for sectors such as education, health, sanitation, infrastructure, and livelihoods.
- **Implementation Strategies:** Methods are outlined, to execute the plan effectively.
- **Resource Allocation:** Available resources are allocated optimally for different activities.

The images below show all the participants of the Sabha as uploaded on the official GPDP website.

The above table shows the resource allocation for various sectors in the year 2022-23. Most of the grants were made towards the supply of drinking water, maintenance of community systems, sanitation and forestry. It is most often seen that although the GPDP aims for comprehensive rural development, there is often an imbalance in resource allocation. For instance, Cheng et al. (2020) highlight that infrastructure projects are often prioritized because they have tangible and immediate benefits, which can translate into political support and votes. This predominant focus on infrastructure usually overshadows other critical sectors such as education, health, and social welfare.

We need to inculcate inclusive planning where diverse community members highlight the importance of education, health, and social welfare. Allocation of specific funds for these sectors will ensure that they receive adequate attention. It also becomes important to train local officials and community leaders on the importance of balanced development.

Challenges faced during the GPDP Preparation process:

- **Low Community Participation:** people do not actively take part and contribute to the Sabhas. Most of the time, those in power take decisions for the larger population making it an undemocratic process.
- **Resource Constraints:** Limited financial and human resources often hinder the effective implementation of the GPDP as planned.

- **Coordination Issues:** All stakeholders do not always find a middle ground, leading to disagreements and fights. In terms of implementation as well, effective coordination among various stakeholders, including government departments, NGOs, and the community becomes difficult to achieve.

▶ Women Self Help Groups

Women Self Help groups play a significant role in development by promoting economic and social empowerment among women. There are 67 Self Help Groups (SHG) in total in the GP. The only initiative under the GP-SHG partnership currently being undertaken is Solid Waste Management (SWM). A Memorandum of Understanding has been signed with the Gram Panchayat and the Gram Panchayat Livelihoods Federation (GPLF) which is a collective organization formed at the GP level comprising representatives from SHGs. Three women have been trained, one to drive the vehicle and two to collect and segregate the waste. The GP pays them between Rs 10,000 and Rs 13,000 per month. Dry waste is collected from 2 villages every day and the women cover all 4 villages in the GP in a week. Although the larger objective of this initiative undertaken by the government is to have an enterprise model where the women earn their own income through the collection and sale of waste, the initiative is still in its nascent stages and the women are not completely able to sustain themselves through this work. Various challenges on the ground include

- Lack of entrepreneurial skills,
- Lack of commitment
- Infrastructure issues
- Sale of recyclables bringing low remuneration due to small volumes of waste
- Women facing social discrimination for collection of service fees

When asked how these issues can be resolved, the Mobile Book Keeper (MBK) was of the opinion that people should be made aware of this initiative at the Gram Panchayat level. They need to understand the larger picture of how this can lead to women's empowerment and their economic development.

Solid Waste Management Shed

Other initiatives that the SHGs have undertaken previously include making terracotta pots, Rotti business, tailoring, selling ginger and poultry farming.

While many women have started individual businesses in the village, not all have been sustainable. One of the reasons pointed out for this was that although banks support them with initial loans, the condition that loan repayments begin immediately is unrealistic. The MBK says, "This does not give the women sufficient time to set up and start making profits. Therefore, if the repayment cycle begins at least 6 months after the funding is given, it would be more beneficial."

Mud pots made by SHG Women

She also said market linkages are low. Training given by the National Rural Livelihoods Mission for women to take up various entrepreneurial activities have been beneficial. However, finding a market for these products is difficult. Therefore, it becomes important to ensure that suitable market linkages and marketing avenues are provided along with training.

Another initiative that had gained momentum in the recent past was setting up a Nutrition Garden in SHG households through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). An Action Plan was prepared to utilize MGNREGA funds to support SHG members in setting up and cultivating vegetables, fruits, and herbs in small home gardens. Through this, the GP and SHG intended to ensure fresh, nutritious food for households, reduce food expenses, and promote sustainable agricultural practices. However, I was told that the initiative could not take off as material costs were high and there were issues with cultivating and maintaining the plants. When social auditors came to check on the work, most often the garden was not taken care of well enough and there was no tangible produce to show.

▶ Visit to Government Higher Primary School

A visit to the Government Higher Primary School in the Gram Panchayat offered valuable insights into the quality of learning, educational infrastructure, teaching methodologies, and the overall learning environment provided by the public education system in this part of the State.

This section intends to explore the various aspects observed during the visit, including the school's infrastructure, learning levels of the students, student-teacher interactions, interaction with a parent and other facilities.

School Details:

SL.NO	PARTICULARS	TOTAL
1.	Strength of students	110
2.	Total No. of Boys	44
3.	Total No. of Girls	66
4.	No. of Teachers	4
5.	No. of Guest Teachers	1 (English)
6.	School Development Management Committee (SDMC) Members	15

a) Infrastructure

The school is at a central location in the GP and has ample space with a huge playground. The classrooms are spacious and there is good ventilation. Although there were sufficient toilets for both girls and boys, they did not seem to be well maintained. There is a lack of ownership and effective monitoring mechanisms. When asked about the condition of the toilets, the principal blamed it on the students for not maintaining cleanliness. Therefore, awareness on both sides and effective monitoring is important.

The sports ground was well maintained. Although there was adequate equipment for different sports, the ground can be further developed to make it conducive for playing different sports (by developing a cricket pitch, installing football goalposts, volleyball/throwball nets, etc.) The principal said she had thought of developing the ground, but it was not a priority as of now.

Schools can explore how MGNREGA can be utilised to develop sports infrastructure in schools. According to an article in the Times of India, in the Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka, MGNREGA has helped improve school infrastructure by constructing toilets, compound walls, midday meal rooms, kitchen gardens, rainwater harvesting systems, and sports grounds in government schools. In the last fiscal year, 153 washrooms were built in district schools under MGNREGA. More Gram Panchayats should consider developing school infrastructure and facilities through this channel.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh launched the "Mana Badi Nadu Nedu" (Then and Now) programme to transform government schools, strengthen the infrastructure of schools across the state in 2019. The various initiatives taken up include:

- Drinking water supply
- Major and minor repairs
- Electrification with fans and tube lights
- Furniture for students and staff
- Green chalk boards
- Painting of school buildings
- English labs
- Compound walls
- Additional Class Rooms

According to an article in Deccan Herald, the programme has helped transform government schools into top-class educational institutions. The improved infrastructure and facilities have encouraged more parents to enrol their children in government schools.

Poor infrastructure is often a drawback in rural government schools. Therefore, more states should take up wide-scale infrastructure improvement projects to ensure that government schools are revived and upgraded. Monitoring is important for the upkeep of the infrastructure.

b) Teaching quality

There was a total of 5 teachers (4 regular and 1 guest) in the school. While attending a Science class, I found the teacher to be knowledgeable and well-informed. While the method of teaching is largely still chalk and board-based in government schools of Karnataka, the students were excited when asked if they would like to see digital content as well.

Smart classrooms with video-viewing technology will enhance retention capacity. A school in Ummadahalli GP located in Mandya district has set up a digital classroom with the help of donor funds. Other schools should also try to tap donations to improve facilities that can improve teaching techniques.

Regular training programs and workshops should be undertaken by the Government to enrich the teaching skills of teachers, update them on the latest pedagogical methods, and ensure they are well-equipped to handle modern classrooms. The Government of Andhra Pradesh has introduced digital classrooms to integrate technology into education. This includes the use of interactive digital content, smart classrooms, and online resources for both students and teachers.

c) Student Engagement and learning levels

While most students paid attention, around 30% seemed a little lost in class. They were unable to answer simple questions that the teacher asked. While the class was going on, a parent came to enquire why her son was not able to do well in Hindi. The teacher said the student was irregular and attended classes only 2-3 days a week. I was told that this was a common issue that prevailed across government schools. Children are sent for work on some days which results in them missing classes and breaking the learning curve. We can see that poverty and low literacy levels in the households of these students often leads to a lack of learning support. Economic pressures force children to work which restricts them from attending schools regularly. When I asked the parent, why the child was irregular, she did not have a concrete answer and tried to dodge it.

On the day of the visit, the total attendance was 81 which shows that around 25% of the students were not present. Garg, M.K., Chowdhury, P. & Sheikh (2023), highlight how children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to miss school due to economic pressures and a lack of supportive learning environment at home. Such students most often go to government schools as they cannot afford to learn in private schools. This is one of the major reasons why learning levels are low in public schools.

Schools in the Kalyana Karnataka (Hyderabad Karnataka) region of Karnataka lag in learning levels and student performance in comparison with schools in developed districts like Shivamogga. If we compare The Human Development Index in Education as given in the Karnataka Human Development Report 2005, between Shivamogga and a district from the Kalyana Karnataka region like Raichur, we can see, as in the image below that Shivamogga ranks 6 with index score of 0.766 whereas Raichur ranks 27 with a score of 0.527.

Composition of HDI 2001

	District	Indicator						HDI	
		Health		Education		Income			
		Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Value	Rank
1	Bagalkot	0.597	27	0.636	22	0.539	12	0.591	22
2	Bangalore Rural	0.692	6	0.662	20	0.605	4	0.653	6
3	Bangalore Urban	0.705	5	0.887	1	0.666	1	0.753	1
4	Belgaum	0.712	2	0.699	15	0.532	13	0.648	8
5	Bellary	0.685	7	0.618	23	0.549	9	0.617	18
6	Bidar	0.638	17	0.689	17	0.470	26	0.599	21
7	Bijapur	0.627	24	0.642	21	0.499	23	0.589	23
8	Chamarajnagar	0.642	15	0.570	26	0.518	17	0.576	25
9	Chikmaglur	0.637	19	0.742	9	0.563	6	0.647	9
10	Chitradurga	0.660	12	0.704	14	0.517	18	0.627	16
11	Dakshina Kannada	0.707	3	0.823	4	0.636	2	0.722	2
12	Davangere	0.680	8	0.711	13	0.515	19	0.635	12
13	Dharwad	0.615	26	0.758	7	0.553	8	0.642	10
14	Gadag	0.628	23	0.750	8	0.525	15	0.634	13
15	Gulbarga	0.632	20	0.572	25	0.490	25	0.564	26
16	Hassan	0.670	10	0.729	10	0.519	16	0.639	11
17	Haveri	0.620	25	0.699	16	0.491	24	0.603	20
18	Kodagu	0.638	18	0.833	3	0.621	3	0.697	4
19	Kolar	0.653	13	0.713	12	0.508	21	0.625	17
20	Koppal	0.642	16	0.576	24	0.529	14	0.582	24
21	Mandya	0.632	21	0.682	18	0.513	20	0.609	19
22	Mysore	0.663	11	0.669	19	0.561	7	0.631	14
23	Raichur	0.648	14	0.524	27	0.469	27	0.547	27
24	Shimoga	0.707	4	0.766	6	0.547	10	0.673	5
25	Tumkur	0.672	9	0.714	11	0.505	22	0.630	15
26	Udupi	0.713	1	0.842	2	0.588	5	0.714	3
27	Uttara Kannada	0.632	22	0.781	5	0.546	11	0.653	7
	Karnataka	**0.680**		**0.712**		**0.559**		**0.650**	

d) Facilities

The school I visited had minimal facilities. The library was just a rack of books and the laboratory was also just a rack of lab equipment. There were only 2 computers in the school. The serving of the mid-day meals was however a delight to encounter. The students sat next to each other and seemed excited for the food. They all prayed before starting to eat. They were all given chikki first and then served hot rice, sprouts and sambar. As reported by the Akshara Foundation, the mid-day meals scheme has undoubtedly had a positive impact and brought about improvements in both health and educational outcomes for children. While the program is largely successful, it is not without challenges. The teachers cite issues such as occasional food shortages, logistical difficulties, and the need for constant monitoring which take up considerable time. But the pros outweigh the cons considering how well it has been able to achieve its objective.

Recently, the Government of Karnataka has introduced egg, and chikki twice a week in government schools to make the food more nutrition-dense. Azim Premji Foundation has signed an MoU with a Rs 1,500-crore grant over three years to supply eggs to students in government and aided schools six days a week in the State.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh has introduced various initiatives to ensure school students have access to resources for effective learning. The Vidya Kanuka Kit provides students with necessary school supplies, including uniforms, textbooks, notebooks, and bags. This helps in reducing the financial burden on families and ensures that students have the resources needed for effective learning. The Amma Vodi Scheme was launched to provide financial assistance to mothers of families from below the poverty line (BPL), encouraging them to send their children to school. These direct benefit transfer initiatives can indirectly help in improving student attendance and engagement.

▶ Conclusion

The village immersion experience provided me with a comprehensive understanding of rural local governance and life in a rural set-up. The entire experience of this immersion helped me understand how governance operates at the local level, and how various schemes and policies are implemented in practice. However, it became evident that we still have a long way to go in transforming this process into a truly democratic reality, rather than merely an exercise on paper. My visit to various institutions in the village and discussions with the people made me realise that the opportunities are vast, but so are the challenges. Achieving alignment and convergence among different institutions requires coordinated efforts at various levels. What became clear is that effective governance hinges on people and processes at the core of decision making, assuming onus and ownership. The essence of democracy and decentralization must be deeply ingrained at the grassroots level. It is only when citizens actively engage and participate in governance that meaningful change can occur from the ground up. It is important to question and hold those in authority accountable. Furthermore, I also observed that gender, caste and class distinctions are very much prevalent and although we have come a long way in empowering people to break these shackles, we still need to work on changing these social dynamics. It becomes evident that only through effective governance, strategic policy implementation, enhanced community participation and ownership and focused educational improvements, can we ensure a more balanced and equitable societal growth.

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Examining Critical Development Indicators and its Impact of Change from The Lens of A Development Professional: A Case Study of *Errapenta*

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▶ Abstract

For development professionals it is imperative to study the progress of marginalized communities. Such studies are done by analysing the progress based on the provision of various development indicators, transition in the lives of the village members, impact of development institutions and the government on the standard of living of the communities in question.

All tribal groups are marginalized and backward. Among them the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), are even more so. A close examination of Chenchu tribes of Errapenta village in the Nallamalla Forest was undertaken by the undersigned CRISP Fellow.

The findings of this preliminary study reveal that while there has been some transition in lifestyle and culture indicating an improvement in the standard of living, progress in education has been slow, and there has been an adverse impact on livelihoods.

Researchers and development professionals can use this report as a reference point for further examination. This study has been commissioned by the Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies as part of its Fellowship Programme.

▶ Introduction

India is a diverse nation where a variety of languages, religions, castes and tribes exist. Tribes constitute 8.6 percent of the total population. Article 342 of the Constitution notifies the Schedule Tribes (ST) on five parameters – (i) "primitive" traits; (ii) distinctive culture; (iii) geographical isolation; (iv) shyness in contacting the community at large; and (v) backwardness. Within this group, the Government of India in 1993 has further notified the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) on three parameters – (i) pre-agricultural level of technology; (ii) very low literacy level; and (iii) declining or stagnant population. As per the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the total number of PVTGs in India are 75 out of 705 Scheduled Tribes.

Telangana, one of the southern states of India, with a tribal population of 9.07 percent is home to 4 PVTGs and 32 Schedule Tribe communities. Chenchu tribe with a population of 14,731, is one of the PVTGs of Telangana. Chenchus can be found across several districts like Mahabubnagar, Nalgonda, Rangareddy and Vikarabad but the largest number, 8784, are present in Nagarkurnool district, according to a survey conducted by the Rural Development Trust (RDT). Majority of Chenchu settlements are situated on the peripheries of Nallamalla Forests, extending a few kilometers into the forests.

Chenchus are an aboriginal tribe. They are hunter-gatherers dependent on the forest for their food and sustenance. Other livelihood activities they engage in are agriculture, cattle-breeding, Non-Timber Forest Produce (N.T.F.P) collection and daily wage labour. They live in small settlements called "Pentas." Each Penta consists of 30 to 100 houses, mostly located on the foothills of Nallamalla Forest. Historically Chenchus are considered the first dwellers of Andhra region, from before the Dravidians. They speak and use Telugu script for both inter and intra group communication. However, their nomadic lifestyle, settlements in deep forests, and access to forest produce has gradually decreased, all of which has led to many changes in their lives. The GOI notification on Nagarjuna Srisailam Tiger Reserve in 1978 is responsible for this.

Challenges being faced by Chenchus are (i) isolation and inaccessibility; (ii) pre-agriculture stage of economy; (iii) wide spread illiteracy; (iv) unhygienic living conditions; (v) high incidence of morbidity and mortality; (vi) imposition of restrictions due to the introduction of tiger sanctuary, (vii) abysmal poverty; (viii) scarcity of drinking water; (ix) inadequate housing; (x) high incidence of illicit liquor consumption; (xi) child marriage and (x) lack of basis infrastructural facilities.

The Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), headquartered at Mannanur is the nodal agency for overall development of Chenchus. Since its inception in 1976, the ITDA has been implementing various welfare and development schemes that have contributed improvement in the lives of Chenchus. The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution safeguards the distinct culture and interest of the tribes. As in all rural areas here too, Panchayats have the responsibility of ensuring the provision of basic necessities such as drinking water, rural connectivity and employment of the dwellers. In addition, ITDA works for their development in the fields of education, health, housing, education and livelihoods.

Regions where Chenchus live are also home to non-tribal farmers who hire the tribals for agricultural work on daily wages. Some go out for construction work. These avenues of livelihood have exposed them to mainstream society and widened the ecosystem of Chenchus. In some cases, access to credit services has affected their lifestyle. In recent times, technology

and communication systems have reached them, opening new avenues of interaction with worlds outside their own.

▶ The objective of the study is

- To critique the institutions involved in the governance, welfare and development of the village
- To assess the access of the village to basic amenities such as electricity, housing, water and roads
- To evaluate the human development indicators such as health, education, ICDS
- To look into the livelihood support from various institutions
- To examine the impact that economic and livelihood conditions have on the lives of Chenchus.

▶ Methodology

Area of the Study

The choice of site is based on a thorough analysis of its backwardness in human development indicators (HDIs) of the state. The district has a high percentage of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe, considered the most marginalized communities. Literacy levels, enrolment ratio in schools, infrastructure and per capita income are among the lowest in the state of Telangana. Within the district, the Chenchus are the most backward communities and their population is the highest here. In view of the above, Errapenta, a tribal habitation, located in the foothills of Nallamalla Forest was selected as an Immersion site. The habitation comprises 102 Chenchu households with a total of 348 members.

Tools and Techniques of Data Collection

This is a qualitative study. Its primary data has been collected through

- Structured interviews with government officials such as Panchayat Secretary, Anganwadi worker, ASHA worker, gram panchayat worker and Assistant. Project Officer (APO) from the Rural Development Department
- Unstructured interviews with village members
- Focus group discussions with the women members of SHGs and the village youth
- Before beginning the study, the Fellow referred to literature dealing with 'village studies.'

Limitations

Due to time constraints, it was not possible to conduct a household survey on the development indicators and analyse and quantify the data in absolute terms. There is scope for deeper research based on the preliminary findings of this study.

▶ Results and Discussion

Socio-Economic Profile

Errapenta comes under the purview of Srirangapur Gram Panchayat. It has an all Chenchu population of 348, distributed among 123 families. Females number 178 and males 170. The total number of children between 0 months to 6 years is 51 and between 11 to 18 years is 22. The village has seven job holders of which, three work with NGOs, four with the government as contractual labour, (Aanganvadi, Asha workers and PDS dealer). A few till their own land, some work as agricultural labour, construction workers and fishermen.

It came to light during the study that the practice of bonded labour prevails in the region. The victims, from different families are approximately 30-40. Money lenders and contractors from nearby towns take them to work in cities and towns in the vicinity such as Chennampally, Padmanapally, Rayavaram, Ambatpalli and Yadgiri Gutta. This practice persists despite its abolition by the State. Chenchus are amongst the worst exploited.

C-Mart, an outlet for NTFP (Non timber Forest Produce), such as honey, nanaari, soapnut and other natural products, employs 25 members, but the income from transactions is insufficient. The village economy is not connected to any industry or enterprise currently. Lack of quality education is also responsible for the Chenchus being unable to secure paying jobs.

Education

Of the 150 literate people in the village, 18 have studied up to Matric, 10 have completed Higher Secondary, 5 have undergraduate degrees and there is one with a postgraduate degree. He is the first in his village to have achieved this degree.
The Anganwadi does not offer Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as its programme is limited to providing nutrition to the beneficiaries. The only primary school in the village built by the Tribal Welfare Department (TWD), is a one-room building with a single teacher. It has provision for students to study till the 3rd standard. On completing class 3, children are admitted to Tribal Welfare Residential Schools located in Mannanur and to gurukulams that are close by. Those who are interested and can afford to go for further education, move to Hyderabad.

As per the current records there are 9 dropouts in the village, at the school level. The reasons cited are:

- Inferiority complex in the students
- Humiliation in class due to non-performance and
- Inadequate guidance and a poor quality of teaching in government schools where no special attention is paid to the cognitive development of the student.

Math and English are perceived as difficult and the students fare poorly in these subjects which makes it tough for them to proceed to higher education. Financial constraints make it impossible for them to join coaching institutes for competitive exams.

The researcher found that lack of exposure limits the aspirations of Chenchus. They have little understanding of the benefits of education and its importance in securing steady livelihoods. Seventy-five years after independence, the picture of education levels of Chenchus in the village remains grim despite multiple welfare programmes offered by the state and central governments.

However, the respondents mentioned that there is a marked shift in the attitude of tribal parents towards education and more of them now want to get their children educated. NGOs like Koneru and Rural Development Trust (RDT) have contributed to this shift. They have appointed an additional teacher in the Primary School along with a volunteer/tutor in the village to ensure a lower dropout level by providing additional learning support. RDT in the past has also distributed Rs. 700 per year and uniforms to students per year from 1st to 10th to ensure that every child attains basic minimum education.
Through free education in the Tribal Welfare Residential Schools and Ekalavya Model Residential Schools, the Government is trying its best to provide the basic requisites for quality education.

▶ Access to Amenities and Infrastructure

Electricity:

Electrification of the village began in 2008 and now every household has a connection. At the household level electricity is used for light bulbs, fans and refrigerators and to charge mobile phones and watch television. Power supply is almost regular but, in the summer, there are heavy power cuts. All households get a waiver on their power bills.

Drinking Water:

A borewell was dug 10 years back, to provide drinking water in Errapenta. With the introduction of Mission Bhagiratha by the state government, an overhead water tank has been installed to release drinking water every alternative day. It is the borewell water that is preferred by the villagers as water obtained through Mission Bhagiratha has led to a range of ailments like fever, cough and cold. Water quality of both sources should be tested and the villagers need to be educated on the risks of using poor quality water. Access to electricity and drinking water serves as a good development indicator.

Housing:

Being a nomadic tribe, Chenchus have always been on the move for sustenance and built dwellings from available material like bamboo and grass. Ms. Heeramma, an Anganwadi teacher and one of the first settlers in the village, mentioned that four decades back when her family came here, along with 4 other families, the place was uninhabitable with snakes, lizards, and scorpions all around. The families built temporary structures and settled here nevertheless because of its proximity to the forest. Under the Indiramma Housing Scheme in the 2000s, the village received roofed houses. The Tribal Welfare department granted them pattas or ownership documents.

In 2011, RDT supported the construction of 65 slab houses for the households at a cost of INR 1.5 lakh per house. Each household was required to contribute INR 3,000 and one individual's labour. In 2023, RDT in collaboration with ITDA had constructed another 37 slab houses. The ITDA contributed INR 3 lakh of the cost and the rest was borne by RDT.

With these significant supports, the Chenchus of Errapenta have moved towards a dignified stable and safer housing system which protects them from extreme weather conditions and wild animals. In this process, their nomadic way of life has come to a halt.

Toilet Facility:

The Swachh Bharat Mission of the Government of India aims to make the country open defecation free (ODF). The 37 houses built in the second phase had provision of toilets. A few households from the earlier phase built toilets at their own expense. Most others practice open defecation. The only way to change this is for the authorities to provide toilet facilities where required.

Other hard infrastructure:

The village remained mostly inaccessible till 2006. Around that time 20 bonded labour were rescued from the town and brought back to the village in a bus. The commute to the village proved to be tough in the absence of a proper road. A CC road was laid soon after. The nearest public transport point is Lingal Mandal. The villagers either use their own vehicles or intermediary transport modes. Since roads have already been laid, provision of public transport will certainly make it convenient for residents to commute more frequently.

There is an immediate need to focus on the development of common public infrastructure. It should be incorporated in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) with a detailed timeline of implementation.

Anganwadi:
The one room village primary school and the Anganwadi centre (AWC) are in a dilapidated condition and have no toilets. The Anganwadi worker mentioned that a sanction of INR 10 Lakh, given for the renovation of the AWC lapsed due to the negligence of the concerned official. At the time of this study, a multipurpose building which includes a play area, is being constructed with a budget of INR 50 Lakh.

▶ Food Security and Health

Food Security:
Traditionally, Chenchus obtained food through hunting and collection of edible roots from the forest. Gradually their diet changed to include jonnalu, korralu, sankati and other millets. For their non-agricultural nutrition they hunted udumulu, udathalu from the forests. Udumu is considered rich in nutrients and great for ailments. Heavy restrictions placed by the Forest Department, has led to greater dependence on agricultural yields and products from the market for nutrition. Their staple diet has changed to rice, which they do not consider too healthy.
The government gives all the villagers 35 Kg of rice every month under the Public Distribution Scheme. All else is procured from the field and the market.
NICE Foundation, an NGO, has adopted the village and provides monthly provisions (rice, sugar, dal, atta, oil, spices, tooth-paste, soaps) for the household, on condition that the family does not migrate. The objective of the foundation is to improve the health of the Chenchus without it being a burden on scant family incomes. The monthly expenditure incurred per household amounts to INR 4,500. NICE has promised this support for a period of 5 years. While this is a much needed boost for the food security of the community, it is not sustainable in the long run. Ultimately the villagers must gain financial empowerment in order to address their own nutrition requirements.

Adult Health and Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS):
An interview with the main ASHA worker revealed that 30 children in the village are underweight, 16 had premature births and are anemic. Appropriate supplements such as vitamin A and iron tablets are provided, timely vaccinations for Polio, BCG and Hepatitis are administered by the Asha worker who also ensures that the stock of necessary medicines are always available. An Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife (ANM) visits the village for checkups on the first Saturday of every month. In addition, NICE foundation volunteers conduct regular health checkups of pregnant and lactating mothers.
There have been 3 child deaths in the past 6 months, 2 of which were due to fever. There is no record of maternal mortality at childbirth. Most deliveries have been normal.

However there is a prevalence of fevers, TB, cold and cough in the village. No one has been detected with BP or Diabetes. One dengue case has occurred in the past 6 months. The nearest Primary Health Centre (PHC) is located 8 kms away at Lingal mandal. The ambulance there can reach Errapenta in 30 minutes..!. Among adults, anemia is prevalent due to consumption of illicit toddy and sarai. Beside physical ailments this also leads to complications in the nervous system, that result in slurred speech and deformation of the body.

Details of the implementation of the ICDS was provided by the Anganwadi worker. Meals as per the guidelines are served in a timely and effective manner. Status of pregnant and lactating women, babies, and toddlers is also checked regularly. The diet for women under ICDS includes rice, dal, eggs, milk, vegetables; for children there are balamrutham and nutritious murukulu along with a meal. All ICDS beneficiaries are monitored by the AW. Women who are unable to visit the AWC, have their ration delivered at home. Apart from this, the children are told stories, taught rhymes, alphabets, and numbers by the AW worker as part of EECE. The services available at the village cater to all the usual issues but a dedicated PHC is an absolute must along with a professional doctor who can advise in case of emergencies.

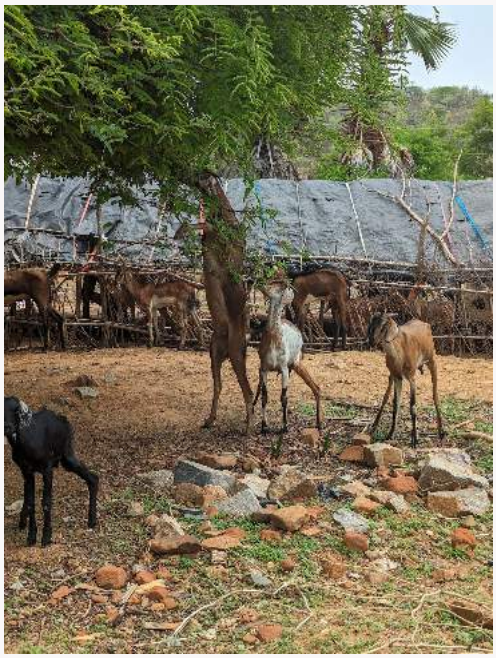
▶ Livelihoods and Income

The traditional livelihood of Chenchus was not only hunting and gathering for food but also to trade NTFP for income and to secure items of utility. The resources collected were banka (gum), nanaari, soapnut, wild honey etc. Gradually, the community has moved to farming and around 75 members in the village own small holdings from 0.5 Acre to 5 Acres. The landless work as agricultural daily wage labour and do fishing. 40 percent of the population are engaged as wage workers. The average monthly income is between Rs. 4,000 and 5,000. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) which assures a hundred days of work is a major pillar of support. The Chinna Rayanam Cheruvu Society enables the fishermen conduct their business from the fish produce obtained from the village pond.

Self Help Groups (SHGs)

There are 6 SHGs in the village, consisting of 72 women.

- A small micro unit of oil cold press was granted under the kanya palpu karya.
- 8-10 goats were distributed to SHG members in 2016 by ITDA.



Neither has been beneficial. The cold press unit was closed due to operational deficiencies and absence of market linkages, and the goats distributed were affected with diseases within one week of disbursement. RDT provided training to some of the SHG members and distributed 4 sewing machines, but that too did not generate any business. In 2011, RDT set up a micro enterprise of agarbathi making for the SHG members but it came to a halt within a year of its operationalization. PHF (Paul Hamley Foundation) and Koneru set up C-Mart (Chenchu Mart) for livelihood enhancement by providing market linkages for NTFP collected by the villagers which include honey, nanaari, soapnut, chilla ginjalu, vippa puvullu and other items. The products in C-Mart are packaged and sold. Tools for cultivation are also rented out by C-Mart. There are around 25 members in C-Mart.

It needs to be noted here that Chenchus led a more prosperous life with trade of banka and nanaari when they had easy access to the forest. Most of them are not interested in cultivation and lease out their lands for a meagre INR 3,000 to 5,000 per acre for a season. The necessity to borrow from money lenders makes them vulnerable and instead of earning they end up as bonded labour.

A ray of hope is emerging in this grim scenario. The proposals of NICE foundation suggest an effective transition to Natural Farming for livelihood enhancement. Appropriate training and market linkages will be provided to the members involved in it. In addition, Khadi Village Industry Board (KVIB) has sanctioned an amount of Rs. 3 Crore for honey farming in the village under the scheme SFURTI. The technical agency to implement this village enterprise will be Koneru. The SHG members and others have expressed a willingness to enhance their livelihoods if an opportunity is provided to them by granting micro enterprises such as soap making, shampoo making etc., with right guidance.

Poorest of Poor

With the governments focusing more on addressing extreme poverty in the states and nation, an attempt was made to understand the poorest of poor at Errapenta. Relevant data was obtained through informal discussions with the village members. There are around 15 families in the village who are considered the poorest of the poor (POP). The reasons behind their condition are

- Lack of social graces,
- Little awareness on education,
- Disability,
- Widowhood
- Absence of other family members.

▶ Support and Functioning of Governmental Institutions

Errapenta comes under the purview of Srirangapur Gram Panchayat. To fully understand the functioning of the Gram Panchayat and its role in serving the people of the villages it administers; I spoke to the Secretary of Srirangapur Panchayat.

The functions of Gram Panchayat include:

- Issue of birth, death and marriage certificates
- Issue of trade licenses
- Road cleaning, sanitation, solid waste management, composting
- Water provision, bore repairs, cleaning of tank
- Provision and maintenance of street lights, burial grounds
- Haritha Haram
- Awareness programmes on education, child marriage, environmental protection;
- Implementation of NREGA works etc.

The Gram Panchayat consists of 9 members, and has four committees that oversee matters of infrastructure, street lighting, Haritha Haram and sanitation. A gram sabha is held once in every 2 months and is attended by people of both villages. Till such time that preparing a Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) becomes a common practice, development of the panchayat cannot be a steady process.

Apart from the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI), the Tribal Welfare Department has undertaken measures such as building of houses, economic support schemes for livelihood enhancement, setting up of a primary school, providing free education to the tribals outside the village in Tribal Welfare schools, distribution of lands for agriculture and housing. It has been seen in the records at ITDA Mannanur that the allocation for Errapenta is less as compared to other villages.

Though the government has been successful in provision of power, water, cc roads, ration, land and pensions, there is a gap that needs to be bridged in pushing the development of villagers in education, skill development, entrepreneurship development and livelihood enhancement.

▶ Impact of NGOs

One of the main contributing factors in favourable trends in development indicators is the presence of NGOs in the village. RDT, the first NGO to step into the village in 2008 has been pivotal in bringing an incremental change in the lives of Chenchus. It has provided support in the development of adequate housing, livelihoods, education, stopping child marriage, reduction of alcohol consumption and improved health of Chenchus in the village. Koneru is providing support in education and livelihood. The recent NGO to enter the village, NICE foundation, is providing support in food security, livelihoods and

health.

Though the support provided by NGOs is incremental and their impact is realized in the long term, their understanding of the village is crucial for policy advocacy and bringing in an absolute change among Chenchus. However, during interaction with the villagers it was evident that NGO team members do not consult them or follow participatory methods of identifying the exact needs of the village. This is a big reason for their programme not meeting the desired goals.

▶ Transition in the Lives of Chenchus

Errapenta can now boast of its first PG student. Moreover, the parents have understood the importance of education and are pushing their children to attain higher education. The prevalence of high alcohol consumption is gradually reducing. The awareness on financial security and savings is slowly being realized by the Chenchus in the village.

Basic necessities and infrastructure such as adequate housing, electricity, access to drinking water, roads, land, communication are available to the Chenchus and it has all happened in a span of 15 years. The livelihoods have drastically changed in the last 20 years, wherein, the Chenchus are indirectly forced to follow the lifestyle of non-tribal communities. The major factor behind this is the restriction to enter forests. Further, the food habits of Chenchus in this generation has drastically changed.

One of the respondents believes that eventually Chenchus will be rehabilitated from the village to the nearby towns or other villages due to the Uranium mining which is proposed in Nallamalla Forest. Though protests have been staged by activists, environmentalists and the tribes, a slow and unstated eviction is taking place to move the tribal population from the forests. I was told that already people of 2 villages, Vatavarlapally and Sarlapally are being promised 2 Acres land, monetary compensation and a job for a member of each household, if they agree to being rehabilitated. With the above transitions, Chenchus may witness better development indicators and standard of living but their distinct culture and lifestyle will face a serious threat.

▶ Policy Recommendation and Conclusion

The study showed that there has been an improvement in standard of living from the time of their initial settlement in the village. Their traditional relationship with the forests has been altered severely, increasing their vulnerability to cultural change. There is a transition to a sedentary settled way of life that is common to non-tribal communities. With support of various institutions, they are interacting with the outside world and slowly transitioning in their lives. It is also important to take cognizance of the positive changes and develop the Chenchus to adapt to the conditions of the world at large.

Based on the study, I offer the following recommendations for a positive impact on the lives of Chenchus:

- The PRIs should formulate a GPDP for a planned development of the habitation.
- The District Monitoring Committee and ITDA Mannanur have to be strengthened, prepare action plans for short term and long-term measures for the development of Chenchus in the village.
- Support on setting up of micro industries and strengthening of SHGs is crucial for the development of village industry.
- A nodal officer or project officer under the direct supervision of an IAS officer should be appointed to implement development programmes related to education, livelihoods, health and sanitation.
- Fishery development and aquaculture may be done i.e., training to harvest better yield, provision of fishing nets, transport vehicles, provision of market linkages etc.
- A Primary Health Centre may be established in the village along with a professional doctor attending to the village members every week.
- Remedial classes for weaker students, targeted career guidance for the students of the village may be undertaken immediately.
- A nodal officer may be appointed to tap the funds to the village from the state tribal welfare fund, and central government schemes for livelihood enhancement, infrastructure etc
- A sports ground to play volleyball, football, cricket of small size may be constructed for physical and cognitive development of the children and youth.
- Special emphasis should be laid down in implementing EECE at par with other schools providing EECE in the village with dedicated faculty, as the period is crucial for cognitive development of the child.
- The primary school may be revamped with a small library, digital boards and an additional teacher from Teach for India fellowship.
- Implement entrepreneur and skill development programmes for the youth and SHGs of the village. It is necessary to inculcate an entrepreneurial spirit among them for a better future.
- To avoid dropout from school, promote education and financially support the parents, a scheme like Amma Vodi may be implemented. In addition, the parents and students should be made aware of different financial grants, scholarships and schemes related to education.
- Proper implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission to ensure toilet facility, ensure sanitation.
- Bonded labour may be tracked by the concerned authority and money lenders involved in the exploitation should be penalised. Further, livelihood support measures may be undertaken by the district administration for the affected. This can result in better standard of living for the family.
- To improve the income and livelihoods of the Chenchus, a 200 days employment guarantee scheme may be implemented by the PR and RD Department and Tribal Welfare Department. This was one of the measures proposed by Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute for improvement of living conditions of Chenchus in 1994 and proposed to the Tribal Welfare Department.

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Navigating Challenges and Cultivating Change: An Immersive Exploration of Bodoland's Communities

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▶ Abstract

Intricately woven with political, socioeconomic, and cultural strands, the history of Bodoland, a region in the northeastern state of Assam, India, is a vivid tapestry. This paper attempts to trace the historical trajectory of Bodoland and delve into the contemporary structure and functioning of Village Council Development Committees (VCDCs) of the region. Additionally, the paper discusses the role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), financial literacy issues, investment patterns, and the impact of various government schemes while looking at the psychological landscape of the community. The narrative is enriched with insights gained from an immersive field experience spanning five days and four nights in the East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC, Kokrajhar. This immersive trip revealed the true hospitality of the people, their wariness of strangers, and the complex socioeconomic factors at play in the village.

▶ Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the structure and functioning of Village Council Development Committees (VCDCs) in Bodoland.
2. To explore the role and influence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on local economic development and community empowerment.
3. To assess the effectiveness of government schemes and financial literacy among the villagers in general and the women in particular.

▶ Methodology of the Study

This study employs a qualitative research approach, integrating primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was collected through an immersive field experience in the selected village of East Maligaon Mohanpur. This involved personal observations, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews with local practitioners, teachers, SHG members, and VCDC representatives. Secondary data was gathered from scholarly articles, government reports, and other relevant literature on Bodoland's socio-economic dynamics and governance structures. This methodology enabled a rich, humanized understanding of the community's lived experiences.

▶ Limitations of the Study

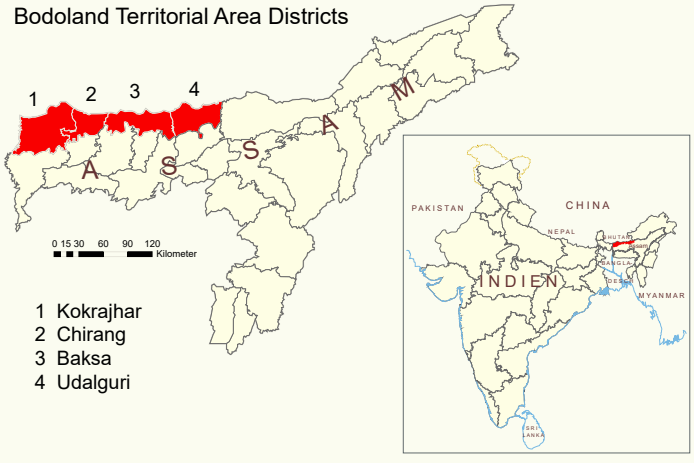
- **Language Barrier:** The lack of proficiency in Bodo and the necessity to converse in broken Assamese posed significant challenges in communication, potentially affecting the depth of data collected.
- **Network Connectivity:** Poor network connectivity impeded effective communication and data transmission during the field immersion, limiting real-time data verification.
- **Outsider's Perspective:** The presence of researchers as outsiders may have influenced the behaviour and responses of the local community, introducing potential biases in the data.
- **Internal Politics:** The internal politics and power dynamics within the VCDCs and among local representatives created challenges in obtaining unbiased information and presented barriers to transparent communication.
- **Area of Study:** The study was confined to East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC, which may not fully represent the broader socio-economic and political context of Bodoland, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings.

▶ Area of the Study

The study focuses on East Maligaon Mohanpur Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) in Kokrajhar district, part of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam, India. This area was chosen due to its unique demographic composition and the presence of diverse socio-economic challenges that provide a rich context for examining the efficacy of local governance structures and community initiatives.

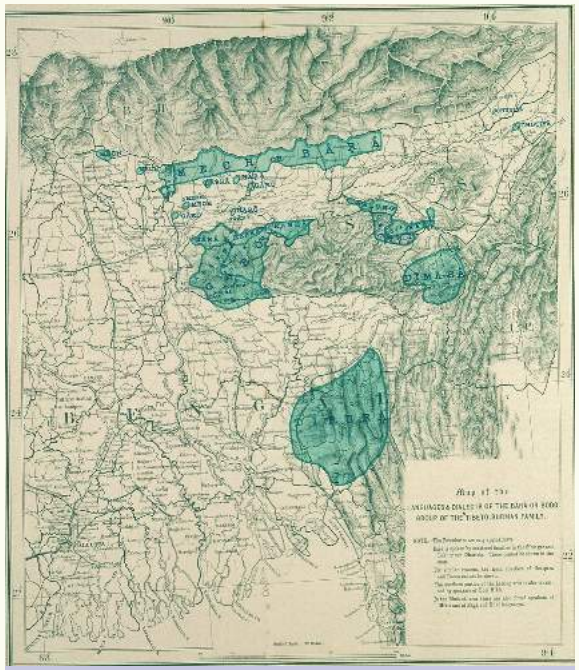
▶ Historical Context of Bodoland

The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) is an autonomous administrative region in Assam, India. It was established following the Bodo Accord of 1993, which aimed to address the socio-political aspirations of the Bodo people. The region encompasses the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, Udalguri, and the newly created district of Tamulpur (Hussain, 2017).



The demand for a separate state of Bodoland has its roots

in the sub-national movements within India. The Bodos, an indigenous community of the Brahmaputra Valley, initiated the movement due to perceived socio-political and economic marginalization. This sense of marginalization was exacerbated by the large-scale influx of non-tribal populations into the region, leading to socio-political and cultural insecurity among the Bodos. The Bodos felt that their unique cultural identity and economic interests were under threat from the dominant non-tribal communities.



Bodoland is Mech or Bârâ region of North bank, as reported in the Language Survey of India 1903 (Image Credit : Wikipedia.org)

The movement for Bodoland gained momentum in the late 20th century with the formation of key organizations such as the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). These organizations played a pivotal role in articulating the demands of the Bodo people and mobilizing support for the cause. The ABSU, established in 1967, was instrumental in leading peaceful protests and negotiating with the government, while the NDFB, founded in 1986, took a more militant approach to achieve its goals (Bodoland Territorial Region, 2020).

The Bodo movement can be divided into three distinct phases: the initial phase of peaceful protests and negotiations led by ABSU, the militant phase characterized by violent insurgency led by NDFB, and the current phase of political accommodation and governance following the signing of peace accords.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the ABSU led a series of peaceful protests and strikes demanding a separate state of Bodoland. The ABSU's leadership played a critical role in raising awareness about the Bodo issues at both national and international levels. Their efforts culminated in the signing of the first Bodo Accord in 1993, which led to the creation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). However, the BAC failed to meet the aspirations of the Bodo people due to limited autonomy and inadequate resources (Hussain, 2017).

The limitations of the BAC and the continuing marginalization of the Bodos led to the rise of militant groups such as the NDFB. The NDFB sought to achieve its goals through armed struggle, resulting in widespread violence and unrest in the region. This phase was marked by severe human rights violations, displacement of populations, and economic disruption. Despite the violence, the NDFB managed to keep the issue of Bodoland alive in the national consciousness, forcing the government to consider more comprehensive solutions (Hussain, 2017).

The third phase of the Bodo movement began with the signing of the Bodo Accord in 2003, which established the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) with greater autonomy than the BAC. The BTC was given the authority to govern the Bodo-inhabited areas and implement development projects. This accord marked a significant step towards political accommodation and brought relative peace to the region.

The most recent development in the Bodo movement was the signing of the 2020 Bodo Accord, which further extended the autonomy of the region and renamed it the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). This agreement included provisions for enhanced legislative and executive powers, increased financial resources, and a commitment to protecting the cultural and linguistic identity of the Bodo people (Bodoland Territorial Region, 2020).

▶ Structure and Functioning of VCDC vs. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI)

VCDC stands for Village Council Development Committees. In Bodoland they operate under the aegis of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). These committees serve as local administrative units but are distinct from the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) prevalent in other parts of India. In the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), the Panchayati Raj system does not apply. To meet the need for local-level governance and development, the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) has established a two-tier institution. This structure replaces the traditional Panchayats with the Territorial Constituency Level Coordination Committee (TCLCC) and the Village Council Development Committee (VCDC). The BTC itself is a decentralized mechanism operating at the district level, while the TCLCC functions at the block level, akin to an Anchalik Panchayat, and the VCDC operates at the village level, similar to a Village Panchayat. The VCDCs, created in 2006, three years after the BTC's inception in 2003, are grassroots-level government bodies responsible for implementing developmental programs at the base level in BTAD. However, due to the absence of statutory provisions for local or village-level government, BTC has faced significant criticism and allegations.

VCDCs were introduced as a means to decentralize governance and bring it closer to the people. However, the implementation has been fraught with challenges. Unlike the PRIs, established under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandate certain powers and functions to be devolved to local bodies, VCDCs lack a legal framework. This absence of a robust structural foundation results in ambiguous roles and limited accountability, thereby affecting their functionality and effectiveness. Thus, unlike PRIs, which have a formalized structure with clear delineations of power and responsibilities, VCDCs function in a more informal and often less transparent manner. The VCDC chairperson, despite being the nominal head, often has limited authority, particularly regarding financial control and revenue management.

VCDCs are more centralized, with the chairmen wielding limited power, especially regarding financial control. The funds and revenues are primarily managed by higher authorities within the BTC, which often leads to inefficiencies and delays in local development projects. Presently, the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), PMAY-G, and MGNREGA are the three Central Government programmes that are managed by the VCDCs. The VCDCs not only carry out the mandate they are given but also act as a village-level extension of the line departments (Bhargab Barman, 2022).

In contrast, PRIs in Assam and other regions of India follow a three-tier system comprising village, block, and district levels. This decentralized structure grants significant autonomy to the Gram Panchayats (village level) in decision-making and financial management. The objective is to empower local communities and enhance their participation in governance, ensuring that development initiatives are tailored to the specific needs of the community (Hussain, 2017).

▶ Field Immersion in East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC

The afternoon after we arrived, as we strolled through the verdant landscape of East Maligaon Mohanpur, I couldn't help but marvel at the lush greenery that surrounded us. Tall trees swayed gently in the breeze, and vibrant fields stretched as far as the eye could see. The beauty of the village was undeniable, but the challenges were equally apparent. The road we walked on was rough and uneven, a testament to the poor connectivity that isolated the village from nearby towns.

As we continued our walk, the sky darkened with ominous clouds, and soon, heavy rains began to lash down. The rain brought with it a sense of peace, as the sound of raindrops hitting the leaves created a soothing symphony. However, the serenity was often interrupted by the erratic power supply. The village experienced frequent power cuts, especially during these downpours, making life more challenging for the residents.

Despite these hardships, there was a palpable sense of unity among the villagers. They moved together with a shared purpose, whether it was tending to their fields or gathering for community events. This close-knit community spirit was heartening to witness. Noticeably, our presence was met with a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

As we explained our purpose for being there, some villagers listened intently, while others watched from a distance, their expressions guarded. The chairman of the VCDC had reassured them of our intentions, but years of dealing with less than honest outsiders had taught them caution. It took time, patience, and many conversations under the tall betelnut trees that stood like sentinels around the village, to slowly bridge the gap between us and the villagers.

In this setting of natural beauty and rural challenges, the people of East Maligaon Mohanpur displayed a resilience and unity that was both inspiring and humbling. Our field immersion was a profound journey into the heart of Bodoland. The warmth and hospitality of the villagers stood in stark contrast to their initial cautiousness towards outsiders. The selection of East Maligaon VCDC for this immersion program was driven by its unique demographic composition. Language posed a significant barrier, as our proficiency in Bodo was non-existent, and we had to navigate conversations in broken Assamese. Despite these setbacks, the adaptability of the hosts enabled meaningful exchanges.

As we approached the modest office of the East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC, it was immediately apparent that resources were limited. The setup was basic, with no computers or proper sitting arrangements. Desks and chairs were sparse, and what existed was old and worn. The office lacked the typical technological infrastructure one might expect in an administrative setup, making it challenging to carry out tasks efficiently. Adjacent to the office was a community hall, a simple structure where meetings were occasionally held. This hall served as a vital space for gathering and discussion, compensating somewhat for the inadequate office facilities. It was here that the chairman convened meetings with VCDC members and community leaders. During our visit, the chairman had called a few VCDC members to join the meeting. They sat on the available benches, attentively listening and contributing to the discussions. The chairman took this opportunity to rope them into the conversation, adding to our understanding of their roles and the functioning of the VCDC.

The VCDC falls under the 10th Debargaon ST constituency and encompasses 26 villages with a total population of approxi-

mately 7,000. There are two forest revenue villages and the area is predominantly inhabited by Bodos, followed by Santhalis, Oraons, Nepalis, and a small population of Rajbongshis. The demographic diversity adds to the rich cultural tapestry of the region but also presents challenges in governance and resource allocation.

The VCDC Chairman and other members are nominated by the BTC authority for a five-year term (Barman, 2022). However the chairman told us that typically he was given an appointment letter for only six months and continues to serve until a notice of change is issued. Despite holding a significant position, the chairman lacks autonomy in the management and delegation of funds, which are controlled by higher authorities within the BTC. This centralized control often leads to inefficiencies in addressing local needs and delays in the implementation of development projects (Bodoland Territorial Region, 2020).

The appointment of the VCDC chairman is politically aligned, with selections often based on political affiliations. He mentioned that out of 26 villages under his VCDC there were 28 VCDC members working along with him. Our stay in East Maligaon VCDC spanned from June 25, 2024, to June 30, 2024. During this period, we managed to personally cover only 11 out of the 26 villages. On the final day, a comprehensive meeting was arranged by the chairman, in which members from the remaining villages, dignitaries, and representatives came together to give their insights.

The chairman spoke at length about the internal politics influencing village affairs. He contrasted the previous volatile governance under the BPF with the current UPPL administration, which he described as visionary and peace-promoting. He mentioned that this shift in governance is crucial for fostering a stable environment conducive to development and coexistence.

During our conversations with the chairman, his insights into the socio-economic dynamics of the community were particularly revealing. He expressed concern about the community's heavy reliance on government schemes, which he believed was contributing to unemployment by fostering a dependency culture. The chairman lamented his lack of control over funds, describing his role as an invisible hand bound by the authorities of the Executive Member (EM) and Members of Council Legislative Assembly (MCLA) under whose jurisdiction he operates. Despite these constraints, he conveyed a strong sense of belonging to his party, the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), and spoke passionately about the strides in education accessibility under the current government.

He also highlighted his farsightedness in leveraging his limited powers for impactful changes. One notable contribution was his strategic decision in a Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) project, where he geographically shifted the project's jurisdiction to ensure that the water supply would benefit both the designated village and an additional village in need. As he recounted this decision, his eyes lit up with pride. "It wasn't easy," he said, "but I knew it was the right thing to do. The needs of our people come first."

Furthermore, he elaborated on the selection process for beneficiaries of various schemes. According to him, Gram Sabha meetings, held three times a year, serve as a platform where VCDC members, village headmen, ex-servicemen, and other literate individuals of society convene to deliberate and decide on the selection of beneficiaries. This participatory approach underscores the community's collective effort in ensuring that the benefits of government schemes reach those most in need.

However, during our field visit to different villages, in an encounter with a particular village headman of East Maligaon village, we discovered a stark contrast to the chairman's description of the selection process for beneficiaries of various schemes. While the chairman spoke of Gram Sabha meetings held three times a year, serving as inclusive platforms for decision-making, the reality was quite different. In the village, these meetings were seldom held, and when they did occur, the attendance was notably sparse. Conversations with other village headmen of Joypur Nepalpara and Dhanpur as well, revealed that political biases often influenced both the dissemination of information and the selection of beneficiaries. These headmen displayed aggression when questioned about their accountability, further highlighting the disconnect between the ideal process described by the chairman and the actual practices on the ground. This discrepancy points to significant challenges in ensuring transparency and fairness in the implementation of government schemes within the VCDC.

During our conversation, the chairman delved into the challenges his VCDC faces with government schemes, particularly the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). He sighed, mentioning that in his entire VCDC, there are only four beneficiaries of the scheme. "Many people are unaware of the KYC process," he explained, "which is why they miss out on receiving the funds." He went on to describe the difficulties with dormant bank accounts and the prevalence of incorrect documentation. "Often, the information in the documents doesn't match, or there are errors that disqualify the claimants from benefits," he said, shaking his head in frustration.

Illiteracy compounded these issues, as many villagers struggled to navigate the bureaucratic processes required to access these schemes. Adding to the challenge, Aadhar card centres were scarce in the area, making it even harder for residents to obtain the necessary identification. Despite these obstacles, the chairman spoke with quiet determination about how he tries to help. "I do my best to assist people in making their Aadhar cards," he shared, "because without it, they can't access the benefits they need."

After our insightful conversation and a soothing cup of tea, the chairman invited us to take a stroll around the village. As we walked through the winding paths, we came upon a mobile medical unit stationed in front of the East Maligaon lower primary school. This unit, provided by the Hans Foundation, was an unexpected and heartwarming sight.
Set up under the broad, protective canopy of a massive tree, the mobile medical unit was a hive of activity. Children galloped around in the scorching heat, their playful laughter ringing through the air. They peeked at us curiously from behind tree trunks and the corners of the school building, their eyes full of innocent wonder and cautious smiles.

The medical team was busy attending to villagers, checking haemoglobin levels, blood pressure, and sugar levels. Men and women alike expressed their relief and gratitude, about this unit visiting them every month. They mentioned that five ambulances were stationed at different locations throughout Kokrajhar, which ensure that basic medical services and essential medicines reach those in need. The chairman watched the scene with a mix of pride and determination. "These

visits are vital for our community," he said, his voice filled with earnestness. As we stood there, watching the children play and the villagers receive care, it struck me how resilient and hopeful this community was.

As outsiders walking into this tightly-knit community space, we were met with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. The locals' gazes reflected a cautious hope that our presence might bring tangible benefits through government schemes. Despite the challenges, there was a palpable sense of optimism that seemed to permeate the village. This visit painted a vivid picture of the community's daily life and the small yet significant efforts being made to improve their well-being.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden hue over the village, we sat with an elderly Bodo man. He spoke with pride about the deep-rooted identity and traditions of his people, particularly their practice of Bathouism, the traditional religion of the Bodos. "Our identity is intertwined with the land and our beliefs," he said, his eyes reflecting a lifetime of wisdom.

The man shared stories of Sijou, the sacred shrub that symbolizes Bathouism and serves as a spiritual focal point in every Bodo household. As we listened, children played traditional games nearby, and women prepared rice beer, a staple in their cultural rituals. His tales were not just about the past; they were about the inbuilt belief in resilience and community, deeply rooted in their Bathou faith.

In another instance, we encountered an ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) worker from Mohanpur who highlighted the challenges she faces while serving three villages. We met this ASHA worker in a particularly poignant setting: sitting under a jackfruit tree in the compound of a lower primary school, she shared her experiences. Despite receiving regular training and being responsible for distributing essential supplies like magnesium and iron tablets, the conditions she works under are far from ideal. The harsh sun beat down as she explained the logistical challenges of her role, emphasizing that the distances between the villages add to her difficulties.

Moreover, the ASHA worker revealed a cultural barrier that further complicates her work. Many locals prefer to consult traditional healers, known as ojhas, over following her medical advice. This reliance on traditional practices often undermines her efforts to provide modern healthcare solutions. She recounted instances where families became offended when she attempted to offer her guidance, highlighting the deep-rooted mistrust towards formal healthcare interventions. Her story indicated that ASHA workers as trained health practitioners, need better support and resources, logistical assistance, cultural sensitivity training, and community engagement programs to bridge the gap between traditional beliefs and modern healthcare practices.

▶ Introduction to Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

In rural India, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as a transforming force, playing a key role in social development and economic empowerment, especially for women and marginalised communities. Sarma and Ghosh (2020) claim that the main purpose of SHGs is to serve as micro-credit organisations that provide money to the underprivileged members of society. Usually consisting of ten to twenty women, these groups promote financial inclusion by allowing members to obtain credit that would not be available to them through traditional banking channels, through internal lending procedures and group savings.

SHGs' goals are outlined by several national and

state-level missions, which include the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). By encouraging self-reliance, improving their ability to make decisions, and enabling them to actively engage in socioeconomic growth, these goals are centred on empowering rural women (Sarma & Ghosh, 2020). In addition to offering financial assistance, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) also introduce rural women to advanced technology and skill development, creating new opportunities for self-employment and entrepreneurship.

One notable programme that helps SHGs in Assam is the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM). Through its programmes, the ASRLM supports SHGs financially and structurally, encouraging them to engage in income-generating activities and raising the standard of living for rural women (Sarma & Ghosh, 2020). Through microfinance and capacity-building initiatives, the mission's major programmes, such as the Kanaklata Mahila Sabalikaran Yojana, have been especially effective in empowering women.

The Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM) plays a crucial role in Kokrajhar, providing SHGs with necessary financial resources and infrastructural support. The mission facilitates the formation of new SHGs, revitalizes existing ones, and ensures they adhere to key operational principles, such as regular meetings, savings, and internal lending (Sarma & Ghosh, 2020). Furthermore, ASRLM's initiatives focus on capacity building through training programs that enhance the skills and entrepreneurial capabilities of SHG members.

Despite these efforts, challenges such as low financial literacy and limited access to markets act as obstacles. The involvement of community resource persons like Jeevika Sakhis is crucial in bridging these gaps by providing continuous guidance and support to SHG members (Sarma & Ghosh, 2020). In Kokrajhar, SHGs have diversified into various income-generating activities, including animal husbandry and handicrafts, although the need for further skill development and market linkages persists.

Recently, the UPPL government, as part of their commitment to empowering women, has also provided financial assistance to Self Help Groups (SHGs) under the Mainao Swrang Bithanki initiative. The Chief Executive Member of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Pramod Boro, distributed cheques of Rs. 25,000 to each SHG as the first instalment. This program aims to financially empower women in the region and will eventually provide a total of Rs. 75,000 to each SHG in three installments. The initiative supports 3,800 SHGs across BTR (Sentinel Assam, 2022; The Hills Times, 2022).

▶ Empowering Change: Experiences from East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC SHGs

Our field immersion in East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC provided deep insights into the functioning of SHGs. Out of 75 SHGs, we interacted with 30, meeting around 280 members. We began by asking the names of various SHGs and the work they were engaged in. To our surprise, the absence of the Jeevika Sakhi had created a gap in imparting essential knowledge. Despite this, there was a noticeable interest among the groups in mushroom cultivation, though they lacked proper training. In Mohanpur village, however, one house was dedicated to mushroom cultivation, albeit with complaints from women about balancing daily chores and generating a sustainable

income.

The women of Mohanpur mentioned that the Jeevika Sakhi had trained them in mushroom cultivation, but the training seemed insufficient. We observed that, although the society is egalitarian, men often intervened, mocking women for hiding money and wanting to be involved. Financial literacy among these women was alarmingly low, and without proper training, they struggled to understand the basics of SHG operations. Consequently, investments were primarily in livestock like cattle, pigs, goats, and chickens, none of which were sustainable given the lack of veterinary centres. This was evident in villages like Mohanpur, Dhanpur, Joypur Nepalpara, and Gauripur, where the SHGs faced significant challenges in leveraging their full potential.

However, during our field visit to Joypur Nepalpara village, we met a woman, member of a local SHG. As we gathered under the shade of a large banyan tree, she began to share her story. “When I first joined the SHG, I didn’t really understand what it was all about,” she confessed. “We were told it would help us save money and get loans, but no one explained how it actually works.” So we explained the real function of SHGs – the principles of collective savings, internal lending, and financial inclusion. She further asked, “So, it’s not just about saving money, but also about supporting each other and learning new skills?” We nodded, and she sighed deeply.

The lady then expressed her dissatisfaction over the lack of training and information available to her and her fellow SHG members. “We want to do more, like start small businesses or learn new trades, but we don’t have the training or the knowledge,” she said, frustration evident in her voice. “The bank linkage programs and the revolving fund assistance sound great, but without proper guidance, it’s hard to make the most of them.”

She spoke of the interest subsidies that were supposed to sustain their activities, but how the absence of continuous support and education left many women feeling lost. “We need more than just financial support,” she emphasized. “We need training, we need information, and we need someone to guide us.”

Despite the promising programs aimed at promoting financial inclusion and enhancing livelihoods, the lack of adequate training and information continued to hinder the true empowerment of women in her village.
In another instance, during our visit to Kathalmuri village, we had the opportunity to engage with several women from a few local Self-Help Group (SHG). Their determination to find new ways of generating sustainable income was both inspiring and indicative of the challenges they faced. One of the prominent initiatives they had undertaken involved purchasing utensils and equipment required for a tent rental business.

As we sat under the shade of a large tree, one of the SHG members, shared her vision with us. “We believe that renting out these utensils and equipment can be a reliable source of income for our group,” she explained. “It’s not just about the money, but also about creating engagement and fostering a sense of purpose among the members.”

Her enthusiasm was palpable, but she also voiced some frustrations. “The problem we face,” she said with a sigh, “is that people can be quite lazy. For example, another SHG in our village received rice mill equipment, but they are delaying the entire process. They have the tools but lack the motivation to put them to use effectively.”

Her observations highlighted a common challenge in rural development initiatives: the need for sustained motivation and active participation. This anecdote from Kathalmuri village underscores the dual nature of SHG initiatives. On one hand, they offer tremendous potential for economic empowerment and community engagement. On the other hand, they require continuous motivation, effective utilization of resources, and a collective effort to overcome inertia. The women’s efforts

in Kathalmuri to innovate and generate sustainable income reflect the broader challenges and opportunities faced by SHGs across rural India.

The vision for SHGs, as exemplified by successful models like Kudumbashree in Kerala, is to create a platform for women to engage in a variety of entrepreneurial activities, thereby ensuring economic stability and growth. Kudumbashree has shown how effective financial training and diversified investment strategies can lead to substantial community development. Unfortunately, in Kokrajhar, the lack of comprehensive financial education means that many SHGs do not achieve this vision. The limited scope of investment restricts the economic empowerment of women and the broader community benefits that SHGs are meant to deliver.

▶ Dependence on Schemes

During our stay, it became evident that there was a significant dependence on various government schemes among the villagers. This reliance on government aid was palpable in many interactions, where residents expressed a belief that our visit could facilitate their inclusion as beneficiaries of these schemes. The trust and hope placed in these schemes were particularly noticeable in the cases of Orunodoi or Arunodoi scheme and PM-Kisan.

The Orunodoi scheme, which aims to provide financial assistance to economically disadvantaged families, had 443 beneficiaries in the VCDC. This scheme is designed to support women as primary beneficiaries, with the intention of ensuring that the aid reaches those who manage household needs directly. Similarly, PM-Kisan, which provides financial support to farmers, had 427 beneficiaries, emphasizing the importance of agricultural support in sustaining the local economy.

One specific observation underscored the profound impact and the degree of dependence on these schemes. We visited a household led by two men, comprising six members in total—three adults and three children. The two men, unfortunately, exhibited a lack of motivation and were largely dependent on the women in the family for both household chores and financial management. This family benefited significantly from the Orunodoi scheme. The financial assistance provided by the scheme was mostly being used by the women to manage the household expenses, ensure the children's education, and meet day-to-day needs.

The villagers' strong desire to be included in these programs underscored the critical role these schemes play in their economic sustenance. For many, these government initiatives are not just financial support mechanisms but lifelines that enable them to navigate through their daily struggles. The dependency on these schemes also reflects the broader socio-economic challenges faced by rural communities, where limited employment opportunities and infrastructural deficiencies necessitate reliance on government aid.

This observation from East Maligaon VCDC highlights the importance of these schemes while also pointing to the need for a more comprehensive approach that includes skill development, employment opportunities, and education. Such measures would ensure that the financial aid being provided, leads to sustainable development and reduces the dependency on government schemes in the long term.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was also a focal point of our discussions. The scheme is designed to provide at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. However, in the East Maligaon VCDC, the effectiveness and reach of MGN-

REGA appeared limited compared to Bhadranpur Bashbari VCDC.

▶ Visit to Bhadranpur Bashbari VCDC: A Contrast

Our visit to the nearby Bhadranpur Bashbari VCDC provided a stark contrast to East Maligaon VCDC. Bhadranpur Bashbari had a more significant number of PMAY beneficiaries, and we observed a PMAY house, showcasing the tangible impact of the scheme in that area. However, despite having a health and wellness centre, Bhadranpur Bashbari faced its own challenges. The centre was fully equipped but lacked doctors and attendants, rendering it effectively non-functional. In contrast, East Maligaon VCDC had no hospital, forcing residents to travel 18 kms to access medical care.

An interesting observation was the villagers' reliance on local healers, or ojhas, for immediate medical needs. This traditional belief system were often preferred over modern medical interventions due to accessibility issues and deep-rooted cultural practices.

During a conversation with a local woman in East Maligaon VCDC, she revealed another critical issue: unwanted pregnancies. She explained that there was a lack of awareness about contraception and family planning measures, leading to frequent unplanned pregnancies. This highlighted a significant gap in health education and services, underscoring the need for better healthcare infrastructure and awareness programs.

Education Infrastructure

Educational infrastructure in both VCDCs revealed significant challenges. Only one higher education school is available between the two VCDCs, and it offers education in the Boro medium. Students travel from distant places, including areas near the Bhutan border, to attend this school. The LP schools we visited were inadequately equipped, with many lacking tables and chairs, and one school in Bishmuri village was severely understaffed. The school in Mohanpur provided midday meals, but the person responsible for food preparation complained about low pay and the poor quality and nutritional value of the meals.

Anganwadi Centres

The condition of Anganwadi centres reinforced our sense of the infrastructural shortcomings. In the centre attached to the school in Mohanpur, the midday meal consisted of sooji, which was of very poor quality according to the caretakers. They also reported that the children did not like eating it. This points to significant issues in the implementation of nutritional programs, which are crucial for the early development of children in these rural areas.

▶ Recommendations for Sustainable Rural Development and Empowerment

To foster rural development, sustainability, and financial literacy while enhancing the autonomy of Village Council Development Committees (VCDCs), a multi-faceted and community-focused approach is essential. This approach must be rooted in practical, on-the-ground realities and tailored to the unique needs of each village.

First, implementing comprehensive training programs focused on financial literacy and skill development for Self-Help Group (SHG) members is crucial. These programs should be designed to equip women with the knowledge and skills necessary to manage finances, start small businesses, and engage in income-generating activities effectively. Collaborations with local NGOs and government agencies, such as the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM), can facilitate these training sessions, ensuring they are accessible and context-specific.

Second, decentralizing financial control is imperative to empower VCDCs. Currently, the lack of autonomy in fund management hinders the timely and effective implementation of local projects. Granting VCDCs more authority over financial

decisions will enable them to address community needs promptly and efficiently. Establishing a clear legal framework for VCDCs, similar to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), will provide the necessary structure and accountability. This legal framework should outline the roles, responsibilities, and powers of VCDCs, ensuring transparency and reducing political interference.

Third, improving infrastructure is vital for sustainable development. Ensuring that health and wellness centres are regularly maintained and adequately staffed, will provide villagers with essential medical services, reducing their reliance on traditional healers and minimizing travel for healthcare. Similarly, investing in educational infrastructure, such as equipping lower primary schools with necessary furniture and hiring adequate staff, will enhance the learning environment for children. Regular inspections and community feedback mechanisms can help maintain these standards.

To enhance the socio-economic landscape of East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC, it is crucial to focus on developing life skills and creating diverse employment opportunities for the local population. One of the key areas for potential growth is the sale of local agricultural produce. For instance, jackfruits, which are abundant in the region, can be harvested and sold both in local markets and to nearby towns. Training programs on proper harvesting, packaging, and marketing strategies can help villagers maximize their profits from this produce.

The introduction of tea plantations in East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC presents a promising opportunity for sustainable economic growth. Given the suitable climate and soil conditions of the region, tea cultivation can become a significant source of income for local farmers. Establishing small-scale tea plantations can provide numerous employment opportunities, from planting and harvesting to processing and marketing. Training programs on modern tea cultivation techniques, pest management, and quality control can enhance productivity and ensure high-quality produce.

▶ Conclusion

Our immersive field experience in East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC provided a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic dynamics, the role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and the impact of various government schemes in these regions. The dependence on schemes like Orunodoi and PM-Kisan is evident, highlighting their critical role in sustaining the local economy. However, challenges such as inadequate financial literacy, limited healthcare access, and poor educational infrastructure persist, hampering sustainable development.

A comparative analysis with Bhadranpur Bashbari VCDC reveals significant disparities, indicating the need for more equitable and effective implementation of schemes across different VCDCs. While Bhadranpur Bashbari had better infrastructure for schemes like PMAY and a health centre, the lack of medical personnel rendered it ineffective. East Maligaon Mohanpur, despite the community's resilience, struggled with infrastructural deficiencies and relied on traditional healers.

Empowering SHGs through comprehensive training and ensuring better access to healthcare and education are essential steps towards achieving sustainable development. The narratives gathered during this field immersion underscore the importance of a holistic approach that integrates financial support with skill development and infrastructural improvements, ultimately fostering self-reliance and economic stability in these communities.

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Decentralized Childcare: A Study of Gram Panchayat-led *'Koosina Mane'* Initiative in Rural Karnataka

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▶ Abstract

This study examines the service delivery of Gram Panchayats in Karnataka, focusing on their mandate to provide childcare services through the innovative *Koosina Mane* initiative. This initiative aims to establish rural crèches for child development, to promote female workforce participation. By drawing on existing literature and analysing quantitative and qualitative data from various sources, including our field study, I have attempted in this paper, to understand the role of Gram Panchayats in provision of childcare in rural areas. Further, the paper analyses the benefits of having a locally tailored childcare system. Referring to the successful models from other states and countries, the paper recommends an integrated approach to childcare, emphasizing health, nutrition, and early childhood education. It also stresses the importance of inclusivity, community mobilization, and strengthened monitoring mechanisms. The study will contribute to CRISP's ongoing project in Karnataka: "Concurrent Evaluation of Crèches."

▶ Introduction

Local self-governments have been a cornerstone of India's democratic framework, with Panchayat Raj system playing a crucial role in decentralizing power and bringing governance closer to the people in rural areas. The 73rd Amendment which bestowed constitutional status to the Panchayats and recognised them as self-governing institutions has made deep inroad into the democratic psyche of the country (Sahoo,2018).

Karnataka had opted for a decentralisation model of governance much before the constitutional mandate was established. The Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 (amended in 2015) provides the legislative framework for the functioning of Gram Panchayats (GPs), the lowest tier of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system (Government of Karnataka, 1993).

This paper explores the service delivery of gram panchayats in Karnataka, with a particular focus on their mandate to provide childcare services and the innovative initiative started under this mandate. We will examine the general functions of a gram panchayat as per the 73rd Constitutional amendment act of 1992 and Karnataka Gram Swaraj Act of 1993, delve into the specific provision for childcare, and analyse instances where public or institutional childcare has made significant impacts in other countries.

▶ General functions of Gram Panchayats in Karnataka

Gram Panchayats, as the lowest tier of the PRI system, play a crucial role in local governance and rural development. Their roles and responsibilities are mainly derived from the Indian constitution. However, it can be observed that the level of devolution of powers is different for different states.

Constitutional mandate

Article 243G of the Indian constitution empowers the state legislature to endow the Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-governance. It also specifies that it is the responsibility of the panchayats to prepare plans for economic development and social justice, generally referred to as Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and to implement schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them, including those in relation to the matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule. The Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution lists 29 subjects that states can devolve to panchayats. Some of these include:

a. Agriculture and allied activities
b. Minor irrigation and watershed management
c. Education, primary and secondary schools
d. Health and sanitation, hospitals and primary health centres
e. Women and child development
f. Social welfare, welfare of the weaker sections

To carry out these diverse functions, GPs are vested with certain financial and administrative powers. They have the authority to levy and collect specific taxes, fees, and penalties, although the extent of this power varies across states. GPs also receive grants from state and central governments, which form a significant portion of their financial resources. On

the administrative front, GPs have the power to appoint certain categories of staff and are responsible for maintaining important records such as birth, death, and marriage registers of households of villages in their jurisdiction.

Provisions as per Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993

The Karnataka Gram Swaraj Act delineates the functions of GPs in considerable detail. At the broadest level, GPs are responsible for planning and implementing measures for economic development and social justice within their jurisdiction. This overarching mandate translates into a variety of specific responsibilities that touch upon nearly every aspect of rural life.

One of the primary functions of GPs is the preparation of annual development plans for their area. These plans are expected to be comprehensive, addressing the diverse needs of the community and setting out a roadmap for local development. GPs are also tasked with implementing various rural development schemes, often acting as the local face of state and central government initiatives. This role requires them to navigate complex bureaucratic processes while remaining responsive to local needs and priorities.

Infrastructure development and maintenance form another crucial aspect of GP functions. They are responsible for the construction and upkeep of public roads, drains, and bridges within their jurisdiction. Additionally, GPs play a vital role in ensuring the provision of basic amenities to their constituents. This includes the supply and distribution of drinking water, a task of paramount importance in many rural areas where access to clean water remains a challenge. The maintenance of street lighting, while seemingly mundane, is another essential function that contributes to the safety and quality of life in rural communities.

In the realm of social development, GPs have significant responsibilities. They are tasked with implementing poverty alleviation programs, which often involve identifying beneficiaries, distributing resources, and monitoring outcomes. GPs also play a crucial role in promoting public awareness on various social issues, from health and sanitation to education and gender equality. This function positions them as key agents of social change within their communities.

▶ Childcare as a Responsibility of Gram Panchayats in Karnataka

Section 58 (5) of the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act 1992, stipulates, "It shall be the duty of every Gram Panchayat, to make reasonable provision within the Panchayat area to provide for a baby care centre or crèche in the building or complex within the Panchayat area as may be required". This inclusion of childcare as a GP function aligns with the national policy on Early Childhood Care and Education ECCE), recognizing the critical importance of the first six years in a child's development (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2013).

This mandate, coupled with the persistent challenge of low Female Labour Force Participation (LFP) rates and inadequate childcare support, has necessitated innovative policy interventions at the grassroots level. In response, the Gram Panchayats of Karnataka, under the guidance of the Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (RDPR), have initiated a rural crèche program that significantly expands the conventional scope of local governance. This initiative, known as "Koosina Mane" (a child's home in Kannada), aims to provide rural childcare facilities, thereby enabling increased female workforce participation and contributing to broader socioeconomic development.

The present study examines the conceptualization and implementation of the Koosina Mane initiative, with a particular focus on the role of GPs in program execution, the challenges encountered during implementation, and the solutions developed by panchayats to address these challenges.

The primary objectives of the Koosina Mane initiative are twofold:

- To facilitate increased participation of mothers in paid employment, thereby improving their standard of living.
- To provide comprehensive health, nutrition, safety, and early childhood education services to children.

Overall, the intent of the initiative is to shift societal perceptions from "childcare as women's job" to "childcare as society's job" and empower local governments to provide affordable and quality childcare in rural areas.

▶ Implementation strategy

The program has been implemented through a phased approach to ensure comprehensive and sustainable childcare support across Karnataka. Initiated in 2021 with the establishment of crèches in all 31 Zilla Panchayat (ZP) offices, the program was designed to be accessible to all employees working on the premises. Subsequently, it was extended to the Taluk level, targeting two taluks in every district. In 2022, the initiative was piloted across 62 GPs, with two GPs selected from each district. Following the success of this pilot, plans were made to significantly scale up the initiative, aiming to extend it to 4000 GPs by the end of 2023, thus catering to a broader demographic of rural women.

▶ Integrating through convergence

The Koosina Mane initiative operates on a convergence model, integrating multiple stakeholders to ensure its success. The key entities involved include the Gram Panchayats, the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA).

Within this framework, Gram Panchayats serve as the central coordinating body, shouldering primary responsibilities such as identifying suitable spaces for crèches, providing play and learning materials, ensuring essential amenities like food, drinking water, and First Aid kits, monitoring overall crèche operations, and conducting Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) activities for awareness. NREGA's role involves facilitating wage payments to crèche caretakers, while WCD offers crucial assistance in activities such as growth monitoring, immunization, caretaker work supervision, and nutritional assessments for children.

This multi-stakeholder approach ensures a comprehensive and sustainable model for rural childcare provision, potentially addressing both immediate childcare needs and long-term socioeconomic development goals in rural Karnataka. Through this innovative initiative, the local governance bodies of Karnataka are demonstrating how well-designed public policies can positively transform the lives of rural communities, particularly women and children, and contribute to broader societal progress.

▶ Literature Review

This section examines the importance of quality childcare and its implementation through local public institutions in other parts of the world. It synthesizes research on the impact of effective childcare programs on child development, gender equality, and economic benefits. The review presents evidence from various low- and middle-income countries where public institutions have successfully implemented childcare initiatives, with local governance structures as the chief agents. By analysing these examples, the section attempts to draw insights and best practices that could inform childcare provision through Gram Panchayats in rural Karnataka.

1. Columbia's De Cero A Siempre

Columbia launched its national strategy for early childhood care known as De Cero a Siempre (means zero to forever). The emphasis of this strategy was to achieve comprehensive care for boys and girls in Colombia, which includes physical, cognitive and social-emotional development (Bernal, 2013). The strategy was piloted in 6 municipalities in July 2012 and reached 750,000 children under 5 years of age, in its first phase (World Bank, 2013). The local authorities working for the most deprived children in Colombia received high quality technical support to improve the services provided to mothers and children under five, and therefore strengthened their governance of Early Childhood Development Programs (Hoyos Vivas, Luz Marina 2020).

2. Chile Grows with You (Chile Crece Contigo - CCC)

Chile began setting up a system primarily focused on promoting child development through provision of care services and benefits aimed at groups of children from socially or economically vulnerable families in 2007 (World Bank, 2018). As a result of the program, between 2006 and 2016/17, the proportion of children under 5 with developmental delay, declined nationally from 14% to 10% (BMJ, 2018). Martínez A., C., & Perticará, M. (2017) discovered that the program participation increased maternal employment by 5% and labour force participation (LFP) of women by 7%. The success of the program is attributed to the good alignment between government departments principally engaged in rolling out CCC, i.e., the Ministries of Social Development, Health, and Education, and between national and local providers of healthcare, education, and social support (CPI n.d.).

3. Cuba's Educate Your Child (Educa a tu Hijo)

As a part of Educate Your Child program, Cuba provides comprehensive, non-compulsory early childhood education to children aged 6 months to 5 years through child care centres, home-based preschool education and a preschool preparatory grade (CMAJ, 2009). There are more than 855,000 children under six years of age, of whom 99.5 per cent attend an early childhood education programme or institution in Cuba (CEPDE ONEI, December 2013). Cuba is currently a leader in the region on early childhood development, with the highest number of inter-sectoral interventions from the moment a woman becomes pregnant to the child's entry in primary school (UNICEF, 2016). Coordinating groups for Educate Your Child, composed of representatives from various sectors at the national, provincial, municipal, and local levels (Tinajero, 2010).

▶ India's Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS)

Nearly half of all under-5 child mortality in India is attributable to undernutrition (UNICEF, 2017). ICDS is India's flagship program for providing early childhood care and development (NITI Aayog, 2015). Launched in 1975, the program focusses on providing supplementary nutrition, pre-school education, health and nutrition education (HNE), immunization, health checkups and other referral services for pregnant women, breastfeeding

mothers and children up to six years (Rajpal et el. 2020). In Kerala we see the highest involvement of Gram Panchayats in implementation of ICDS. The Kerala model also serves as an example of PRI-CBO (Community Based Organisations) convergence as it involves GP members as well as SHG members in Anganwadi level Monitoring Support committees. (Kudumbashree, n.d.)

▶ Why do we need crèches if there are Anganwadis?

While both Anganwadis and crèches serve young children, they differ significantly in their focus and operational structure. Anganwadis, operating under the ICDS scheme, cater to children aged 0-6 years, but their preschool education component is limited to children above 3 years. Moreover, Anganwadis typically operate on fixed timings, usually from 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM, which may not align with the diverse work schedules of rural parents, particularly mothers. In contrast, crèches like those in the Koosina Mane initiative are specifically designed to support working parents by offering flexible hours that can extend beyond traditional workday schedules. This differentiation ensures that crèches complement rather than duplicate the services provided by anganwadis, filling a crucial gap in childcare provision that directly supports increased workforce participation among rural women.

The Gram Panchayats have been empowered to determine crèche timings that best accommodate local women's work schedules. While each facility operates for a minimum of 6.5 hours daily, there's provision for extended hours based on community requirements and Gram Panchayat decisions.

▶ Implementation of the Program:

• Operational Framework

The program's target demographic comprises children aged 6 months to 3 years, whose families possess valid and active job cards under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). To staff these facilities, a cohort of 10 women, all NREGA job card holders, have undergone specialized training to operate the crèches. These caretakers work in rotating pairs, with shifts changing after every 100 days to ensure consistent care provision.

• Monitoring and Oversight

A multi-tiered monitoring system has been implemented to maintain high standards of care. ICDS supervisors conduct regular checks on crèche workers. Additionally, each group of 3-5 crèches is overseen by an appointed nodal officer. The program's effectiveness is further ensured through dedicated monitoring committees at the Gram Panchayat, District, and State levels, which work to uphold operational guidelines and standards.

• Nutritional Provisions

Nutrition plays a central role in the Koosina Mane initiative. Each Gram Panchayat is mandated to provide hot, freshly prepared meals at their crèche. To cater to local tastes while ensuring nutritional adequacy, district-level Executive Committees, in consultation with local nutritionists, are tasked with menu formulation. This approach ensures that meals are both appetizing and nutritionally balanced for the children's optimal development.

• Record Keeping and Administration

Meticulous record-keeping forms an integral part of the program's operations. Caretakers are responsible for maintaining various registers, including those for enrolment, attendance, food stock, health records, and growth monitoring. This comprehensive documentation ensures transparency and aids in the ongoing evaluation of the program's efficacy.

• Caretaker Training

The program places great emphasis on the quality of care provided. To this end, Mobile Crèches, a pioneering organization in Indian childcare services, conducts comprehensive training for all caretakers. This training encompasses various aspects of child development, health and safety protocols, and effective caregiving practices, ensuring that the staff are well equipped to provide high-quality childcare.

• Infrastructure and Environment

Koosina Mane facilities are designed to provide a stimulating and nurturing environment for children. The crèches feature vibrant, colorful murals that engage young minds and spark imagination. Moreover, each facility is mandated to be well-stocked with a diverse array of toys and play materials. These resources are carefully selected to promote early stimulation and support holistic child development through play-based learning experiences. In addition to child-centric spaces, the crèches also incorporate dedicated areas for mothers, providing comfortable and private settings for rest or feeding, thus ensuring a comprehensive approach to childcare support.

• Current Enrolment rates

The data collected by the department reveals that, as of July 1st, 2024, a total of 31,706 children have enrolled for the crèche service across all 30 districts (Bengaluru Urban District is excluded from the program). The gender distribution among beneficiaries is nearly equal, with 15,952 girls and 15,754 boys enrolled, reflecting the program's commitment to inclusive childcare provision.

▶ Insights from the field

This study employs a qualitative research design to understand the operations of Koosina Mane. Data collection was conducted using a purposive sampling method, encompassing 75 crèches across 22 districts of Karnataka. This sampling strategy was chosen to ensure a diverse representation of crèches across the state, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the program's implementation in various geographical and socio-economic contexts.

The research engaged a wide range of stakeholders to gather multi-perspective insights into the Koosina Mane initiative. A total of 380 respondents participated in the study, including crèche caretakers, current and potential beneficiaries, Gram Panchayat Development Officers (PDOs) and other officials, elected representatives, Taluk Executive Officers (EOs), Nodal officers, Anganwadi workers, and Zilla Panchayat (ZP) Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). This diverse group of participants ensured a holistic view of the program's implementation, user perception and challenges faced along with some solutions worked out by the panchayats to solve these challenges.

Data collection methods were triangulated to enhance the reliability and depth of the findings. The study utilized Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), face-to-face interviews, and telephonic conversations. This mixed-method approach allowed for both in-depth individual perspectives and collective insights, capturing nuanced experiences and opinions related to the rural crèche initiative.

▶ Limitations of the study

As the Koosina Mane program is in its early stages of implementation, the research does not attempt to assess its impact on women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) or child nutrition and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) outcomes. These aspects will require evaluation at a later stage when the program has had sufficient time to demonstrate measurable effects.

▶ Findings

Reinforcing the necessity of Rural Crèches

Field interactions have strongly corroborated the need for crèches in rural areas. Mothers of children under three years old express a keen desire to rejoin the workforce or seek employment once their children reach an appropriate age. This aspiration stems from both personal fulfilment needs and the necessity to contribute financially to their families. The willingness of these women to entrust their children to institutional care facilities underscores their confidence in such services. Observations reveal that childcare responsibilities within families predominantly fall on women, be it mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, or elder daughters. This aligns with Neeta and Palriwala's (2011) concept of 'gendered familialism', where women prioritize caregiving duties over paid employment.

Overcoming Initial Community Scepticism

The pilot phase of the crèche program encountered initial reservations from local communities, particularly due to the young age of the target beneficiaries. To address this challenge, the GPs entrusted caretakers with the responsibility of conducting Information, Education and Communication (IEC) activities. They meticulously gathered information on children aged between 6 months and 3 years and conducted door-to-door surveys targeting these households. Through these outreach efforts, they raised awareness about local childcare services and educated residents about the potential benefits. The GP officials and elected representatives ensured that information about available services were communicated about in all the GP meetings as well. This direct community engagement proved crucial in alleviating apprehensions, fostering understanding, and gradually building acceptance and support for the crèche facilities among the local populace.

Empowerment of Caretakers

Beyond providing childcare services, the Koosina Mane initiative offers employment opportunities to both mothers and caretakers. This dual benefit allows women to contribute to the initiative while finding personal fulfilment. A caretaker from the Kalaburagi district eloquently expressed her sentiments: "I am so happy to be taking care of the children here. This is not just 'Koosina mane' but also a 'Kanasina mane' (which means 'dream house') for me and many mothers who leave their children here, giving them the opportunity to go out and work." As of July 1, 2024, the program has identified 29,820 caretakers to operate the 4000 crèche facilities on a rotational basis throughout the year.

Addressing the resource constraints

The operation of each crèche requires a total budget of 4 lakh rupees (Government of Karnataka, 2023). Gram Panchayats are expected to contribute about 1.5 lakh rupees from their own resources towards this budget. While panchayats with

substantial self-generated revenue can typically manage this expense, those with limited funds find it challenging to meet this financial requirement. Despite the resource constraints, the GPs have managed to setup the basic infrastructure and materials in the crèche by finding alternative ways of funding. In Koppal District, the Taluk Panchayat (TP) leveraged the untied funds from the ZP and allocated supplementary funds to enhance the facilities and resources at the crèche. As a result, these crèches now have access to improved infrastructure and amenities, ensuring a better childcare environment for the children and their families. Similarly, the GPs in Tumkur district identified old buildings of school that were non-operational and refurbished them to start Koosina Mane and provide childcare services.

Additional Demand from secondary villages

The success of the Koosina Mane program has sparked increased demand beyond its initial implementation areas. In districts such as Dharwad, Mysore, and Bagalkote, numerous Gram Panchayats (GPs) report that the program is operating at full capacity and achieving notable success. However, the current placement of crèches, typically situated in the main village of each GP, has created accessibility challenges for residents of outlying villages. This geographical limitation has not gone unnoticed by the broader community. Observing the positive outcomes of the existing crèches, residents from secondary villages have begun advocating for the expansion of the program to their localities. These requests to the GPs for additional crèches in their villages underscore both the program's perceived value and the unmet childcare needs in more remote areas. This growing demand presents both an opportunity for program expansion and a challenge in terms of resource allocation and logistical planning.

▶ Way forward

Drawing from the field visits and review of institutional childcare programs from other states and countries, several key lessons emerge that can inform and enhance the implementation of Koosina mane program by gram panchayats in Karnataka:

Integrated Approach

- From the examples presented earlier, we observe that successful childcare programs often integrate health, nutrition, education, and family support. Currently, the GPs are focussing on creating a demand for the crèche and providing nutritious meals. Moving forward, the GPs should strive for a holistic approach by including periodic health checkups, immunization for the children and ECCE at the crèche.

Inclusivity of marginalised

- During our visit, we had the opportunity to interact with individuals from a few tribal settlements (tandas) regarding their views on crèches. A significant number of respondents in these tandas (12 out of 18) expressed their willingness to send their children to crèches, but under the condition that the crèche was established within their own tanda. The Anganwadi worker of a Lambani tanda in Vijayapura district stated that the main reason behind this preference was possibly due to their concern about potential discrimination against their children by crèche worker. Hence, universal provision of childcare services should be the focus of GPs.

Addressing the cultural barriers

- Despite the progressive nature of the Koosina Mane program, deeply ingrained societal attitudes regarding childcare as a mother's primary responsibility continue to pose challenges. These cultural norms impact the uptake of crèche services negatively. Field interactions in the Yadgir district revealed that while many mothers express interest in utilizing crèche services, they often hesitate due to concerns about family approval. One mother shared her dilemma, expressing interest in sending her child to the crèche but uncertainty about her family members' acceptance of this decision. Similar sentiments were echoed by numerous other mothers, underscoring the persistent influence of traditional gender roles and family dynamics on program utilization. This presents a situation to the gram panchayats and an opportunity to induce gradual behavioural change within the communities.

Community mobilisation

- Field observations indicate that word-of-mouth played a significant role in increasing the demand for crèche services in the GP. Hence, the gram panchayats must leverage the community to spread awareness and the benefits of sending their children to the crèche.

Strengthening Monitoring Mechanisms

- While many GPs have formed crèche-level committees, some of them are not conducting regular monthly meetings or have yet to constitute these committees. GPs need to operationalize these committees to ensure smooth functioning of the crèches.

Quality Assurance

- Mothers are likely to be reluctant to send their children to centres if they hear anecdotal reports of unsanitary conditions, minimal food provision, limited learning and educational materials, and, in extreme cases, neglect and abuse (Githinji and Kanga 2011). Hence, ensuring safety and maintaining high-quality child care standards should be a key responsibility of the GP to build and maintain trust in these services.

▶ Conclusion

The examples from other states in India and countries around the world demonstrate the transformative potential of well-implemented public and institutional childcare programs. These models offer valuable lessons in integration of services, community engagement, cultural sensitivity, and focus on quality – all of which can inform the efforts of Karnataka's gram panchayats.

While challenges exist, particularly in terms of resources and capacity of few of the panchayats, the opportunity to create a robust, locally tailored childcare system is immense. By leveraging community strengths, fostering partnerships, and maintaining a commitment to quality and inclusivity, gram panchayats can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of Karnataka's children.

As gram panchayats in Karnataka embark on this crucial mandate, their efforts have the potential to not only enhance child development outcomes but also contribute to broader goals of women's empowerment, community development, and social equity. The success of these initiatives could serve as a model for other states, furthering the vision of grassroots-level governance and development in India.

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Navigating Challenges and Cultivating Change: An Immersive Exploration of Bodoland's Communities

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▶ Abstract

Grassroots governance is the root of the Indian governing structure and is entrenched in history. In the Bodoland Territorial Region, it is facilitated by the Village Council Development Committees (VCDCs), established in 2006 as the primary local governance structure. VCDCs are crucial in implementing development schemes and ensuring last-mile service delivery. However, they face challenges such as procedural inefficiencies, limited public participation, and inadequate representation of women and other Community-based groups. This study is part of the Village Immersion programme, and focuses on the East Maligaon-Mohanpur VCDC, examining its roles, functions, and effectiveness in implementing major schemes and promoting self-help groups, healthcare, and education. The paper also investigates two major schemes that are dealt with by the VCDC- i.e. MGNREGA and PMAY-G. A few other schemes have also been examined, where even though the VCDCs' role is limited, it becomes important to know their on-ground reality. The research findings highlight the need for improved governance structures, greater public engagement, and lessons from successful models like Kerala's community-based governance practices.

▶ Objective of the study

The primary objective of the study is to know the:

1. The roles and functions of the Village Council Development Committee (VCDC)[1] in implementing major schemes.
2. Effectiveness of Self Help Groups (SHG)[2], Healthcare and Education.

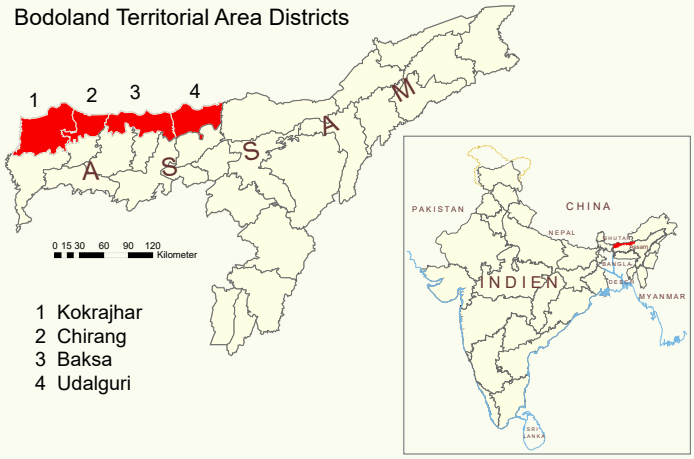
▶ Methodology

The study uses a qualitative and quantitative approach, focusing on primary and secondary resources. Personal interactions have been a primary resource. The respondents were selected using a random sample method, and focus group discussions were conducted sequentially. Secondary sources like books, academic research articles in journals, and government policies were referred, to acquire the required basic and background understanding of the scenario and better conduct the study.

Area covered: For the study, 11 of the 26 villages within the East-Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC of the Kokrajhar Development Block under the Bodoland Territorial Region were visited. For the remaining villages, due to paucity of time, 2- group interactions styled as Gram Sabha were organised by the VCDC chairman, Mr Jaymanta Mushahary, due to the paucity of time. The dates of Immersion were 25th to 30th June 2024.

▶ Introduction

Bodoland, officially the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR)[3], is an autonomous region under the Sixth schedule in Assam. It comprises five significant districts[4] of Assam. The creation of Bodoland has been a long-drawn process. The Bodoland Movement is a product of Assam's socio-economic and historical milieu.



Development in the North East Region has been a contested concept from colonial times till today. The natives claim that development is taking place at the expense of the indigenous lives and livelihood, and this continues in the contemporary scenario as well. The feeling of core- periphery gave rise to sub-nationalism in the region in general, the state of Assam, and among the Bodos in particular. This process has led to a significant disparity in the distribution of resources, representation in governance, and preservation of cultural identity. The issues of landlessness, land alienation, lack of education, and unemployment are the major players here. Prof.Hiren Gohain mentions that the educated tribal youth felt they had been left out in the cold as the Assamese were concerned about lucrative jobs and monopolised administrative power (Gohain, 1989). This led the leadership discourse and the "insurgents" to question its existence with Assam, and hence the demand for separate statehood.

Thus, Since the early 1990s, the Bodos have organised themselves into different pressure groups to assert their rights, re-

1 Henceforth referred to as VCDC in the paper.
2 Henceforth referred to as SHG in the paper.
3 Henceforth referred to as BTR in the paper.
4 Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Chirang, Baksa, and the newly included Tamulpur.

sulting in peaceful and violent movements[5] under the leadership of the Bodo middle class. The Asomiya[6] nationalism[7] composed of caste-Hindus remained apprehensive of the sub-nationalism that started blooming in the hearts of tribal communities of the state. This movement for greater recognition of statehood began with the movement[8] for the medium of instruction in the early 1970s. Monirul Hussain observes, the Bodos started reviving their dormant language from slumber and advancing it as their ethnic symbol to assert their rights in their historical homeland through political mobilisation. (Hussain, 1993). Thus began the drastic discourse of agitation of the Bodos in Assam (K.Das, 1994).

▶ Movement for Self-rule and Birth of Bodoland:

The Bodos started demanding separate statehood with the name Udayanchal[9], which later became Bodoland and comprised the north bank of the mighty Brahmaputra. There were a series of tripartite discussions between the representatives of the Union and State Government and the Bodo leaders, but these failed to arrive at an agreeable solution; the Central Government constituted an expert committee on the Bodo problem in February 1991 about the devolution of legislative, administrative and financial powers. The expert committee submitted its recommendation in March 1992, but the Bodo leaders rejected it. Following this, several efforts and negotiations were made. Finally, the curtain rung in February 1993 on the eight-year-old Bodoland Agitation, with the leaders signing an MoU[10] with the representative of the centre and state government; here, a new political experiment was set in Assam, and this was the creation of an Autonomous Council within the state of Assam (Das, 1994). However, a few organisations were unhappy with the Accord, such as the United Democratic Front (UDF)[11]. They say this was merely a document for the devolution of administrative power and did not answer the age-old issues.

Over time, the original accord has changed twice, in 2003 and 2020 being the latest. The second tripartite discussion created the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)[12], and the area came to be known as Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) and comprised four districts[13]. However, even after this, the BTAD saw constant spates of violence and ethnic riots between the Bodos and the Non-Bodos, resulting in conflict and consequent displacements and post-conflict under-development. These issues hanging on the newly created council gave rise to demands for another settlement. Therefore, the NDFB and

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5 Bodoland Liberation Tiger (BLT), All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) were the organisations involved in the violent confrontations for statehood and autonomy.

6 The term 'Asomiya' is here used to refer to the Assamese-speaking people of Assam.

7 Thus, the social movement to assert group identity by the relatively powerful and advanced Asomiyas during the Assam Movement (Andolan) has given birth to new social movements among the weaker national minorities (Hussain, 1993).

8 Bodo Sahitya Sabha, founded in 1952, aimed at uniting the Bodos on language issues and worked towards developing the Bodo Language. They demanded the introduction of the Bodo language in the Bodo-dominated areas of the state and adopted it as a medium of instruction.

9 A map of the proposed "Udayachal" state was prepared and memoranda supporting their demands was submitted to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, President, V.V. Giri and also to the Home Ministry

10 Under the memorandum of settlement, a 40-member Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was to be set up within the geographical boundary of Assam on the understanding that the integrity of Assam would be fully protected. The BAC was to have 35 elected members, with five members to be nominated by the Governor. An interim council was to be formed with the movement leaders till elections were held after six months. (K.Das, 1994)

11 UDF, a left outfit of the Bodos, was apprehensive of the Accord and asserted that the ABSU/BPAC had cheated the Bodos by compromising with the State and Union Governments. The UDF president, Rabiram Brahma, declared they would continue agitating for Bodoland. The non-tribe caste Hindus and the religious minorities living within the BAC area were also quite apprehensive and felt that the hopes of the non-tribals would not be fulfilled; a segment of the Bodo elites began to feel the accord has virtually been in a vacuum and viewed it as a consolation prize for the Bodos. (K.Das, 1994).

12 According to this accord of 2003, the BLT leaders were to surrender their arms and convert into Bodoland People's Front (BPF). The objectives of the agreement are: to create an Autonomous self-governing body to be known as Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) within the State of Assam and to provide constitutional protection under Sixth Schedule to the said Autonomous Body; to fulfil economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos; and speed up the infrastructure development in BTC area.

13 The four districts of the BTAD are Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang and Kokrajhar. The headquarters of the BTC are in the Kokrajhar district. Tamulpur, being the newly created district, will be the fifth one under the BTR Administration.

the ABSU faction signed the tripartite agreement in January 2020[14], and BTC now became known as the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) with 5 districts.

Kokrajhar[15], formerly part of the Goalpara district, emerged as the epicentre of the Bodoland Movement and subsequently became the headquarters of the Autonomous Council. This district comprises 2.85% of the state's population, with 3 sub-divisions, 5 revenue blocks and 11 development blocks. The district has rural and urban populations spread over a geographical area of 3,169,22 sq. km, with 36 Village Council Development Committees (VCDCs).

▶ Institution of Grassroot Governance or Last-Mile Service Delivery: Role of VCDC in BTR

India lives in its villages, and the development of rural areas has been termed an integrated development and has been one of the paramount concerns of the planning process. For this, India introduced the Panchayati[16] Rural Institution (PRI) through the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992. However, there are special provisions for realising the goal of Gram Swaraj for the scheduled areas[17]. For the sixth scheduled[18] area, the PRI does not exist and has another structure in its place. For BTR areas, the structure is constituted by the Autonomous Council at the top, the Territorial Constituency Level Coordination Committee (TCLCC) at the mid- level, and the Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) at the grassroots level.

The VCDC has been at the base since 2006 and is a nominated body. The Council Government forms this from among the ruling party's supporters. VCDC[19] forms a committee with a minimum of 14 members, and their term is for 5 years. There are 36 VCDCs Under the Kokrajhar development block, of which East Maligaon-Mohanpur VCDC is situated in the Kokrajhar Tehsil of Kokrajhar District of BTR,

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14 A Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed on 27.01.2020 with factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), All Bodo Students Union etc. This MoS seeks to increase the scope and power of Bodoland Territorial Council and to streamline its functioning; resolve issues related to Bodo people residing outside Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD); promote and protect Bodo's social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities; provide legislative protection for the land rights of tribals; ensure quick development of tribal areas and rehabilitate members of NDFB factions. MoS also provides for establishing a Bodo-Kachari Welfare Council as per existing procedure, notifying Bodo language as an associate official language in the State and to set up a separate directorate for Bodo medium schools. A provision is also there for a special Development package of Rs.1500 crores to undertake specific projects for the development of Bodo areas.

15 Kokrajhar emerged as a district in the year 1983.

16 Article 40 under the DPSP of the Indian Constitution- The organisation of village panchayats- The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as self-government units. (Constitution of India, 1948).

17 The Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996, gives special powers to the Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas especially for the management of natural resources. The provisions of the Fifth Schedule shall apply to the administration and control of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes in any State (other than the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram). (Ministry of Home Affairs, 1996)

18 The provisions of the Sixth Schedule shall apply to the administration of the tribal areas in the State of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. This law gives enormous freedoms to the autonomous regions and districts regarding legislative and executive power. The law notes that each autonomous region shall have its own autonomous Regional Council and every autonomous district its own autonomous District Council. (Ministry of Home Affairs, 1996)

19 The study found that important stakeholders- like 1. Party Primary Committee, 2. Party Block Committee, 3.Respective MCLA (if from the same party), for instance, in East-Maligaon-Mohanpur VCDC, however, the MCLA was not involved in the selection of Chairman, since here- Mr Hagrama Mohilary is from the opposition party- Bodoland People's Front (BPF) 4. Village public, in most ideal situations and 5. Block Committee are involved in the nomination and selection of VCDC Chairman and members. Apart from this, each village also has VCDC Coordinators.

VCDC prefers to form a committee with 14 officially nominated members, including a Chairman (One); 2 (two) women members, 1 (one) SC member (1 reserved where SC population is least), but SC community members may be increased as conditions warrant; 3 (three) farmer members; 1 (one) BPL member; 1 (one) Social Worker; and 5 (five) general members. The government employee designated as Member Secretary, Junior Engineer, assists these officially nominated members (JE). The JE primarily assists them in the planning and formulation of strategies and policies relating to the estimation of projects associated to government initiatives that are meant to be implemented for rural development. But what is to be noted here is that, not all VCDC members have a member secretary. (Barman, 2022)

Assam. It is located around 5 kilometres north of the Kokrajhar District headquarters. East Maligaon-Mohanpur lies at the border between Kokrajhar District and Bongaigaon District and is 30-35 km away from the Bhutan border.

The East Maligaon-Mohanpur VCDC was selected for the village immersion program based on a comprehensive evaluation of various factors. This included the demographic composition and development indicators of the village, as well as its proximity to the Council Headquarters. Furthermore, a significant consideration in its selection was its strategic location as a village bordering Bhutan.

▶ East Maligaon- Mohanpur VCDC:

The 27-member VCDC is led by Jaymanta Mushahary (Chairman), an influential businessman and one of the learned persons in the VCDC. The 7 female members of the VCDC are engaged as farmers, weavers, ASHA Workers, and Mid-day meal workers. While the male members are engaged in both primary and secondary activities.

VCDC- East Maligaon-Mohanpur- Kokrajhar District	
Total Population in the VCDC	7000
Village	26
Revenue Village	2
LA Constituency: 30- Kokrajhar East (ST)	MLA: Lawrence Ishlary UPPL
Council Constituency: Debargaon	MCLA: Hagrama Mohilary, BPF
Total Members of VCDC	27 (Female: 7 || Male: 20)
Demographic Composition	Bodo | Oraon | Nepali | Rabha | Rajbongshi
Source of Income	Agriculture-85%| Small Business-7% | Private Sector Service-3% | Government Sector Service-1% | Daily Wage Worker- 2%

The Chairman[20] mentioned several difficulties the VCDCs faced regarding functioning and appointments. The primary difficulty is related to the appointment of the Chairman, where she/he is appointed for a period of 6 months, and then re-appointment takes place according to rules. However, as mentioned by Mr Mushahary, the case is different on the field, and their appointments have not been renewed ever since he took charge on 19th February 2021.

Another significant issue in the BTR, regarding grassroots governance, is the lack of standard operating procedures with regard to the roles and responsibilities of the VCDCs and TCLCC. This is because there is no necessary documentation. On the one hand, they are the third tier of the autonomous council, allocated the administrative responsibility to a very limited extent, and on the other, they are the body responsible for the last mile service delivery. The VCDCs are an extension of the Panchayat & Rural Development (P&RD) Department, implementing the DRDA's development initiatives at the village level. The VCDCs also serve as a village-level extension of the line departments in addition to implementing plans (Barman, 2022). They collect household and area-level information to identify beneficiaries of developmental schemes.

The VCDCs prepare the Village Council Development Plan (VCDP), exercised once every year. The Chairman of the VCDC mentioned that the primary focus of the East-Maligaon Mohanpur VCDP since the time they have assumed the office had been poverty alleviation and socio-economic and developmental goals. But the sad reality is that even after being diligent about the plans, these do not materialise; no actions are taken, or the entire plan gets rejected. Here, Gram Sabhas become the centre of the development planning process. By rules, a VCDC ought to conduct a minimum of three Gram Sabhas in a year, involving all the adult members of the society. However, the Gram Sabhas are quite procedural and are restricted to discussion on MGNREGA or PMAY-G, as has been found during interactions with commoners.

Regarding participation, field observation revealed a disparity between the perceived and the real image of participation.

20 Personal interactions dated 25th June 2024 at the East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC office

The general public and VCDC members pointed out that the participation of women is primarily limited to their membership in the Self Help Group (SHG) and acknowledged the need to promote women's participation and engagement since independent female participation is not adequate. The ASHA worker from the Gaurinagar village pointed out that people are not enthusiastic about participating in these Gram Sabhas; even after repeated awareness raising programmes, a few sections exhibit very little interest and participation. Therefore, it is necessary for the government and civil society organisations to initiate the process of creating awareness about the importance of collective decision-making and democratic decentralisation.
Furthermore, interaction with the teaching community highlighted their poor inclusion in the Gram Sabhas. This exclusion is concerning as educators could offer valuable insights and contributions even if residing outside the VCDC jurisdiction. When questioned about this, VCDC member Mr Manoranjan Basumatary and village headman Mr Ajit Borgayary[21] of East-Maligaon village justified the exclusion by citing existing membership in the School Management Committee (SMC), implying a lack of willingness to get their involvement in the Gram Sabhas. Here, it becomes important to unlearn these notions and take up lessons from Kerala, that adopted the collective action principle to offer social support and help to vulnerable sections. They successfully did this since they amalgamated traditional practices in the governance process[22].

The members also mentioned the difficulties concerning the non-receipt of funds under the Fifteenth Finance Commission (FFC) in undertaking developmental activities. It restricts their ability to function as an effective grassroot organisation, limiting them to a mere nominal body. VCDC's function, therefore, is primarily limited to administering two primary central schemes, MGNREGA and PMAY-G.

▶ MGNREGA

In the BTR region, MGNREGA is implemented through the VCDCs with assistance from the Gram Rojgar Sahayak (GRS). The roles of VCDCs in MGNREGA are:

1. Plan and prioritisation for schemes through the Gram Sabhas
2. Submit the plan to the Block Development Office for approval
3. Receive work demand applications from the beneficiaries and allocation of work within 15 days.
4. Execute work while maintaining adequate standards and monitoring the work.

The Chairman of East Maligaon-Mohanpur VCDC mentioned that there are almost 600 job card holders. During the personal interaction, Mr Mushahary mentioned the inconsistencies in the work allotted under the MGNREGA Scheme are due to budgetary constraints. This also results in backlogs of pre-approved projects. Additionally, a critical impediment to the timely disbursement of funds is the documentation issues, especially the absence of Aadhar card linkages with the Job card holder's bank account, which delays the entire process and hinders the utilisation of the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanism. The record since 2021 show the following data in the table:

The aforementioned projects have been initiated since 2021; while some have been completed, few exhibit varying degrees

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21 Personal Interactions dated 30th June 2024 at the East Maligaon village under the East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC

22 Some examples of such pioneering social organisations, which, perhaps, contributed directly or otherwise to the evolution of the neighbourhood group-based community organisation of the 1990s, are listed below.
- Kurikkalyanam or Tea Party of North Kerala
- Sunday thrift schemes of Kumarakom
- Rice-based chit scheme of Southern Kerala
- Paddy savings and lending scheme of Onattukara
- Coconut-based thrift and lending scheme of Alappuzha (Kudumbashree)

MGNREGA Projects since 2021 in East-Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC	
RCC Canal	6
Fencing/ School Repairing	10
Land Development	3
Anganwadi Centres	1

(Anganwadies in Mohanpur, East-Maligaon, Kathalmuri, Joypur, Dhonpur and Rabhapara were constructed under the MGNREGA scheme.)

of completion due to budgetary constraints that have affected the material procurement process. It must be highlighted here that some projects have received official commendations for their efficient and diligent execution by the council line departments.

Sadly, the field interaction with beneficiaries showed a mismatch between approved projects and public demand and priorities. This led to discouragement among the beneficiaries, especially in repairing the roads. Additionally, the work, even if available, is scattered over the year; a few of the *Santhali* women[23] from the Joypur village who are Job card holders also pointed out that sometimes there are not even 50 days of annual employment, even if it is a right under the MGNREGA scheme. The VCDC Chairman and the Job card holders also noted that unemployment allowances have not been received[24].

This compels them to migrate to other places in search of better economic opportunities. Moreover, alternative daily wage labour offers a minimum rate of Rs.300, which is against the MGNREGA rate of Rs.249 daily, which adds to the low participation in the MGNREGA Scheme. This leads to challenges associated with low participation by the Job card holders in the few existing projects. The VCDC's population record shows that they are engaged in the primary source of income; hence, agriculture has become an important activity. Landless individuals prefer to work as wage labourers on others' land or own small businesses like shops or hotels. Additionally, there is a trend of out-migration to Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Bangalore to work as industry workers, security workers etc. There have also been incidents, as mentioned by one of the villagers, in their neighbourhood, where a 38-year-old construction worker lost his life in Kerela. There, it becomes pertinent to highlight the shortcomings within MGNREGA, which is potentially leading people to migrate to other places to seek alternative sources of employment, not only from this VCDC in particular but from the state of Assam in general.

PMAY-G:

The VCDCs are responsible for facilitating the last-mile delivery of PMAY-G in the BTR. The beneficiaries in Assam receive a sum total of Rs. 1.30 lakhs as a direct cash transfer to build their house within a period of 1 year. The role of VCDC concerning PMAY- G are:

1. A priority list is prepared based on the census.
2. Gram Sabha verifies the list based on the reality of the ground.
3. The list is shared with the Development Block to disburse funds for the schemes.
4. VCDCs share the list with the public. Additionally, they facilitate and monitor the construction of the houses.

PMAY-G project since 2021 in East Maligaon-Mohanpur VCDC	
Total Applicant	675
Accepted	4
Rejected	671
AWAS+ Scheme	430

The Government conducted Awaas+ survey during January, 2018 to March, 2019 to identify those beneficiaries which claimed to have been left out under the 2011 SECC. The data of beneficiaries captured through Awaas+ is utilized to fill the gaps between overall target of 2.95 crore and eligible beneficiaries made available from SECC Permanent Wait List (PWL). (Govt. of India, Ministry of Rural Development, 2023)

The VCDC prepare the priority list through a participatory process during the Gram Sabha Meeting in the presence of the Village Headmen, VCDC chairman, members, influential people, and party representatives. When asked about any partisan biases during

23 Personal interactions on the 28th of June 2024 among the residents of Joypur village under the East-Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC.

24 The unemployment allowance is an allowance that the MGNREGA Job Card holders are supposed to receive when no work is provided within 15 days of work application.

the process, the VCDC members denied such occurrences. However, these assertions appeared to be contradictory since the on-ground image suggested the existence of clear bi-polarity, especially after interaction with a Village headman[25] who previously was a member of VCDC.

The on-ground scenario for the PMAY-G in this particular VCDC is quite deplorable, as seen from the table above. While discussing this issue with the stakeholders, it was observed that the primary loophole is the documentation process. There is no clarity as to what documents are required for the seamless achievement of the scheme. It was observed that there are several issues, some of which are the following:

1. KYC issues
2. Inactive or Dormant Bank Account
3. Errors in the address of the applicant.
4. Errors in the spelling of the beneficiaries' names

Discussions with the Chairman helped me learn about the absence of banking facilities within the VCDC; hence, people must travel to Kokrajhar to access banking services. This discourages people and makes them reluctant to travel since many cannot afford it. Apart from that, the post office at *Bishmwuri,* which is a few km away, lacks technical infrastructure, rendering it practically inactive. It is to be noted that the Assam Gramin Vikas Bank has undertaken a commendable initiative to address these accessibility issues.

PMAY-G project since 2021 in Bhadranpur / Bhasbari VCDC	
Total Applicant	705
Accepted	195
Rejected	513
AWAS+ Scheme	19

However, in comparison, during a short visit to Bhadranpur/ Bhasbari[26] VCDC, the Chairman, Ms Khanthaima Narzary, mentioned that a total of 195 households were able to avail of the housing scheme, and 513 were rejected due to the same issues as mentioned above. Nevertheless, this VCDC reflected a comparatively better picture than the East Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC. This may be attributed to a better understanding of documentation, housing schemes, eligibility criteria, and application processes, which the others may replicate to implement the schemes better.

▶ Schemes within the VCDC at a glance:

Important schemes briefly	
Arunodoi Scheme	443
Mainao Swrang Bithangkhi	15
Ayushman Bharat Scheme	4253
Jal Jivan Mission Scheme	8
Swashya Bharat Abhiyan Schemes	0
PM-KISHAN Scheme	427

•Arunodoi Scheme[27]:

"Arunodoi" translates to "sunrise" in Assamese, which indicates a program aimed at empowering or uplifting the state's women. Interaction among the beneficiaries shows that they are highly satisfied with this scheme. An interaction highlighted a household with two middle-aged men lacking stable income and relying solely on the female beneficiary's Arunodoi benefits. It raises a critical question- Does the scheme foster empowerment or create a dependency trap? The observed dependency scenario necessitates a multi-pronged approach, primarily skill-enhancing schemes for both men and women.

25 He wishes to remain anonymous

26 This VCDC is located a few km from the surveyed VCDC and is a demographically homogenous locality. The VCDC, with 15 members, have 3 women members and is headed by a woman Chairperson, Khantaima Narzary.

27 Women, being the primary caretakers of the family, are kept as beneficiaries of the scheme. 'Arunodoi' scheme will provide Financial Assistance of Rs. 1000 per month through the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme to around 19.10 Lakh Families in the state. (Govt of Assam)

•Mainao Swrang Bithangkhi[28]:
"Mainao Swrang" translates to "pride of our own land", and "Bithangkhi" means "seed" in Bodo; this is a community-based scheme and is meant for the SHGs. The ground data indicates a significant implementation gap. With only 15 beneficiaries out of a potential 75 SHGs within the Village Council Development Committee (VCDC), the scheme's impact falls far short of its potential. The lack of knowledge displayed by women who haven't received the grant highlights a potential communication gap. Effective dissemination of program guidelines and application procedures is important for equitable access.

•Ayushman Bharat Scheme:
While high enrolments (4253 beneficiaries) make healthcare accessible, there are delays in beneficiary verification that pose a challenge.

•Jal Jivan Mission Scheme:
Despite its importance, the scheme has low penetration (8 out of 26 villages), there are incomplete projects, and irregularities in the supply process have been reported.

•Swacch Bharat Abhiyan:
The scheme's on-ground implementation is zero; apart from that, along with the need to implement the schemes vigorously, it is also important to initiate outreach and awareness campaigns to address the issue of open defecation.

•PM-KISAN Scheme:
The scheme has moderate beneficiary satisfaction (427 beneficiaries), suggesting potential areas for improvement.

A critical factor to consider here is the VCDC's limited role in beneficiary selection and monitoring. Where accountability has not been specified clearly, there is a disconnect between local needs and top-down implementation, creating challenges on the ground. Empowering the VCDC, alongside relevant government departments, to participate in beneficiary selection and scheme monitoring, will help build a more transparent and accountable system. A collaborative approach like the Kerala model would not only strengthen democratic decision-making but it will also ensure that no poverty (SDG 1), good health and well-being (SDG 3), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) and reduced inequalities (SDG 10) are achieved and to create a sustainable society.

▶ Institutions within the VCDC at a glance:

1. **Healthcare centres or sub centres** have become a critical requirement within the VCDC. While the nearest health and wellness centre (HWC) in Bhadranpur/Bhasbari VCDC may take pride in its well-established infrastructure for ante and post- natal care, medicine supplies, and OPD, it lacks a permanent doctor. It is learnt from the interaction with the residents that the doctor who was previously appointed had been transferred to the Nalbari district, and later, a female doctor who was supposed to be appointed visited the HWC once; however, since then, no information could be obtained from the concerned authorities regarding any doctor's appointment. Currently, the health centre is run by ANM workers and ASHA workers. Consequently, the residents of these villages are bound to travel to Kokrajhar Civil Hospital, which is around 1 hour away. The villages also lack 108 ambulance facilities, which adds to people's difficulties during emergencies. Due to the lack of primary healthcare, Hans Foundation has been working in this field, and people have been quite satisfied with their service. However, the only limitation is that they visit only once every month, which does not suffice to achieve SDG-3, i.e. Good Health and well-being.

28 Mainao Swrang Bithangki is a scheme that aims at strengthening women's power in the BTR region. According to the information shared by BTR CEM Pramod Boro, around 24.21 crores in grants have been given out to 96,850 women beneficiaries (Government of Bodoland).

2. **The ASHA program,** implemented in 2006 to enhance healthcare accessibility for marginalised communities, faces significant challenges within the VCDC. ASHA workers report a critical shortage of workers, with same individuals responsible for serving three villages. This overextension of duties and inadequate incentives pose a risk to program sustainability. Moreover, the absence of sufficient doctors and medical centres creates challenges for ASHA workers, hindering their ability to fulfil their roles effectively. Ms Hayenapala Brahma, an ASHA worker from the East-Maligaon village, noted the lack of required supplies, primarily sanitary napkins, and urged for material incentives for workers like scooty for easy movement. Villagers have expressed dissatisfaction about these; they also pointed out that, sometimes, there is a lack of enough awareness programmes and absence of primary supplies like medicines, etc, for women, highlighting the negative aspect of healthcare delivery. Nevertheless, the ASHA workers, irrespective of the villages, applauded the training imparted to them by the Government. They receive training on vector-borne diseases, post and pre-natal care, and sexual and reproductive health, and they have also been actively imparting this knowledge. One of the new mothers present during a gathering, named Ms Mundri Murmu[29], with a 1-year-old male child, narrated that during both the pregnancy and post-pregnancy period, she received good care with regular supplies of medicines, vitamins, ultra-sound facilities and also had institutional delivery at the Civil Hospital, Kokrajhar.

3. **The VCDC, encompassing 26 villages, do not have well-established education facilities.** It houses 12 Lower Primary (LP) schools. Among these, the LP School in Joypur Nepalpara, which was established in 1986 and primarily catered to the Nepali community, remains a venture school to date. The school faces two key challenges: limited teaching staff with salary concerns and discontinuation of the mid-day meal scheme. Secondary education within the East-Maligaon-Mohanpur VCDC relies on a shared middle and high school located in the Bhadranpur/ Bhasbari VCDC, a Bodo-medium school serving the Bodo population of seven VCDCs. The lack of dedicated middle and high schools within the VCDC hinders achieving SDG-4, equality in education. Students are also compelled to travel long distances and face difficulties due to poorly developed transportation and road infrastructure. Notably, the Don Bosco Society (DBS) has established a High school, the Joypur RC- ME/ HS section, an Assamese medium to address the educational needs of the area and cater to communities like Santhali, Nepali and Oraons. However, the school remains a non-provincialized/venture, leading to difficulties regarding teachers' salaries, students' uniforms, and the mid-day meal scheme. Funding from the DBS, which previously supported these aspects, has been discontinued. Venture schools do not receive the program's benefits. Meanwhile, provincialised government schools too exhibit inconsistencies in the mid-day meal scheme. Some students are fortunate to receive a well-balanced diet, including vegetables and eggs once a week. However, others lack balanced diets and solely rely on a daily serving of khichidi, which fails to meet the nutritional requirements of students.

A comparison of the two high schools:

VCDC- EAST MALIGAON COMPARISON OF BHADRANPUR/BASHBARI AND JOYPUR ME/HIGH SCHOOL		
2023-2024	BHADRANPUR-BASHBARI ME/HIGH SCHOOL	JOYPUR ME/HIGH SCHOOL
Total	88	24
Pass Percentage	100%	95%
Fail	NIL	1
2022-2023	BHADRANPUR-BASHBARI ME/HIGH SCHOOL	JOYPUR ME/HIGH SCHOOL
Total	129	18
Pass Percentage	76.70%	66.6%
Fail	21	6

A.Bhasbari High School, Basbari, is a provincialized school that caters to the educational needs of students from classes 6 to 10, with 484 students in total. Despite facing a shortage of teaching staff (15 permanent and 1 Ad-hoc teacher) and classrooms, the school has accomplished good results. This year, the teaching staff boast a 100% pass percentage, significantly improving from the previous year's 76.7%

29 Personal Interaction on 29th June 2024 at the Gaurinagar village

with 21 detentions. The villagers pointed out that the teachers have taken good care of the students and have been active in imparting classes for the weak students. The remedial classes have been very effective. This achievement is important to highlight since girls outnumbered boys, with no detainees. The school is also blessed to have a well-stocked library with multilingual resources and two smart classrooms, which can be recognised as a tiny step to bring them on par with the private institutions.

B. Joypur ME and High School, a venture school, caters to 177 students with 9 teachers. The Don Bosco Society built the school building, as mentioned earlier, but the school does not have a few basic amenities like fans, well- maintained toilets or a mid-day meal scheme. The teachers also highlighted that the students must register at Karigaon High School to appear for their exams.

C. While the pass percentage for the year 2023-24 is commendable (23 out of 24 passed), it must be mentioned that 6 of the 23, appeared for compartmental exams and succeeded in their second attempt. This may be attributed to the remedial classes provided by the teachers within the limited resources.

Enrolment in the venture school is evidently low, considering the lack of basic facilities. Joypur's teachers deserve credit for overcoming infrastructure deficiencies and basic salary rights. Both schools have dedicated teachers, as shown in the results. One primary element that needs to be mentioned here is that interactions with teaching staff from both educational institutions reveal that girls have outnumbered boys for both sessions. Improving the needs, achieving inclusive and equitable quality education, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all are possible.

4. **The VCDC integrates Anganwadi centres** with existing primary schools but lacks dedicated Anganwadi facilities; only 7 separate Aganwadi centres exist in the VCDC. The rate of participation of children in day-care is 30%-35%. While the centres have adequate infrastructure consisting of tables, chairs and other materials for a child's early and psychomotor development, the Mid-day meal programme in most of the Anganwadi causes a significant concern- since it is either Sooji or Khichidi. A first-hand experience in 3 Anganwadi centres revealed a major deficiency in the balanced diet.

   Ms Renu Brahma, a worker of the Mohanpur Village Anganwadi, highlighted the nutritional inadequacy of the meals, citing a lack of enthusiasm in consumption among children due to the unappealing taste. Additionally, a villager expressed concerns about the poor food quality. Moreover, there is a complete absence of a mid-day meal program in some centres, where they rely solely on the provided meals. Furthermore, not all the 26 villages within the VCDC have access to the Aganwadi Centre, such as Mohanpur Goan, Nepalpara, and Kathalmuri. Village headmen and concerned residents have reportedly submitted numerous requests in this regard, yet the efforts remain unsuccessful. This disparity compels the Dhanpur-Rabhapara Anganwadi worker to serve three villages-Rabhapara, Oraongusti and Saharjuri- with only 2 workers, which creates challenges in the management process. Additionally, another issue that the villagers of Gaurinagar pointed out was that sometimes, instead of cooking mid-day meals, the Anganwadi workers distributed the supplies directly to the households; the beneficiaries shared that both quantity and quality of the food supplies is minimal and sub-standard.

5. **Self-Help Group:** While poverty affects individuals of all genders, women are more likely to experience poverty due to various structural and systemic factors. This, added to the feminisation of poverty, intersects with other forms of social inequality, exacerbating disparities based on race, ethnicity, disability, and geography. Here, to create a society with zero poverty with equal opportunities for each gender and to reduce inequalities, it becomes important to focus on decent work and economic growth, and the role of Self Help Groups becomes prominent; they act as a bridge to empower these women and liberate them from poverty and inequality. During the field study, a total of 30 SHGs were interacted with, and the average number of members was 9. Women aged between 25 and 40 are members of the SHGs. Interaction with these members helped to gain knowledge about the VCDC from a woman's perspective. The primary reasons for women to join SHGs are the following:

    1. To complement family income
    2. To promote the culture of savings.
    3. To promote income-generating activities and be self-reliant

Socio-economic characteristics of women SHG members in Bodoland of Assam	
Total SHG in the VCDC	75
SHG interacted with during the Field immersion programme	30
Total Members interacted with during the Field immersion programme	280
Hindu	98
Bathou*	95
Christian	87
Married	266
Un-married	14
No Formal Education	103
Primary Education	130
Secondary	25
Tertiary Education	10
Employed	12
Un-employed	268

** Bothouism, is the religion followed by the Bodos. Here, they worship the Sijou tree, as the ultimate symbol of God. It is based on five moral principles and spiritual message namely- i) holy realisation ii) holy practice iii) Messages on love iv) Message on truth and v) Messages on hatred.*

While these are the major reasons, the aim to complement family income is the most prominent among the members, followed by the desire to have their own savings. In this context, we have Thangamani and Muthuselvi's study (S, Thangamani, & Muthuselvi, 2013) of SHGs in Coimbatore district of TN, which showed that women become members of these groups to have savings of their own, even if little, this not only helps them to be independent socially and economically but also help in achieving recognition in the society

Thus, in this VCDC as well, they primarily aim to complement family income by having savings, and the women narrated how, with these little savings, they can pay their child(ren)'s school fees for those going to missionary schools. Some utilise the money to fulfil their family needs.

What needs to be noted here is that these SHGs in this VCDC are intra-community collectives, unlike the Kudumbashree, which are neighbourhood groups where they all come together as women regardless of their social identity. Nevertheless, during the interaction with 30 SHGs, it was found that the collectives in East-Maligaon Mohanpur VCDC groups are created not with an exclusive mindset, but they are organically formed based on their community identity since the villages are based on community lines.

The SHGs on registration, receive a sum of Rs.25000/-, as a grading as per norms fixed by NABARD; of the total 30, three SHGs have faced issues with the grading amount; two of them Chaipotri and Kalyan Group from the Joypur-Nepalpara Village have received Rs 15000/-only, and Sauti group mentioned that no single amount is credited under these norms to their respective accounts. What was observed during the field interaction is that these women, with all vigour, somehow

lack the knowledge of finances and financial management, which stands as a big wall between them and their goal to be self-sustainable.

Some examples of these are:

1. Limited Income Generation through Traditional Activities: Approximately 22 of the 30 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) rely on traditional income-generating activities such as mushroom cultivation and animal husbandry; on inquiring about trying new avenues, it was found that they are sceptical about it and worried that the funds should not be wasted by experimenting.
2. Inadequate Returns on Investment: Despite access to loans of up to Rs. 3 lakhs, the reliance on traditional methods often yields insufficient income to repay the loan, necessitating personal funds.
3. Diversion of Loan Funds: A significant trend observed during the interaction is using loan funds for personal expenses, including childcare and household purchases. This misappropriation of funds compels them to repay the loans using their little personal income.

Nevertheless, two very significant examples of maximum utilisation of funds have been observed in the Kathalmuri village of the VCDC, where the Kogaphu SHG under Ms. Putuli Mushahary, with thirteen other members, have been able to set up a tent house business.

Though they are in their initial phase, their vigour and perseverance was inspiring. Another one, called the Barphu SHG, with Ms Manula Basumatary as the Secretary, has been able to pitch the idea of a rice mill. Consequently, they were successful in receiving a machine as well for the same. These two examples challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes associated with entrepreneurship and prove that one small step will help them achieve a sustainable future.

▶ Women's participation and local governance.

While villagers and the chairman acknowledge increased women's participation through Self- Help Groups (SHGs) over the years, their active involvement in Gram Sabhas remains low. Assam mandates 50% reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, and VCDCs follow this with a 30% reservation policy. However, the current representation in the East-Maligaon-Mohanpur reflects a gap, with only 7 women out of 27 members (i.e. around 25%).

Nevertheless, the VCDC empowers women with the SHGs. Standardised templates facilitate the SHGs in identifying -a) potential beneficiaries under different government schemes, leading to improved access to support programs; b) individual infrastructural needs, enabling targeted interventions; and c) community infrastructural needs, informing resource allocation. This process facilitates access to support programs, targeted interventions, and informed resource allocation. During interactions with the members of the SHGs, it was found that they had been involved in identifying beneficiaries under the National Social Assistance Program. However, their participation in planning for schemes like MGNREGA and PMAY-G is limited. VCDC chairman and members manage the planning processes for schemes like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Reproductive and Child Care Schemes. Lack of clear guidelines presents challenges for both VCDCs and SHGs. Villagers further highlighted that while SHG participation in both VCDCs and Gram Sabhas is satisfactory, the discussions within Gram Sabhas primarily focus on MGNREGA and land issues. This limits women's opportunities for effective participation in these discussions. What

needs to be highlighted is that *Jeevika Sakhi, 33*, of the VCDC, has been inactive on the ground; women pointed out that there is training that *Jeevika Sakhi* attains but imparts to SHG members as per her convenience. Her inactiveness on the ground is a big hindrance to women's participation in the Gram Sabha since her activeness and leadership could be a strong factor in mobilising women to participate in democratic grassroots governance.

Here, it becomes important for the council to bring in the Kerala model of the Women Component Plan (WCP), where the state government issued guidelines for formulating and implementing WCP. The most significant part here is that women and development subjects were made mandatory, and more significantly, women are given the prime responsibility to discuss and collectively identify problems and solutions. They also introduced detailed capacity-building programmes for women and dedicated training programmes. The most important element that the structure of VCDC lacks is the dedicated programmes and mandatory inclusion of SHGs as supplementary discussion forums of Gram Sabhas. A successful model is the Kerala Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs)[30], like the Kudumbashree *(Kudumbashree)*. In addition to the inactive participation of women, the VCDC faces several other difficulties, some of which are mentioned below:

▶ Difficulties faced by VCDC:

1. At the very beginning, providing a clear framework of the functions and powers of the VCDCs becomes pertinent. It is of prime importance that the concerned authorities recognise these institutions as a statutory body, highlighting the roles and responsibilities of the office bearers.
2. A significant challenge VCDCs face is the budgetary limitations, which restrict their ability to function effectively as grassroots organisations, essentially relegating them to last-mile service delivery entities with limited autonomy. A demand for funds under the Fifteenth Finance Commission is the burning issue, and other developmental funds should be devolved so that these bodies can undertake urgent activities.
3. The lack of an adequate number of staff hampers the monitoring and evaluation of staff. This is complemented by the lack of computer or technical education among the people. This digital divide presents a significant setback and hinders the functioning of VCDC. Therefore, skill-based learning is the need of the hour to create a web of resources well acquitted in technology.
4. A critical impediment to democratic decision-making within Gram Sabhas is the low participation of community members. This absence hinders the flow of local needs and perspectives, leading to policies misaligned with the community's aspirations.

30 NHGs engaged in (1) Discussion of the local plan (2) Review of plan implementation (3) Selection of beneficiaries (4) Review of general administration (5) Settlement of family disputes (6) Educational programmes for children (7) Health programmes (8) Cultural activities (9) Project implementation

▶ Suggestions:

1. To eradicate these issues, it is important to adopt a system that is similar to that of the PRI. Devolution of financial powers, where the VCDC could levy taxes and surcharge on land revenue and borrow money from banks with prior permission for any developmental work. The lack of financial incentives is also a demotivating factor for the VCDC Members.
2. Another important factor is the creation of effective guidelines for the functioning of the VCDC. Universal rules and procedures may help the 420 VCDCs function effectively, resulting in adequate monitoring and evaluation of their work by authorities above them. This will help create an environment where VCDC members will be accountable to their people.
3. Effective involvement of community-based organisations is of utmost importance since this will increase transparency in its functioning. As important as it is to actively involve communities, including health workers, teachers, religious headmen, youth and women. it is also important that the VCDC members equally participate in the people's activities. This two-way process will help build trust in grassroots governance.
4. Capacity building for the VCDC members, SHGs, ASHA, and Anganwadi workers is pertinent for effectively planning and implementing schemes, primarily in democratic governance and mobilising people and technology.
5. More importantly, it is important to emphasise the Bodoland Village Council Bill 2012. The bill would create statutory village councils, facilitating local governance in the Council.

▶ Conclusion:

This study underscores the critical role of effective local governance in ensuring the successful implementation of government schemes and equitable development within VCDCs. It identified limitations in beneficiary selection, project completion rates, and outreach efforts, indicating why the collaborative approach is important. This will not only strengthen democratic decision-making but also help adequately monitor schemes by creating vigilant citizens. Furthermore, by bridging the gap between top-down policy and ground-up realities, VCDCs can be transformed into effective vehicles for equitable development and improved well-being for all community members. Therefore, prioritising local participation, strengthening VCDCs, and promoting democratic decentralisation and government schemes are important for creating a more prosperous and empowered rural Bodoland.

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Village Immersion Report- *Kadamalaikundu* Panchayat

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▶ Preface

"In the heart of every village lies the essence of India's soul, where tradition, resilience, and community intertwine to form the fabric of our nation."

- Rabindranath Tagore

The rural landscapes of India hold within them the stories of millions, reflecting the country's diverse cultures, traditions, and socio-economic realities. As policymakers and as youth, understanding the nuances of rural life is not merely a task but a necessity. With over two-thirds of India's population residing in rural areas, these communities play a pivotal role in shaping the country's trajectory. Therefore, delving into the depths of rural India is essential to grasp the intricacies of our nation's development narrative and to formulate inclusive policies that cater to the needs of every citizen.

Initiatives like the Village Immersion Program of the Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies (CRISP) have been designed to bridge the gap between urban perceptions and rural realities. By immersing participants in the heartlands

of rural India, such programs offer firsthand experiences that go beyond statistics, allowing individuals to empathise, learn, and collaborate with rural communities. Through these immersive experiences, participants gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of rural life, paving the way for them to make meaningful contributions to rural development efforts through informed decision-making.

We selected our village carefully hoping to ensure a meaningful and enriching experience. Theni district in the southern part of Tamil Nadu, stood out for its challenges reflected in its low Human Development Index (HDI) – 0.539, hinting at the struggle for necessities and socio-economic progress. We decided on Kadamalaikundu Panchayat within this district, considering it has a scheduled tribe population (Kadar Tribe).

I felt excitement and curiosity when I started my village immersion journey in Kadamalaikundu Panchayat, nestled amidst the picturesque landscapes of Theni district, Tamil Nadu. The opportunity to connect with local communities, hear their stories, and see their daily lives firsthand filled me with anticipation and humility. Little did I know that this experience would give me insights into rural realities and deepen my respect for the resilience, warmth, and resourcefulness of rural communities.

I want to express my profound gratitude to several individuals who have been instrumental in facilitating this program. My heartfelt thanks go to Block Management unit of K Myladumparai, especially Thangakodi Akka and Kameshwari Akka, who helped with the accommodation. I am also grateful to Gomathi Akka, the bookkeeper of Kadamalaikundu Gram Panchayat SHG, and all the stakeholders, including SHG members, Anganwadi Workers, Panchayat members, and community members. I extend my special appreciation to S.M Vijayanand I.A.S (Retd.), R Subrahmanyam I.A.S (Retd.), C Chandramouli I.A.S (Retd.), State Lead Dr. Vijayaraghavan and other CRISP Mentors. Their mentorship and guidance have been invaluable in this immersive experience. Their contribution has enriched me and made this journey genuinely enlightening.

This report serves as a testament to the transformative power of village immersion experiences. Through narratives spanning the functions of the Gram Panchayat, education, healthcare infrastructure, livelihood opportunities, sanitation facilities, and water issues, this is a compiled reflection of my observations and experiences during my week-long stay in the Gram Panchayat of Kadamalaikundu. Through these firsthand accounts, I aim to provide insights into the aspirations, challenges, and everyday realities of the community. By sharing these experiences, I hope to foster greater understanding, empathy, and solidarity towards rural India, as one small step towards inclusive and sustainable development for all.

▶ Theni: An Overview

Nestled in the southern region of Tamil Nadu, India, Theni district is a picturesque landscape known for its diverse geography. Situated at the foothills of the Western Ghats, the district boasts a stunning natural beauty characterised by lush greenery, cascading waterfalls, and fertile plains. Its strategic location, bordering Kerala and the districts of Dindigul, Madurai, and Virudhunagar, adds to its geographical and economic significance. Geographically, the district spans approximately 2,889 square kms, encompassing a varied terrain ranging from fertile valleys to rugged mountain ranges. The district is renowned for its agricultural prowess, with fertile plains ideal for cultivating crops such as paddy, sugarcane, coconut, and spices. The Periyar River and its tributaries, and the Mullaperiyar Dam, are lifelines of the region, providing essential irrigation for agricultural activities.

Economically, Theni thrives on agriculture, horticulture, and allied industries, significantly contributing to the state's agrarian economy. Apart from agriculture, the district is also known for its robust trade in commodities like tea,

coffee, cardamom, and pepper, which flourish in the cool climate of its hilly terrains.

Administratively, the Theni district is divided into five taluks: Theni, Uthamapalayam, Periyakulam, Andipatti, and Bodinayakanur. Each taluk is subdivided into revenue blocks and panchayat unions, ensuring effective governance and decentralised administration.

▶ Overview of *Kadamalaikundu*

Kadamalaikundu village is in Andipatti taluka of Theni district in Tamil Nadu, India. It is situated 34 km away from the sub-district headquarters, Andipatti (tehsildar office) and 34 km from the district headquarters, Theni Allinagaram.
The total geographical area of the village is 6942.85 hectares. It has a population of 10,983 people, of which the male population is 5,547 while the female population is 5,436 (Source: Census 2011).

The habitation-wise distribution of the population is as follows:

Habitation	SC Population	ST Population	General Population	Total Population
Kadamalaikundu	2330	0	7978	10308
Karattupatti	400	154	848	1402
Melapatti	491	0	1242	2869
Nehruji Nagar	0	0	332	332

(Source: Jal Jeevan Mission database)

▶ Gram Panchayat

Kadamalaikundu (கடமலைக்குண்டு) Gram Panchayat is a Rural Local Body in K Myladumparai Panchayat Samiti, part of Theni Zila Parishad. The Gram Panchayat office I visited was housed in a well maintained two-room building with electricity and a computer. Staff comprised two personnel, besides the president. MGNREGA officers also operate from the same building. The premises included an Anganwadi Centre, a Village Poverty Reduction Committee (VPRC) building, two libraries, and a playground.
The Gram Panchayat comprises 12 ward members, half of whom are women. On an average, Gram Sabha meetings are attended by approximately 150 individuals, with active participation from the Scheduled Caste (SC) community. In contrast, the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population seldom attends these meetings. Over the past year, 6 Gram Sabha meetings were convened, two designated as special Gram Sabhas. Upon delving into the functioning, I discovered that committees convened every three months, actively contributing to the Gram Panchayat's operations. SHG members are also members of committees dealing with child protection, education, etc.

The Panchayat has formulated a Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and is actively working on various Sankalp themes through planned activities funded by the Panchayat. These themes include creating a water-sufficient village, maintaining a clean and green town, developing self-sufficient infrastructure, and ensuring a socially just and secure village by constructing roads, drainage systems, and awareness programs. Additionally, the Panchayat addresses themes such as developing a child-friendly village with funding from other departments.

According to the eGramSwaraj Portal, funds for these programmes are available with the panchayat.

S.No.	Sector	Planned outlay							
		Scheme							
		Tied				Untied			
		SC	ST	General	Total	SC	ST	General	Total Count
1	Drinking water	0	0	1754094	1754094	0	0	2348792	2348792
2	Health	0	0	0	0	0	0	1600000	1600000
3	Sanitation	0	0	1754094	1754094	0	0	0	0
	Total	0	0	3508188	3508188	0	0	3948792	3948792

S.No.	Scheme Name	Component Name	Amount Allotted								Planned outlay							
			Tied				Untied				Tied				Untied			
			SC	ST	General	Total	SC	ST	General	Total	SC	ST	General	Total	SC	ST	General	Total Count
1	Own Funds	Own Funds	0	0	0	0	0	0	10000	10000	0	0	0	0	0	0	10000	10000
2	State Finance Commission Grants	State Finance Commission Grants	0	0	0	0	0	0	1600000	1600000	0	0	0	0	0	0	1600000	1600000
3	XV Finance Commission	Basic Grant (untied)	0	0	0	0	0	0	2338792	2338792	0	0	0	0	0	0	2338792	2338792
4	XV Finance Commission	Tied Grant	0	0	3508188	3508188	0	0	0	0	0	0	3508188	3508188	0	0	0	0
	Total		0	0	3508188	3508188	0	0	3948792	3948792	0	0	3508188	3508188	0	0	3948792	3948792

Discussions that I had with officials and others, highlighted several challenges, particularly the lengthy process for fund requests. This begins by submitting proposals to the block office after Gram Sabha consultations, followed by obtaining approval from higher authorities—a procedure that usually takes at least six months. The post of secretary lies vacant in many Gram Panchayats, which makes decision-making tough.

I learnt from the clerk that despite these challenges, the level of political engagement within the Gram Panchayat is intense. They described vibrant Gram Sabhas where community members actively participated, with a notable presence of women. Moreover, members of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) emphasised the cooperative nature of the president and staff, highlighting their accessibility and responsiveness to queries from ordinary citizens. The Gram Sabha meetings were held regularly, and updates about the Panchayat's activities were efficiently communicated via WhatsApp, fostering transparency and community involvement.

I observed the Anganwadi Centre and the Village Poverty Reduction Committee (VPRC) building within the same premises. This co-location facilitated collaborative efforts and streamlined community services. The Panchayat also boasts two libraries and one playground. However, conversations with the Anganwadi worker highlighted concerns about inaccessible bathrooms in the centre, despite the Panchayat's assertion of having built them. This indicates a need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration to address the community's needs effectively.

Additionally, I observed that the Panchayat building is in Kadamalaikundu, the main settlement, which has essential services like a public bus stand. Residents from other habitations, all within a 10 km radius, must rely on transportation to access it. Bus and auto services are available for travel to Kadamalaikundu. However, most services, such as street lighting and bus routes, are concentrated in this habitation. Development seems restricted primarily in this area.

▶ Sanitation and Drinking Water

Water Harvesting

In Kadamalaikundu Gram Panchayat, the Jal Jeevan Mission covers 100% of households, and both piped water supply and Har Ghar are available. According to the Jal Jeevan Mission website, water coverage is available across all the habitations. The Panchayat building houses a crucial water harvesting unit, efficiently addressing the community's water needs. Utilising the perennial flow of the Vaigai River, the Panchayat collects and stores water in large on-site tanks. With ample capacity, these tanks ensure a steady water supply for household use, complemented by periodic quality checks to maintain safety standards. Despite challenges during the summer when the Vaigai River's flow decreases, the Panchayat endeavours to provide consistent water access to residents. Drinking water is supplied by the Government, through central schemes and made available through community taps. Residents typically collect drinking water in the morning using plastic pots.

Sanitation

The Gram Panchayat demonstrates a commendable commitment to cleanliness and hygiene. With a notable workforce of 20 sanitation workers dedicated to solid waste collection and an additional 5 managing liquid waste, the Panchayat exhibits a proactive stance toward garbage. The Panchayat also manages the waste. An initiative of selling solid waste showcases its innovative approach to addressing sanitation challenges while generating additional income.

Community members highlighted the presence of toilets in every household, including those in the scheduled tribe colony, underscoring the Panchayat's efforts towards promoting sanitation infrastructure. Still, the challenge is that the tribes reside in the forest for most of the year so toilet usage in their homes is not regular. The people depend on personal borewells for water supply in bathrooms. It became clear that in the summer season water scarcity impacts sanitation practices.

▶ Education

As reported by parents, it is common in this Gram Panchayat, for children to complete their education up to the 12th grade, with a low dropout ratio. However, there is a noticeable discrepancy in the graduation rates between male and female students, with fewer females completing their education. Early marriage is the primary reason for this.

School

Although I couldn't physically visit the schools, it being the summer vacation, inquiries revealed the presence of one primary school with four teachers, one high school with seven teachers, and the primary school also hosting classes 6 through 12 with 32 teachers in the vicinity. These schools are housed in well-maintained buildings with sturdy walls and classrooms, ensuring the safety of students.

I discovered that the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme is operational in these schools, providing nutritious meals to stu-

dents. Discussions with parents highlighted their satisfaction with the quality of education these schools offer and the accessibility of educational facilities within the community. A School Management Committee (SMC) further contributes to the effective governance and management of these institutions. The SMC, comprising representatives from the local community, plays a pivotal role in decision-making processes related to school administration, resource allocation, and academic initiatives. These educational institutions strive to provide students with holistic and inclusive learning environments through collaborative efforts between the SMC, school administration, and stakeholders. The schools are within 10 km of each other. Along with these, a few private schools offering CBSE options further diversify educational opportunities for the community, catering to varying preferences and needs.

The major challenge is the low enrolment rate among the tribal population. They remain hesitant to attend schools and are particularly reluctant to complete higher secondary education, with a common trend of discontinuing their education after finishing high school.

Anganwadi

There are nine anganwadis in the panchayat. Kadamalikundu has five, Melapatti has two, and Karattupatti and Melapatti each have one. These anganwadis are conveniently located within walking distance for parents in each settlement.

While visiting one of the Anganwadi centres in the Gram Panchayat, I observed a modest setup consisting of a single classroom, kitchen, and bathroom, accommodating approximately 20 children. The kitchen adhered to stringent hygiene standards and provided nutritious meals as mandated by the state. Impressively, the children were outfitted in uniforms, and thankfully, did not suffer from Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM). The Anganwadi distributed supplements like Sattu Mavu to expectant mothers, promoting maternal health. Despite these commendable efforts, several pressing challenges were identified. Firstly, the lack of accessible bathrooms poses a significant hurdle to the centre's operations. Secondly, the absence of electricity within the premises detracts from the overall functionality of the facility. To worsen matters, the centre operates with only one staff member, placing an undue strain on her time and compromising the quality of early childhood education provided to the children. The absence of an ASHA worker means the lone staff member is also responsible for mobilising during immunisations, which further increases her workload. Parents appreciate the services offered by the Anganwadi, yet they voice concerns regarding the absence of electricity, particularly during the intense heat of summer months. During my visit, only two children were present, claiming that the heat was the primary reason for the absence of other students. Parents hesitate to send their children to the Anganwadi during summer.

▶ Healthcare

In the Gram Panchayat, healthcare services are primarily provided through a Primary Health Centre (PHC) and a sub-centre. The PHC has essential medical facilities, including a doctor who attends to patients and oversees services such as the labour room and family planning support. The sub-centre is staffed by a nurse and is equipped with basic medical equipment. I learned that the doctor conducts regular visits to monitor and address noncommunicable diseases within the community. During my visit, I found the sub centre closed, which prevented direct interaction with the staff. However, I gathered from the residents that the sub-centre typically operates three days a week, providing vital healthcare services to the commu-

nity. The nurse at the facility plays a crucial role in monitoring the progress of pregnant mothers, ensuring they receive essential Antenatal and Postnatal Care (ANC and PNC) check-ups. Although I couldn't get any information from the facility about female infanticide and maternal mortality rates, discussions with household members shed light on awareness levels. While specific maternal protection schemes were not widely known, the Chief Minister's Girl Child Protection Scheme was acknowledged for its beneficial impact, particularly among households with single girl children.

As far as community engagement is concerned, I found that Self Help Group (SHG) members organise awareness programs on topics such as menstrual hygiene and child marriage. These initiatives have played a significant role in raising awareness about critical issues consequently leading to an improved understanding of maternal mortality. Community members reported that cases of child marriage have gone down too. SHG members are also involved in the Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam program, where women health volunteers do door to door screening tests for sugar, BP, and other common ailments. They also do counselling, raising awareness on non-communicable diseases.

I learnt that the Gram Panchayat is served by two district hospitals within a 50 KM radius, namely GH Bodinaikunur and Periyakulam Head Quarter Hospital. In addition to this, the Theni Medical College is within a 30 KM distance from the Panchayat, providing residents access to specialised medical services and expert level healthcare facilities.

▶ Scheduled Tribes

In the Scheduled Tribe colony at Karapattupatti, I encountered members of the Kadar tribe. The colony has a population of 154 individuals, all residing in houses equipped with bathroom facilities provided by the government. The area also has other services like healthcare and schools within a 2 KM radius.

The primary school building has a single teacher from the central primary school, who instructs a combined class of 26 students of class 1 to class 5 level. Notably, the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme is not operational here nor is the Midday Meal Scheme. The location is 2 kms from the main settlement, and a bus service is available. The Kadar tribe traditionally depends on forest produce collection for livelihood, resulting in limited income opportunities. Unfortunately, none of the students express interest in pursuing higher education, typically opting to join the daily wage workforce upon completing their 12th-grade education. Significant social issues that I observed were, child marriage and alcohol consumption. These challenges underscore the need for targeted interventions and support systems tailored to the unique needs of the Kadar tribe and the broader Scheduled Tribe community in the area.

▶ Livelihood

In this Panchayat, livelihoods depend on various activities that blend agricultural and non-agricultural pursuits. Agriculture serves as the linchpin of the local economy, with cashew nuts, grapes, and coconuts emerging as primary crops tended by farmers. Concurrently, a significant portion of the population depends on daily wage labour, primarily as agricultural labourers and through schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Those working in factories, receive a minimum wage of Rs. 350 per day, for labour-intensive tasks.

Women mostly rely on MGNREGA for their daily wage work. Men often seek employment opportunities beyond the Panchayat's borders, migrating to nearby urban centres such as Coimbatore or states like Kerala to pursue better-paying jobs.

▶ Self Help Groups

Kadamalaikundu Gram Panchayat, Theni district, supports 52 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) from all the habitations. These are integral to the community's socio-economic structure engaging in various livelihood activities like agriculture, animal husbandry, tailoring, and small-scale businesses, pooling their resources to generate income. Empowered by capacity-building initiatives such as financial management and entrepreneurship training sessions, SHG members manage their collective endeavours effectively. Supported by government schemes facilitated by agencies like the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women (TNCDW), SHGs receive financial assistance and guidance for income-generating projects. All SHGs have received a revolving fund of ₹15,000, primarily for individual entrepreneurial activities or personal needs like education and marriage.

The SHG hub operates from the Village Poverty Reduction Committee building, which has modest yet functional infrastructure, including an office space with amenities like a bathroom and electricity and storage facilities for group resources like tailoring machines. At the village level, dedicated individuals such as bookkeepers, social mobilisers, agriculture coordinators, and livelihood coordinators ensure the smooth functioning of SHG activities.

Women seek livelihood from goats and hen rearing. Members were previously trained in tailoring but this initiative failed. The Panchayat is exploring successful livelihood activities from other Panchayats in the block.

SHG members regularly interact with each other and with the community, to disseminate information on social issues such as child marriage and menstrual hygiene. They are also involved in the Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvom program. Another important task they undertake is conducting an annual survey to identify the poorest members who require MGNREGA work and submitting this list to the Panchayat. They assist the Panchayat with other surveys whenever requested.

Unfortunately, most livelihood enterprises are run individually rather than as a group effort but this does not take away from the entrepreneurial spirit of the SHGs here, with around ten enterprises ranging from tea shops to pottery outlets. Recent initiatives, like beekeeping training for Kulu members from the ST colony, demonstrate a willingness to innovate, although obstacles like bear attacks hindered their free movement.

The underutilisation of resources is a permanent challenge. The 20 tailoring machines available to SHGs can potentially enhance productivity and income but they are not used optimally. One primary reason for this underutilisation is the shortcoming in the training offered which instead of focussing on entrepreneurship development, put all stress on skill development. What is needed, obviously, is a comprehensive approach to capacity-building along with entrepreneurship development, to unlock the full potential of SHGs and foster sustainable livelihoods in the community.

► Suggestions for Improvement:

1. **Infrastructure Development:**
   - Improving facilities like Anganwadi centres by adding electricity and bathrooms. This will make them more accessible and valuable for everyone in the community.
   - Planning of setting up community resources like libraries in the village. They can aid children with their studies and open new opportunities.
2. **Political Participation and Community Engagement:**
   - Encourage greater political participation from marginalised groups, acknowledging the disparity in service delivery to these communities. Facilitate avenues for their involvement in decision-making processes to ensure their needs are adequately represented.
   - Promote inclusivity in governance by facilitating regular Gram Sabha meetings and awareness programs, providing platforms for marginalised groups, especially women, to voice their concerns and contribute to local decision-making.
3. **Empowerment of Self-Help Groups (SHGs):**
   - Provide targeted training programs to enhance entrepreneurship skills among SHG members, to optimise resource utilisation and enhance income.
   - Foster an environment conducive to cross-learning and networking among SHGs to facilitate the adoption of best practices.
   - Adopt a bottom-up approach by understanding each locality's specific demands and needs, tailoring interventions accordingly to ensure relevance and effectiveness.
4. **Education and Awareness:**
   - Implement strategies to address gender disparities in education, including awareness campaigns on the significance of education and interventions to combat early marriage practices.
5. **Healthcare Access and Quality:**
   - Ensure the consistent operation of healthcare facilities, particularly sub-centres, to meet the diverse healthcare needs of the community. Enhance awareness of maternal protection schemes and healthcare initiatives through targeted outreach efforts.
6. **Scheduled Tribes Welfare:**
   - Implement targeted interventions to address the unique challenges faced by Scheduled Tribe communities, offer them better access to education and healthcare.
   - Explore avenues to stabilise the livelihoods of tribal communities, such as establishing Farmers' Produce Organizations.
   - Prioritize monitoring and intervention for malnutrition among tribal children and facilitate their integration into mainstream education to enable social mobility.
   - Strengthen social support systems and awareness programs to tackle ills like child marriage and excess alcohol consumption.

▶ Conclusion

The Village Immersion in Kadamalaikundu Panchayat has been a profoundly enriching experience. Through firsthand interactions and observations, I have gained a deeper appreciation of the complexity of rural life and the critical role rural communities play in shaping India's future.

Kadamalaikundu, like many rural areas, grapples with issues related to infrastructure, healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities. The dedication of local leaders, SHG members, and community volunteers, to addressing these challenges is commendable. The Immersion programme made it clear that significant gaps remain. There is a necessity for inclusive and context-specific policies rather than one size fits all plans and programmes. Only then can equitable growth be ensured. The suggestions offered above are with a view to create conditions for an inclusive and supportive environment for development. Addressing gender disparities, supporting scheduled tribes, and leveraging the potential of agricultural and non-farm livelihoods are crucial steps toward achieving holistic and sustainable progress.

Ultimately, this report is a collection of my observations and learnings. By fostering empathy, understanding, and collaboration, we all can work together to bridge the urban-rural divide and pave the way for a prosperous India.

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Pudhupattinam Panchayat-Village Immersion Report

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▶ Preface

"Villages are the heart of our nation. If we wish to see India prosperous and happy, we have to recreate the village life."
- Gandhi ji

India, a country of diverse cultures and lifestyles, has witnessed a significant shift in its growth trajectory over the past few decades. This growth, however, has been predominantly urban-centric, leaving the rural heartland somewhat in the shadows. Interestingly, these rural areas comprise about 67% of India's population. Therefore, Villages hold the key to understanding the living standards of most of the country's populace. Urban and rural life in India is as different as chalk and cheese, each with unique advantages and challenges.

Recognising the need to bridge this urban-rural divide and foster a deeper understanding of village life, the Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies CRISP initiative has ingeniously conceived the Village Immersion Program. I initially found myself engulfed in a wave of confusion and fear, primarily due to the unfamiliarity of the new environment. The thought of residing in an unknown place was daunting.

However, this journey was a valuable learning experience and gave me a fresh perspective on villagers and their way of life. As a fellow of CRISP, I am delighted to share my rich experience of participating in this program. The Village Immersion Program was nothing short of a roller coaster ride for me. It provided me a profound understanding of rural culture and livelihood, allowed me to experience the rural lifestyle firsthand, and explore the ground realities that often remain hidden behind the urban-rural divide.

My journey took me to the quaint Pudhupattinam Gram Panchayat in Ramanathapuram district, an Aspirational District of Tamil Nadu, India. Nestled within the Aspirational Block of Thiruvadanai, Pudhupattinam is a charming coastal village. The prospect of immersing myself in the life of a seaside town filled me with anticipation.

This report is a chronicle of my experiences and observations in Pudhupattinam. It aims to shed light on the realities of rural life, the challenges rural communities face, and some potential solutions. I hope my experiences will contribute to the ongoing discourse on rural development in India.

In this report, I have covered

- an overview of the Gram Panchayat,
- discussed the education level,
- focused on health infrastructure,
- then shifted to the community livelihood,
- shed light on sanitation facilities and water issues,
- and offered a holistic view of the village's current situation.

I want to express my profound gratitude to several individuals who have been instrumental in facilitating this programme. My heartfelt thanks go to Panchayat President Mohammad Mustafa, Panchayat Secretary Immanuvel, and SHG President Sengolamma. I am also grateful to Ramani Akka and all the stakeholders, including School Teacher Kalaiselvi, SHG members, Anganwadi Worker Sengolrani, Anganwadi Helper, Women Health Volunteer Subhasini, Computer Operator Muthu Meena, SMC member, and the entire community.

Additionally, I extend my special appreciation to S M Vijayanand I.A.S (Retd.), R. Subrahmanyam I.A.S (Retd.), C Chandramouli I.A.S (Retd.), State Lead Dr. Vijayaragavan and other CRISP mentors. Their mentorship and guidance have been invaluable in providing me with this immersive experience. Their contributions have enriched my understanding and made this journey genuinely enlightening.

▶ Introduction:

History of the District

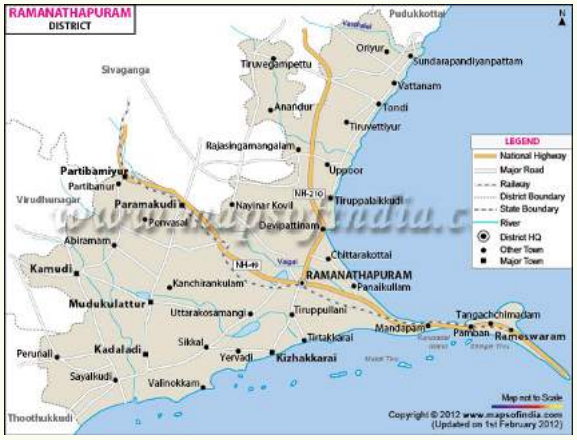
Ramanathapuram District, also known as Ramnad, lies in the southern agricultural climate zone of Tamil Nadu. This coastal district, known for its rich culture and heritage, is home to a diverse population. Ramanathapuram district was formed in 1910 by clubbing portions from Madurai and Tirunelveli districts. During the British period, this district was called "Ramnad." The name continued after independence. Later, the district was renamed as Ramanathapuram.

In the early 15th century, the present territories of Ramanathapuram district, comprising the taluks of Tiruvadanai, Paramakudi, Kamuthi, Mudukulathur, Ramanathapuram, and

Rameswaram, were part of the Pandiyan Kingdom. This area was under the Chola Kings for a short period when Rajendra Chola brought it under his territory in 1063 AD. One of the chieftains deposed Sethupathy and became the Raja of Sivagangai with the help of the King of Thanjavur in 1730 A.D. Acting upon the weakness of the Nayak rulers, the local chieftains (Palayakarars) became independent. Raja of Sivagangai and Sethupathy of Ramanathapuram were prominent among them. In 1795, the British deposed Muthuramalinga Sethupathy and took control of the administration of Ramanathapuram. The old Ramanathapuram District consisted of the present-day Virudhunagar and Sivagangai districts. It extended to the Western Ghats, bordered by Kerala to the west and the Bay of Bengal to the east, making it the largest district in the region at that time.

Location and Geographical Area:

Ramanathapuram is located between 9° 05' and 9° 50' North of Latitude and between 78° 10' and 79° 27' East of Longitude. The district headquarters is the town of Ramanathapuram, and the district now covers 4,123 km², bordered by Sivaganga District to the north, Pudukkottai to the northeast, Palk Strait to the east, Gulf of Mannar to the south, Thoothukudi to the west, and Virudhunagar to the northwest. The district has 271 km of coastline, of which 130 km is in Palk Bay and 140 km in the Gulf of Mannar. Administratively, this district has 02 Revenue divisions, 4 Municipalities, 7 Taluks, 11 Blocks, 38 Freaks, 429 Panchayats, 400 Revenue villages, and 2362 Hamlet villages.



Aspirational district:

Ramanathapuram district is deficient in rainfall. The district has two rivers Vaigai and Gundar, but they are not perennialand cannot provide water for cultivation. Though a dry district, agriculture is undertaken extensively by irrigating the land through tanks and wells. While the Southwest monsoon brings limited rain, the Northeast monsoon is more significant but inconsistent. The district optimally utilizes rainfall through small irrigation tanks and wells.

Regarding livelihoods, the per capita income in Ramanathapuram is Rs 44,707, significantly lower than the state average of Rs. 91,700. Fishing, Livestock, Agriculture, and Brickmaking are the major livelihoods for the people of this district.

Ramanathapuram District is industrially backward. Out of eleven blocks, nine have been categorised as industrially backward by the MSME Department. The district faces various socio-economic challenges, such as low levels of education, poor health indicators, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient access to essential services. For instance, the literacy rate of the district is around 80.86%, which is comparatively lower than the other districts in Tamil Nadu. This district has the lowest number of Hospitals and PHCs in the state. So Ramanathapuram is one of the Aspirational Districts identified by NITI Aayog in 2018 based on its relatively low performance in various sectors.

▶ Key Reason for Selecting Gram Panchayat:

Thiruvadanai is recognised as an Aspirational Block within the district. The Aspirational Block program is designed to improve governance and service delivery in India's most remote and underdeveloped blocks. This block is known for charcoal manufacturing from fuel food (Prosopis juliflora), locally called seemaikaruvelem, used for brick making. This is done by the people close to the Below Poverty Line (BPL). Thiruvadanai Block includes 47 Gram Panchayats and 57 villages.
One of these villages is Pudhupattinam, 22 km from the Block Headquarters of Thiruvadanai and 47 km from the District Headquarters of Ramanathapuram. This village was selected for the immersion program because it falls under the Aspirational Districts and Blocks category. It is also a coastal village with relatively poor performance across various indicators and far from the administrative headquarters.

▶ Overview of Pudhupattinam:

Pudhupattinam is 10 km away from the nearest town, Thondi. The Pudhupattinam Gram Panchayat includes three villages: Veerasanglimadam, Kankollanpattinam (K.K. Pattinam), and Pudhupattinam. The Gram Panchayat consists of 742 households. It has a population of 1785, with nearly equal number of males (890) and females (895), resulting in a sex ratio of 1005. The residents of Veerasanglimadam (V.S. Madam) are mainly Hindu, those in Kankollan Pattinam (K.K. Pattinam) are mainly Christian, and Pudhupattinam is primarily Muslim. As a coastal village, the primary occupation of its residents is fishing. Charcoal manufacturing from the Prosopis juliflora tree (seemaikaruvela maram) is the next prominent activity. This is a seasonal activity of BPL families, halted during the rainy season. There is no agricultural activity in this Gram Panchayat.

The village-wise distribution of the population in 2021 is as follows:

Villages	SC Population	ST Population	General Population	Total Population
Veerasanglimadam	72	0	248	320
K.K. Pattinam	254	0	431	685
Pudhupattinam	12	0	768	780

(Source: Jal Jeevan Mission database)

Gram Panchayat:

The Gram Panchayat consists of three villages divided into six wards and five habitations, with the Panchayat office situated in the Pudhupattinam habitation. The Panchayat office is located between the K.K. Pattinam and Pudhupattinam villages. However, V.S. Madam village lies slightly farther away from the Panchayat office. This geographical distribution poses challenges regarding accessibility and coordination for residents of V.S. Madam.

The key officers of the Gram Panchayat are the Panchayat President and the Panchayat Secretary. The ward members consist of three women and three men. The Gram Sabha is held four times a year. The central committees in the Gram Panchayat are the SHG, and VPRC. According to the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Raj Act, five Social Action Committees (SAC) are suggested to be established: Agriculture, Development, Education, Works, and Appointments. These committees were formed during the Gram Sabha on January 26, 2020, but they became inactive due to the pandemic and other factors. There is a need for them to be assigned specific roles and responsibilities. A Computer Operator, a Frontline Worker (Thuimai Kavalar), and a Women's Health Volunteer (WHV) have been appointed through the Village Poverty Reduction Committee (VPRC).

Gram Sabha:

The Gram Sabha is conducted four times a year, and updates about the Panchayat's activities are efficiently communicated via WhatsApp, fostering transparency and community involvement. On an average, Gram Sabha meetings are attended by approximately 200 individuals, with active participation from all three villages. In contrast, the Scheduled Caste (SC) population seldom attends these meetings. However, the participation of women in the Gram Sabha is meagre, even though many SHGs are functioning very well. Only those receiving benefits through the Village Poverty Reduction Plan (VPRP) participate in the Gram Sabha. The VPRP is discussed in the Gram Sabha with all the members, and the Gram Panchayat maps the list of activities against schemes, programs, funds, and budgets for those included in the VPRP. A resolution has been added to the GPDP. Three people have benefited through the PM–Ujjwala scheme, mosquito nets purchased under NHM for the

Anganwadi, and health cards (Ayushman cards) distributed via VPRP and GPDP convergence.

Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP),

In the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), decisions are made through resolutions passed by the Gram Sabha. This panchayat being a coastal village and a water steward area, a significant allocation of funds is used for drinking water and water conservation activities. Since this panchayat comprises three villages, highly funded projects are allotted rotationally to the villages due to the lack of funds, and a decision to this effect was made in the Gram Sabha. However, the planning process also involves guidance from block-level officers. The Panchayat Secretary plays a crucial role in formulating the GPDP based on directives received from these officers. Unfortunately, there are instances where specific projects are allocated forcefully by the Block Development Officer (BDO), even when the Panchayat does not endorse them. For example, despite having already constructed soak pits for every household, the BDO insisted on utilizing funds from the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) for additional soak pit construction. This decision diverted resources from other essential initiatives, such as procuring e-vehicles for waste collection.

S.No.	Sector	Planned outlay							
		Scheme							
		Tied				Untied			
		SC	ST	General	Total	SC	ST	General	Total Count
1	Drinking water	0	0	251082	251082	0	0	80000	80000
2	Health	0	0	0	0	0	0	20000	20000
3	Roads	0	0	0	0	0	0	301299	301299
4	Sanitation	0	0	251082	251082	0	0	20000	20000
5	Technical training and vocational education	0	0	0	0	0	0	33477	33477
6	Water Conservation	0	0	0	0	0	0	180000	180000
	Total	0	0	502164	502164	0	0	634776	634776

(Source: http://egramswaraj.gov.in)

Sankalp activities:

The Panchayat has formulated a Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and is actively working on various Sankalp themes through planned activities funded by the Panchayat. The panchayat addresses three themes in 2023 - 24, including creating and maintaining a water-sufficient village, ensuring a clean and green village, and developing self-sufficient infrastructure. Additionally, the Panchayat addresses themes such as creating a child-friendly village and fostering a secure village by constructing roads, drainage systems, and awareness programs. With funding from other departments, 22 No-cost and Low-cost activities have been completed under various Sankalp themes through the GPDP. Discussions with PRI members highlighted several challenges, particularly the lengthy process for fund requests and approval from the respective line department officers.

Own Source Revenue:

Own-source revenue is generated from property and professional taxes. Last year, a total of ₹1,84,573 rupees was collected as Own Source Revenue, which included 15,320 rupees from professional tax.

The Panchayat maintains different tax slabs for household taxes:

- Kutcha houses are taxed at Rs.165.
- Rehabilitated houses are taxed at Rs. 220.
- Concrete houses and homes built under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) are taxed at Rs.330.
- Duplex homes are taxed at Rs.880.

The Panchayat Secretary collects taxes door-to-door; alternatively, residents can pay through the VP tax portal and make digital payments. TNPASS is another website where the Panchayat President and Secretary monitor the collected funds through the Indian Bank portal. The Panchayat has an e-Seva centre, where residents visit the Panchayat office to apply for any schemes and certificates.

The Panchayat does not have other OSR except for household taxes and professional taxes. However, there is considerable

potential to set up a boating spot in the V.S. Madam village and lease the coastal land to SHGs for prawn farming. Additionally, the K.K. Pattinam village has an irrigation water tank (Kammai), which the Panchayat can lease to individuals or SHG members for fish farming to increase the Own Source Revenue.

Other Revenue Sources (CFC & SFC):

The Gram Panchayat received 969,552 rupees total of Tied and Untied funds from the 15th Finance Commission grants. Additionally, it received funds from state grants. However, accurate data on state grants is yet to be available.

S.No.	Scheme Name	Component Name	Amount Allotted								Planned outlay							
			Tied				Untied				Tied				Untied			
			SC	ST	General	Total	SC	ST	General	Total	SC	ST	General	Total	SC	ST	General	Total Count
1	Own Funds	Own Funds	0	0	0	0	0	0	300000	300000	0	0	0	0	0	0	300000	300000
2	XV Finance Commission	Tied Grant	0	0	502164	502164	0	0	0	0	0	0	502164	502164	0	0	0	0
3	XV Finance Commission	Basic Grant (untied)	0	0	0	0	0	0	334776	334776	0	0	0	0	0	0	334776	334776
	Total		0	0	502164	502164	0	0	634776	634776	0	0	502164	502164	0	0	634776	634776

Source: http://egramswaraj.gov.in)

▶ Education:

In terms of literacy, many individuals have attained at least one degree, while girls at least complete higher secondary school. There is no school dropout due to the mandatory attendance policy, which requires teachers to report any dropouts or prolonged absences to higher officials through the EMIS app. The students display a keen interest in attending school. Despite facing challenges, parents are committed to ensuring their children's education. During my interaction with the students, they expressed their happiness and enthusiasm for attending school. The relationship between students and teachers was also positive and supportive.

School

The middle school is located between the Pudhupattinam and K.K. Pattinam villages. Students from V.S. Madam village face a one-kilometre journey to reach the school. The middle school has a total enrolment of 143 students, with each class being taught by a dedicated teacher. Among the teaching staff, 6 are government teachers, and 2 are PTA teachers. The school has six classrooms, with first- and second-standard students studying together in one classroom.

School Management Committee (SMC),

The school building has been renovated by the School Management Committee (SMC), a group of 20 members which includes PTA representatives, the headmaster, teachers, parents, retired officers, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) members, and ward members. They hold meetings on the school campus every third Wednesday from 2:00 to 3:00. The committee has spearheaded initiatives like cleaning the school campus and toilets with the help of the PRI and building the school boundary wall through the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP).

Ennum Ezhuthum (Foundational Literacy and Numeracy)

It is a program that has helped bridge the learning gap for students in grades 2 to 5, that arose during the pandemic. Students learn letters through picture formats, eliminating the need for rote memorisation.

I asked three school students to read a book and identify the letters, which they could do successfully. A third-grade girl recited a Tamil poem and knew basic math. When I inquired about this from the teacher, she informed me that the "Ennum Ezhuthum" scheme (Foundational Literacy and Numeracy) provides them with the materials that aid in teaching. Every Wednesday, students borrow books from the school library. The library can be more functional with better staffing. It has

around 500 books.

CM's Morning Breakfast Scheme

Fishermen leave for fishing at 3 a.m. and return at 11 a.m. When they return, the women cook food. The children don't get a good breakfast or enough vegetables because they live far from the market.

The Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme gives them healthy breakfasts like millet upma and semiya khichdi. This way, they can have a good meal in the morning.

Midday Meal Scheme

The consumption of vegetables is notably low among the fishing community. This scheme plays a vital role in their children's nutrition. It ensures that students receive eggs and vegetables, providing them with essential nutrients. Teachers are instrumental in this process, encouraging students to have this food. This initiative enhances the students' health and fosters a culture of balanced eating habits.

"Illam Thedi Kalvi" (Education at Doorstep)

This is a program that runs in six centres at this Gram Panchayat. It helps students whose parents can't help them with their homework because they have little education. Students go to these centres every day to finish their homework. This also lessens the workload for teachers. Teachers post the homework in the class WhatsApp group so parents can stay updated on their children's learning progress. The students enrolled in the Higher Secondary School in Thondi, a Town panchayat located 10 km from Pudupattinam, utilise the bus pass scheme for their commute to school.

▶ Anganwadi Centre:

Two Anganwadi centres are functioning in the GP. Each of the three villages has its own Anganwadi centre. In Pudhupattinam, the Anganwadi centre operates from a new building and is staffed by an Anganwadi Worker (AWW) and an Aanganwadi Helper. However, in K.K. Pattinam, the Anganwadi centre runs in an old building and lacks proper infrastructure. Additionally, an Anganwadi worker still needs to be assigned to this centre. Fifty-five children were enrolled in these two centres. Vaccinations and immunisations are administered by a multi-level nurse (MLN) every Wednesday. Each Anganwadi centre maintains a Kitchen Garden. There are no reported cases of malnutrition or issues related to stunting. Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) monitor the height and weight of children and pregnant women monthly. The kitchen adhered to stringent hygiene standards and provided nutritious meals as mandated by the state.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sessions are conducted from 9:30 to 11:00 AM, during which AWWs teach numbers, letters, and rhymes. They also monitor children's growth and physical activity through various activities and games, following the ICDS State Training Institute curriculum. Pudhupattinam Anganwadi has a television. So, AWW teach rhymes and poems through the visual media.

Take Home Ration

Sattumavu (Nutrient-rich food) is distributed to pregnant women (ANC), Children between 6 months and two years (BNC), children aged 2 to 6 years, and adolescent girls. Children receive eggs thrice a week as part of their diet. AWW is monitoring this Take Home Ration.

Community-based activities

Community-based activities are organised every third Friday of the month. These activities, organised by Anganwadi Workers, include campaigns on sanitation, celebrations for Polio Week, baby shower functions, and awareness programs.

▶ Primary Health Care Centre:

The village's Primary Health Care Centre (PHC) was operational five years ago. However, due to the demolition of the building and lack of infrastructure, it is not too functional and needs to be restored. Also, there are no sub-centre facilities available at Gram Panchayat. As a result, the village is now connected with the Thiruvottiyur Primary Health Care Centre, which is located 10 km away.

A Women's Health Volunteer (WHV)

A Women's Health Volunteer (WHV) conducts screenings for diabetes and hypertension and cares for the elderly and pregnant women. The Village Health Nurse (VHN) post in the panchayat is currently vacant, so a Midlevel Health Provider has taken up the responsibilities of the VHN. Nurses visit the village at least once a week to screen patients who have been unwell for extended periods. If necessary, the WHV refers them to the PHC. She also runs monthly campaigns and participates in community-based activities conducted by Anganwadi. VHN conducts regular visits to monitor and address non-communicable diseases within the community.

Midlevel Health Provider

Midlevel Health Provider visits the Anganwadi every Wednesday to vaccinate and immunise those in need. She is accompanied by a team of psychotherapists, nurses, and trainee doctors through the Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam programme. The WHV facilitates these activities at the community level.

Interactions with some women revealed that this initiative has reduced their frequency of hospital visits. Many people have benefited from this programme. In addition, people have a contact number for a nurse they can call in an emergency. This comprehensive healthcare approach has significantly improved the health and well-being of the community.

▶ Livelihood:

Fishing is the primary source of income for the local people. Some individuals work as labourers in nearby villages or lounges. In K.K. Pattinam and V.S. Madam, the residents' primary livelihood revolves around fishing.

Business

However, in Pudhupattinam, the situation is different. Here, people engage in business activities in Ramanathapuram. The variation in livelihoods across these villages can be attributed to factors such as religion and other economic considerations. A decade ago, the government introduced the Bonded Labourer Prevention Act, which allowed fishermen to receive grants to repay their debts.

Fishermen's cooperative societies are robust. Fishermen save Rs. 1500 monthly and receive their savings with incentives from the Central and State governments. Some fishermen are members of the Fishermen Welfare Board, which provides them with monthly subsidised

diesel. A few individuals travel to the UAE to work as fishing labourers for six months.

As most members are small-scale fishermen, they don't have the leverage to set the prices for their catch. The prices for fish are typically determined by the forces of demand and supply in the market. This dynamic can often lead to fluctuations in fishermen's incomes depending on market conditions. Fishermen typically receive their earnings in cash, seldom visiting the bank. They spend their earnings majorly on alcohol. Their primary savings are invested in chit funds. Small finance institutions offer personal loans to fishermen for their rehabilitation home patta, resulting in a significant portion of their earnings being spent on interest payments.

A few decades ago, they were bonded to money lenders. Small financial institutions provide loans based solely on land pattas or land ownership documents. This practice encourages people to borrow money, often leading to a cycle of debt. In the discussions with the president of the Self-Help Group (SHG), it was evident that the SHG plays a crucial role in the community. The group has successfully prevented many families from falling into debt and financial instability. This highlights the importance of such organisations in promoting financial literacy and supporting vulnerable communities.

▶ Self-Help Group:

Twenty-Three Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are active in the area. Parasakthi, Sembaruthi, and Yazhisai SHGs members recently received training in pickle-making, tailoring, and soap-making. They initiated the production of cloth bags as part of the "Mangappai" campaign but encountered difficulties finding markets for their products. At the village level, dedicated individuals such as bookkeepers, social mobilisers, agriculture coordinators, and livelihood coordinators ensure the smooth functioning of SHG activities.

The Parasakthi Group comprises 12 members, each contributing Rs. 370 monthly. The group's bank saki (accountant) manages deposits, withdrawals, and disbursements for members in need. Despite being operational for 15 years, the group has not yet received any revolving funds. According to NITI Aayog indicators, the Thiruvadanai block has received the lowest allocation of revolving funds.
The group holds monthly meetings on the second day of each month, and the interest rate is set at 16% per annum (1.6 paise per rupee). This structure and support system plays a significant role in the financial stability of the group members.

SHG – GP Partnership:

SHG members conduct an annual survey and prepare the Village Poverty Reduction Plan (VPRP) to identify the poorest members who require MGNREGA work and submit this list to the Panchayat. They also assist the Panchayat with surveys whenever requested. Two years ago, the SHG president and a Community Resource Person conducted a survey to identify the Vulnerable Poor through Participatory Rural Appraisal and social mapping. The team identified ten households as the poorest of the poor and 33 households as women-headed. Due to the high death rate of fishermen from fishing activities, the number of women-headed households is significantly high. This Village Organization team assisted these households in securing housing through the PMAY and constructing IHHL in SBM and Ujjwala schemes. However, this activity ceased last year.

Discussions with the SHG members highlighted that assisting Panchayats for better functionality benefits them. Additionally, since all three women ward members are part of SHG groups, implementing the VPRP in the GPDP is more manageable. However, there is a concern that if the Panchayat president interferes in SHG activities, it could lead to male domination. The Panchayat does not pay any remuneration to the SHG for their assistance.

There is considerable potential to lease the coastal land to SHGs for prawn farming. Additionally, the K.K. Pattinam village has an irrigation water tank (Kammai), which the Panchayat can lease to individuals or SHG members for fish farming.

The Tamil Nadu Rural Transformation Programme (TNRTP)

It is a significant initiative to foster rural enterprises, enhance access to finance, and create job opportunities in selected regions of Tamil Nadu. The primary goal is to create an environment conducive to the growth and development of enterprises and jobs in targeted areas. This involves identifying market opportunities, fostering favourable business conditions, and guiding the path to effective and efficient enterprise development.

Under the TNRTP, 21 women who are members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have collectively embarked on seaweed cultivation enterprises. Seaweed typically takes between 90 to 110 days to grow. The plantation season begins in February (during the spring), and cultivation occurs from mid - April to June. Fishing is prohibited from mid -April to mid-June to facilitate breeding and enhance fish populations. Income from seaweed cultivation serves as an alternative livelihood during this period. This initiative provides a sustainable income source for these women and contributes to the local economy.

The harvested seaweed is supplied to pharmaceutical companies in Thoothukudi and food processing industries in Coimbatore, producing products like jelly, halwa, and other valuable items. The absence of a nearby sector or warehouse for seaweed presents a challenge for the local fishermen. They often must wait for orders from distant industries, leading to delays and uncertainties in their income. Currently, fishermen sell their seaweed at Rs. 7 per kilo. A middleman grades the seaweed into different layers, selling the lowest quality at Rs. 13 and the highest grade at around Rs. 72. This price discrepancy indicates a significant markup, which the fishermen could not benefit from due to the lack of local grading facilities.

▶ Fisheries and Disaster Management Department:

All the fishermen are interconnected through a WhatsApp group created by Sagar Mitra from the Fisheries Department. This platform shares updates on weather conditions and other relevant information. Additionally, they have access to a weather prediction tool, aiding their fishing activities.

In response to the devastation caused by the 2004 cyclone, the Revenue and Disaster Management Department has provided rehabilitation homes for the fishermen. This initiative has been instrumental in helping the community recover and rebuild their lives after the natural disaster. Fishermen reside in the rehabilitation homes provided to them. Initially, these homes did not have toilet facilities. However, toilets were constructed after 2014 through the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM-G). This initiative has significantly improved the living conditions of the community.

▶ Sanitation:

This village has been ranked as an ODF+ Aspiring village. However, Individual Household Latrines (IHHL) usage is minimal due to the area's lack of sufficient water and cultural barriers to use toilets on the same premises. As a result, open defecation is prevalent. Although IHHLs have been constructed using the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) scheme, they are not functional. There is no Community Sanitation Complex (CSC). The village needs a Community Sanitation Complex.

1. **Faecal waste management** is a significant issue in the community, particularly given its coastal location and loose soil conditions. Faecal sludge can lead to unpleasant odours and potential health risks. The current septic tank technology could be more effective in this context, leading to low usage of Individual Household Latrines (IHHL). This situation underscores the need for innovative and context-specific sanitation solutions.

2. **Waste management:** Three waste collection vehicles operate daily, with frontline workers visiting each house in the morning to collect waste. Waste segregation plants are available but are not operational, leading to the burning of collected solid waste at the segregation plant. Some residents dispose of fish waste in the sea. Establishing a proper collection channel is essential. This would streamline the waste management process, making it more efficient and environmentally friendly.
3. **Sea crops:** Sea crops, a type of decomposable waste, are prevalent in this area due to their location on the seashore and shallow depth. Fishermen often cut these sea crops to bring their boats to shore, but this waste contributes to mosquito breeding.
4. **Greywater management:** Greywater management needs to be improved in the village. Despite the low flow of greywater, a proper management system is required. Residents typically wash their clothes and bathe in the pond. The pond water is replenished during the monsoon season.

▶ Water

According to the Jal Jeevan Mission website, the Jal Jeevan Mission currently covers only 4.04% of the households in the area. This means that out of the 560 households, only 23 have access to tap connections. Unfortunately, there is no water coverage available across all the habitats. The Tamil Nadu Drinking Water Board has constructed three tanks in this Gram Panchayat. However, only two tanks are functional, and a proper water source for storage must be provided. The Cauvery Integrated Drinking Water Project is the primary scheme for water supply through tap connections, but proper retrofitting still needs to be done. Water is transported from the Cauvery River, but residents only receive five pots every fortnight. As a result, people resort to buying water from private tankers, spending approximately Rs. 6000 monthly on water alone. During the monsoon season, all households use a rainwater harvesting system to store the water in underground tanks.

However, there is no groundwater recharge system in individual homes. Groundwater is an alternative water source but is not usable due to sea erosion. Jal Jeevan Mission was not implemented here at all. This situation highlights the numerous challenges of open defecation, sanitation, and hygiene practices. During my interaction with an Anganwadi Worker, it was revealed that children need to consume more water each day. However, schools and Anganwadi centres need help to provide potable water to students. This problem is not seasonal but persists throughout the year.

Water scarcity becomes a prominent issue during the summer, further exacerbating these challenges. The burden of this crisis often falls on the women of the community. They sometimes have to travel as far as 5 km from their homes to fetch water used solely for domestic purposes. This task consumes a significant amount of women's time, as they often wait in long queues to collect water. Interestingly, local marriage customs reflect the community's struggle with water scarcity.

It is common for the bride's family to provide a water-pulling vehicle as part of the dowry.

▶ Anaithu Grama Anna Marumalarchi Thittam II (AGAMT II)

The Anaithu Grama Anna Marumalarchi Thittam II (AGAMT II) is a scheme designed to address the village's critical infra-

structure needs and promote holistic development through convergence with other departments. The scheme is funded by various sources, including the state, devolution, the Scheme Component of Pooled Assigned Revenue (SCPAR), local government contributions, and state finance commission grants. Through AGAMT II and in convergence with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MANREGA), two Micro Irrigation Tanks (Ooranis) have been rejuvenated, and one has been constructed. A CC road was also built through this state grant in convergence with MANREGA. It has facilitated the construction of various infrastructures, contributing to the overall development and improvement of living conditions in the area.

▶ MGNREGA:

Two hundred eighty-six members (Job cards) are enrolled in the MGNREGA program. The daily wage for these workers is Rs. 294. The wage rate of MGNREGA is relatively low compared to the nominal wage rate of Tamil Nadu. Speaking with the women in the community revealed that alternative employment could yield a minimum daily income of Rs. 700. This higher wage has led many men to seek other job opportunities rather than participate in the MGNREGA program. The program continues to attract many women and elderly individuals. SHG members conduct an annual survey to identify the poorest members who require MGNREGA work and submit this list to the Panchayat. They also assist the Panchayat with surveys whenever requested. The MGNREGA program provides them with essential financial support, greatly benefiting the community. Workers under MGNREGA have planted trees and rejuvenated the pond. A social Audit happens every year and is submitted to the Gram Sabha.

▶ Suggestions for Enhancing Gram Panchayat Development from Village

Immersion Observation:

- **Water Management:** Implementing a desalination treatment system is crucial for providing clean drinking water and significantly alleviating the community's water issues. The Jal Jeevan Mission, which has not yet been implemented, could be a pivotal solution for water stewardship in the area.
- **Educational Infrastructure:** The local middle school needs a playground. Given that a Panchayat space is available, it could be developed into a playground. This would particularly benefit students passionate about Kabaddi, helping them hone their skills and win prizes.
- **Panchayat Engagement:** Despite the proximity of residences to the Panchayat office, visits are not frequent. The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) should focus specifically on the needs of the coastal village, including provisions to sustain sea resources. This could help integrate the fishermen more into the Panchayat activities. During discussions with the fishermen and the Panchayat President, it was highlighted that, as a coastal village, they need special provisions in the GPDP to construct a prawn farming shed and a shed for fishing-related activities using MGNREGA labour.
- **Tourism:** Given the village's coastal location and unique seaweed cultivation, there is significant potential to boost tourism.
- **Local Economy:** Establishing a nearby seaweed grading industry or warehouse could benefit the fishermen, who sell seaweed at low prices due to the lack of local industries.
- **Anganwadi:** There is a pressing need for water connections between the school and Anganwadi to prevent student dehydration. Renovating the Kankollanpattinam Anganwadi and appointing a dedicated worker could improve conditions.

- **Sanitation:** The waste segregation plant needs to be renovated, and a proper collection channel for solid waste should be established. Faecal waste is a significant issue due to the loose soil near the seashore, making the use of Individual Household Latrines (IHHL) low. Implementing Community Soak Pits and Magic Pits could solve greywater management and groundwater recharge.
- **Financial:** NBFC banks currently provide loans based only on land pattas, leading people to borrow money and fall into debt. Encouraging saving habits among fishermen, who typically deal in liquid cash and rarely visit banks, could improve their financial stability.
- **Social Issues:** Alcohol addiction is a prevalent social issue in the Gram Panchayat that needs to be addressed.
- **Self-Help Groups:** Self-help groups in the area have yet to receive revolving funds, which could significantly enhance their operations and impact.

▶ Conclusion:

In conclusion, I would like to state that this village immersion has been an enlightening experience, providing a deep understanding of various aspects such as government schemes and policies, community lifestyle, and people's behaviour.

The immersion highlighted the pivotal role of schemes and policies and their impact on the community. Witnessing how these initiatives can change the community's perspective and improve their quality of life was fascinating. The major takeaway from this immersion is the realisation that rural lifestyles are distinctively different. Development may take time to reach the grassroots level, but it is essential to ensure that it does. The experience underscored the importance of conserving natural resources, especially water, which is fundamental to life and livelihoods in the community. This immersion has been a valuable journey, offering insights into the complexities and nuances of rural life.

"Villages should be self-reliant, self-contained, and independent of their neighbours for their needs, but interdependent for other needs"
– Gandhi ji.

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Beyond Books: Improving Future Readiness in Students through NGO Interventions in Rural Libraries

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▶ Abstract

Karnataka's Gram Panchayat libraries have undergone significant transformations through campaigns to promote reading habits, efforts towards digitization to equip them with digital resources and internet connectivity, and upgrades to make them disabled-friendly. This research paper examines the impact of government-NGO partnerships in enhancing the future readiness of children in these libraries.

The study focuses on three NGO initiatives: Grama Digi Vikasana (GDV) by Sikshana Foundation, Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya by the Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA), and Grantha Mithra by Akanksha Charitable Trust. GDV addressed the digital divide by providing essential technological infrastructure to libraries, Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya instilled citizenship values and life skills through activity-based learning, and Grantha Mithra offered educational programs to support the academic and personal development of rural students. Each initiative significantly enhanced the role of libraries as community educational centres, by promoting digital literacy, civic awareness, and learning opportunities.

The lessons derived from this study highlight the importance of collaborative efforts between government and NGOs in enhancing public services. These examples from Karnataka, demonstrating the potential for significant social impacts through well-coordinated interventions, provide valuable guidance for policy practitioners aiming to replicate the successful transformation of rural libraries in other regions.

▶ Background

Karnataka's libraries have a rich history, dating back to the pre-independence era. The first libraries were established in the princely states of Mysuru and Bangalore in 1915. Post- independence, Karnataka became the third state in India to enact a Public Libraries Act in 1965, aiming to establish a network of public libraries at various administrative levels. Today, Karnataka has a total of 6,890 libraries, with 5,895 located at the GP level.

However, GP libraries often lacked proper infrastructure and community engagement, resulting in minimal participation, especially from children. In 2019, rural libraries were brought under the administration of GPs to facilitate better supervision. Since then, Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (RDPR) has been on a mission to revitalize these spaces. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were closed, RDPR saw an opportunity to repurpose libraries as centers for continued learning. They launched the Oduva Belaku (Light of Reading) campaign, aimed at rejuvenating these libraries. The goal was to provide free enrolment for rural children aged six to eighteen, resulting in over 4.5 million student enrolments across the state.

To further enhance these libraries, RDPR launched the Pustaka Jolige (Bag of Books) campaign. This initiative encouraged children and librarians to collect child-friendly books from the community, significantly enriching the libraries' collections and fostering greater community involvement. Recognizing the need for modernization, RDPR embarked on a mission to equip these libraries with digital resources and internet connectivity, transforming them into 21st- century learning hubs. More than 90% of the libraries were digitized, opening a world of information and learning opportunities for rural students. Special attention was also given to making libraries accessible for disabled individuals, with 713 libraries being upgraded to include resources such as braille books and accessible toilets.

Despite all these efforts, challenges remained. Many libraries were in central villages of GPs, making them less accessible to students from remote areas. To address this issue, RDPR secured 264 crore rupees from the Central Ministry of Finance under the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment, to establish additional libraries in more locations.
Recognizing the need for further improvements, RDPR sought the support of NGOs to enhance librarian proficiency, provide child-friendly books, and implement engaging activities. Several NGOs, recognizing the potential for impact, stepped forward to contribute to these efforts. Their interventions focused on infrastructure support, user engagement, book provision, and librarian training.

Infrastructure

One of the critical areas of intervention was improving the infrastructure of rural libraries. Tata Kalike Trust provided child-friendly furniture to 40 libraries in Yadgir and Koppal districts, making the spaces more welcoming and conducive

for young readers. Sikshana Foundation equipped over 2,400 libraries with digital infrastructure, including computers, tablets, and internet connectivity. These upgrades transformed the libraries into modern learning hubs, making them more appealing and accessible to students.

User Engagement Activities

To enhance user engagement, various NGOs launched programs targeting different aspects of student development. The Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA) implemented activities to instill citizenship values and life skills among students in 90 libraries across Ramanagara and Tumkur districts. The Akanksha Charitable Trust introduced educational programs in 59 GP libraries across Dakshina Kannada, Uttara Kannada, and Udupi districts. These activities not only increased library attendance but also fostered a sense of community and civic responsibility among the students.

Provision of Books

The provision of child-friendly and educational books was another critical intervention. The Azim Premji Foundation donated sets of 120 illustrated books to over 4,000 libraries, significantly enriching their collections. Pratham Books provided storybooks to more than 5,000 libraries and introduced Storyweaver, a digital platform with multilingual storybooks for children. These resources catered to the diverse interests and educational needs of the students, encouraging a love for reading and learning.

Training for Librarians

Effective library management and the ability to engage users are crucial for the success of these interventions. The Azim Premji Foundation trained 200 librarians in library management practices, equipping them with the skills needed to manage the modernized libraries and engage with the community effectively. Tata Kalike Trust organized exposure visits for 20 librarians to the best-performing libraries in Mysuru and Mandya districts, providing them with insights into best practices and innovative library management techniques.

▶ Problem Statement

This research paper seeks to explore the extent and impact of three important NGO- government collaborations in revitalizing rural libraries in Karnataka. These interventions are examples of partnerships between the Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (RDPR) and NGOs, aimed at improving the future readiness of rural children by providing digital literacy skills, instilling citizenship values and life skills, and supporting their personal and professional growth.

The three interventions under examination are:

1. **Sikshana Foundation for the program Grama Digi Vikasana:** This program focuses on enhancing digital literacy among rural students by equipping libraries with modern digital infrastructure and resources.
2. **Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA) for the program Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya (My Library for a Better Me)**: This initiative aims to instill citizenship values and life skills among students through engaging activities and educational programs.
3. **Akanksha Charitable Trust for the program Grantha Mithra:** This program introduces educational activities and provides resources to support students' academic and personal growth.

▶ Review of Related Literature

Masooda Bano's paper, "Partnerships and the Good-Governance Agenda: Improving Service Delivery Through State–NGO Collaborations," examines how partnerships between the state and NGOs, advocated under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), can enhance basic social services delivery to the poor. Focusing on three cases in Pakistan—privatisation of basic health units, an 'adopt a school' program, and a low-cost sanitation initiative—the study demonstrates that while state–NGO collaborations can improve service delivery, they often fail to evolve into sustainable, embedded partnerships that lead to enduring changes in government practices. This shortfall is attributed to the reluctance of public servants, who typically tolerate NGO interventions due to political or donor pressures rather than genuine commitment. The paper highlights the necessity of ideal-type commitment from NGO leadership, which donor-funded NGOs often lack, for successful embedded partnerships. Effective planning must distinguish between the routine co-production arrangements and embedded partnerships, to achieve sustainable development goals. The study underscores the importance of NGO leadership attributes in transforming temporary collaborations into lasting, beneficial partnerships for public service delivery.

Another article on Social Dhara delineates several significant challenges faced by NGOs in the realm of rural development. A major obstacle is the persistent issue of inadequate and inconsistent funding, which impedes the ability of NGOs to plan and sustain long-term projects effectively. Furthermore, the lack of essential infrastructure in rural areas—such as insufficient transportation and communication networks—hinders the implementation and operational efficiency of development initiatives. NGOs also grapple with a high dependency on external financial support, leading to instability and potential sustainability issues for their program. Coordination difficulties with local governments and other organisations can result in overlapping efforts and suboptimal use of resources. The limited capacity and expertise within NGOs, particularly in rural settings, further constrain their ability to deliver impactful services. Additionally, cultural and social barriers, including local resistance and skepticism, can obstruct the successful execution of development projects. Political instability and bureaucratic hurdles further complicate the progress of these initiatives, affecting their overall effectiveness. Finally, ensuring the long-term sustainability of development efforts remains a significant challenge, especially when programs are heavily reliant on external funding and support. Nonetheless, NGOs play a crucial role in empowering local communities by offering training and resources that enhance skills and promote self-reliance. They improve health and education by running clinics, providing vaccinations, and offering educational programs, thus enhancing wellbeing, literacy and skill development. NGOs also support economic growth through sustainable agricultural practices, microfinance options, and income-generating opportunities, which improve the economic status of rural communities. Additionally, they engage in infrastructure development by building or upgrading roads, water supply systems, and sanitation facilities, which improves living conditions and facilitates other development efforts. NGOs also raise awareness and advocate for important issues like environmental conservation, women's rights, and social justice, influencing policy changes and mobilising community action. They foster social cohesion by engaging with local leaders and by working on various social programs, which strengthens community ties and supports collective problem- solving. In times of disaster, NGOs provide essential relief and rehabilitation services, aiding recovery and rebuilding efforts. Moreover, their willingness to pilot new ideas and innovative approaches often leads to breakthroughs that can be adapted and scaled by other organisations.

The article "Tata Trusts' PARAG Initiative has sparked the creation of Home Libraries by Children in Yadgir" discussed the PARAG initiative by Tata Trusts, which aims to promote home libraries and literacy in the Yadgir district. This initiative has had a positive impact on education and community development by providing books and reading materials to children and families in rural areas (Matthew.2020)

▶ Data Collection

An exploratory qualitative research design was employed for this study, utilizing semi- structured questionnaires as the primary data collection method. Field visits were conducted in 53 libraries across 22 districts, covering all four administrative divisions within Karnataka. The primary data collection methods included field observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, providing a detailed understanding of the library interventions and their impact on the communities they serve.

▶ Grama Digi Vikasana

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the stark digital divide between rural and urban populations, particularly in education. As educational activities shifted online, rural children found themselves at a significant disadvantage due to a lack of digital devices and internet access. Moreover, the advent of new job opportunities stemming from digitization found that rural youth were ill-prepared to seize these opportunities. With many public services also moving online, rural communities faced challenges in accessing them. These pressing issues necessitated the Grama Digi Vikasana (GDV) initiative.

Rural libraries, particularly those at the Gram Panchayat (GP) level, were abundant in books but lacked the technological infrastructure necessary for remote learning. Recognizing these challenges, the Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (RDPR) collaborated with the Sikshana Foundation to modernize these libraries by providing essential digital devices and educational applications. "We saw an immediate need to provide digital access to rural communities," noted N. Sunil, COO of Sikshana Foundation. "Libraries were the perfect place to start because they were the only community spaces open during the pandemic."

As part of the GDV initiative, GP libraries were equipped with smartphones, Chromebooks, TVs, monitors, and educational applications such as Sikshanapedia and MyGP.

Pilot Phase

The initiative began with a pilot phase in eight GP libraries across Ramanagara district. Over the course of a year, these libraries were provided with smartphones and TVs preloaded with the Sikshanapedia application and parental control measures. An internal assessment of this phase led to the program's expansion to 400 libraries. During this expansion, Hitaishis—volunteers who assisted librarians and taught basic computer lessons to users— were introduced. Additionally, the Sikshana Foundation conducted digital skill development sessions for librarians to manage the new technology. A publicly accessible dashboard on the Foundation's website offered insights regarding age-wise enrolment and user groups engaging with smartphones.

Expansion and Scaling

Following the success of the initial phases, the initiative was rebranded as Grama Digi Vikasana and officially launched on March 22, 2022. In the third phase, the number of digitized libraries increased to 1,408. Currently, the fourth phase is underway, aiming to provide digital equipment to 995 more libraries and Sikshanapedia access to 1,850 libraries already equipped

with devices provided by Gram Panchayats or Taluk Panchayats.

To manage the program on the ground, District Managers and Block Coordinators were appointed to frequently visit libraries, oversee the program, and provide technical support to librarians. "Since the introduction of the program, there is more focus on libraries by GP officials and the community. Libraries have undergone renovation, and user engagement has increased," said a District Manager from Shivamogga.

Support provided by Sikshana Foundation staff to the libraries	Number of libraries
Training the library supervisor on using digital devices	1210
Teaching the students to use digital devices	1066
Repair of digital devices	283

Source: A survey conducted by CRISP among librarians

Additional Projects

The GDV initiative also includes other projects aimed at furthering community development:

1. ***Sampoorna Digital Literacy (SDL):*** Implemented in 35 GP libraries, this program enhances digital literacy among rural communities with a 5-hour basic digital literacy course for individuals aged 16-60.
2. ***Krishi Kaushalya:*** In collaboration with AgroTIE, this program provides sessions to farmers on topics like honeybee farming and agricultural marketing in 50 libraries.

These projects are designed to ensure that various segments of the rural population benefit from the digital advancements. For instance, a farmer from Chamarajanagar district who attended the Krishi Kaushalya session remarked, "I got my farm's soil tested as suggested in the sessions before farming. This helped me increase the crop yield."

Positive Changes

The GDV initiative has significantly enhanced library services across rural Karnataka. By providing digital equipment loaded with both academic and non-academic content, it has made learning more accessible, particularly for students who previously had limited access to educational materials. The digitization of libraries has led to a notable increase in user participation. A librarian from Chitradurga district noted, "The presence of digital devices has made libraries more appealing to students, who previously showed little interest in visiting."

A key objective of the initiative is to bridge the digital divide in rural areas. Programs like SDL are empowering students and their parents with basic digital literacy skills. A library user from Uttara Kannada district shared, "The SDL program has been helpful. My mother didn't know how to use a mobile phone, but now she has learned to send messages and call."
The provision of TVs and internet access has also played a crucial role in transforming libraries into community hubs. Villagers gather to watch news and significant events. Many community members came together to watch the ISRO Chandrayaan-3 launch. Similarly, some teachers bring students to watch educational movies with socially relevant themes. Such events foster a sense of community, provide educational value, and promote greater engagement with the libraries.

Individual success stories further highlight the impact of the GDV initiative. In Kusnoor GP (Kalaburagi district), a library user who recently completed his schooling uses the library's computer to practice what he learns in daily computer classes since he does not have a computer at home. In Tambarahalli GP (Vijayanagar district), a student with a passion for Karate used the digital devices to gather information about national tournaments and learn new techniques online. After her classes, she regularly visited the library to access these devices, where she learned new Karate techniques through online content. This enabled her to participate in a National level Karate tournament, where she won second prize.

The Foundation can further leverage volunteer support by establishing partnerships with nearby colleges to offer digital lessons to students using digital equipment at libraries. For this, a structured syllabus can be developed. Volunteers from neighbouring colleges can deliver these educational sessions at regular intervals, especially on weekends when library attendance is typically at its peak.

▶ *Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya* (My Library for a Better Me)

Our education system places a heavy emphasis on academics and vocational skills. However, there is limited focus on nurturing students to become good human beings and responsible citizens. Addressing this gap, *Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya* aims to foster crucial life skills and citizenship values in children. Launched in 2021 by the Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA) under the *Oduva Belaku* campaign, this initiative seeks to transform rural libraries into dynamic centers of learning and community engagement. Through mentorship and interactive activities, the program supports the holistic development of rural children. "Such initiatives offer children an experience of democracy in action right from a young age," said Marulappa PR, Associate Director at CMCA. "It recognizes them as equal citizens and enables them to explore their right to participate."

The Beginning: Maneyalli CMCA

The *Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya* initiative began in 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by school closures and widespread home confinement for children. In response to these challenges, the Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA) launched Maneyalli CMCA (CMCA at Home) in the districts of Ramanagara and Tumkuru. This initiative aimed to reach out to children via phone calls to educate them on safety measures and self-protection during the pandemic.

Recognizing the isolation and boredom many children faced, CMCA introduced simple activity sheets filled with fun and engaging tasks, encouraging them to spend quality time with their families. This led to the creation of the "Happy Book," a collection of 200 activities spread across themes including health, self-development, and resilience. Around 10,000 "Happy Books" were distributed to children, bringing joy and learning into their lives.

The initiative received a positive response, with children eagerly participating, addressing their doubts, and completing activities with enthusiasm. This initial success laid a strong foundation for the development of the *Nanna Oletigaagi Gran-*

thalaya program.

From Homes to Libraries: The Birth of *Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya*

As the world began to recover, the seeds planted during the pandemic sprouted. The success of *Maneyalli* CMCA led to the idea of bringing these activities to GP libraries. RDPR signed an MoU with CMCA, paving the way for Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya. Before the official launch, CMCA conducted pilot events in two districts to gauge interest. Students loved the activities, confirming CMCA was on the right track. In December 2021, the program was launched in Tumkur district, followed by Ramanagara in April 2022. CMCA mentors enrolled more children in libraries and set up CMCA corners for students to gather and engage in activities.

Pushpa, a CMCA mentor from Tumkur, recalls, "The first three visits were a settling phase. We assessed their reading levels and helped those needing improvement before starting activities."

The program's key pillar is activity-based learning. Children receive activity cards focused on self-development (resilience, goal setting, financial literacy, arts appreciation) and civic skills (gender equality, cultural diversity, environmental awareness, governance participation). Each student selects two cards: one for completion at the library and another as homework. The program emphasizes teamwork, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and empathy through 'Together for Change' projects. Children are grouped and assigned projects on themes like bird watching, critical thinking, gender, and diversity. They prepare chart-format reports which are presented to the Panchayat Development Officer (PDO) and peers.

To complement in-library activities, the program introduced a 24/7 IVRS system for educational content via phone. Children can call a toll-free number to access story reading sessions, changemaker stories, and information on child rights, trees, animals, and birds, ensuring learning continuity outside the library.

Overcoming Challenges

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with around 100 children registering in each library. Initially, some libraries struggled to attract students, but as children enjoyed the activities, they brought their friends too. To reach children in distant villages, mentors distributed activity cards door-to-door and persuaded them to join. Sometimes, a CMCA mentor accompanied students to the GP library. In other cases, parents from distant villages dropped off and picked up their children.

With more children coming to libraries, ensuring adequate infrastructure became essential. CMCA mentors worked with the GPs to enhance library facilities, and the district administration supported these efforts. Initially, some librarians were not cooperative, but witnessing the students' enthusiasm and receiving encouragement from the administration, their involvement grew.

Positive Changes

The initiative has transformed quiet library spaces into bustling hubs of activity and learning. Over 80,000 individuals across 90 libraries in the Ramanagara and Tumakuru districts have benefited from this program. The impact can be seen across various domains, including active citizenship, social interventions, health, sanitation, environmental initiatives, and the promotion of equality and diversity.

Acts of Active Citizenship and Social Interventions

More than 500 'Together for Change' action projects were conducted, where children collaborated to make significant changes in their communities. Over 150 social change and community-building actions were undertaken. For instance, students who attended CMCA sessions approached local authorities to resolve issues like faulty streetlights and broken pavements. CMCA club members also intervened to rescue classmates forced into child labour, helping them return to school. Additionally, CMCA members wrote a letter to the local traffic police officer requesting the installation of 'school zone' and 'no honking' boards in front of their school, resulting in the successful implementation of these safety measures.

During interactions with students attending CMCA's program, their enthusiasm for the activities conducted by program mentors at the library was noticeable. Students who had been visiting the library for some time found the activities, including storytelling and computer- related tasks, to be valuable learning experiences beyond the school curriculum. The desire for more activities related to drawing, painting, singing, and dancing was shared by some students.

Health, Sanitation, and Environmental Initiatives

Some CMCA club members took steps to address issues with their school toilets. They approached the headmaster, who reported it to the GP, resulting in a new set of functioning toilets. Lavanya, a CMCA member from Tumkur district, was inspired by what she learned about sanitation in her CMCA class. She convinced her parents about the benefits of a toilet within the house and then secured their right to sanitation. Lavanya's story inspired sixty other CMCA Club members to do the same. Her inspiring story was featured on the show "Aaj Ki Raat Hai Zindagi" on Star Plus and recognized by UNICEF.

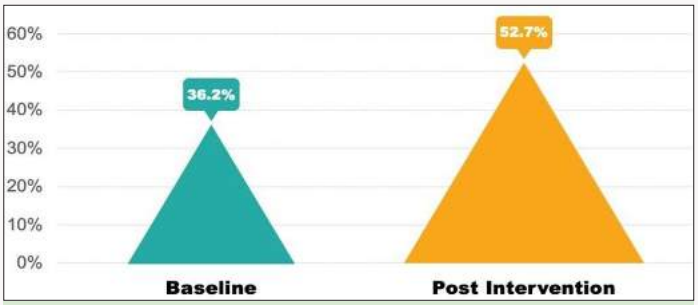
In another instance, Subash and six other children found three horses dying of starvation. The children brought them water from the nearby lake, fed them grass and bananas, and got a doctor to administer saline. The matter was later reported to Compassion Unlimited Plus Action (CUPA). The children's proactive behaviour ultimately saved two of the three horses.

Promotion of Equality

Promoting equality was one of the main aims of the program. As an act of promoting equality, a student named Rana Amina wrote a letter to her school principal requesting separate toilets for boys and girls in her school. Thanks to her initiative, the school now has separate toilets for boys and girls.

In another instance, a CMCA member named Amrita stood up against caste discrimination by speaking out for two women who were served food separately at a village gathering. Similarly, another student named Harshita rescued Surabhi, who was working as a domestic help, by reporting the matter to the child helpline. Surabhi now attends a Government School.

Amrutha, an 8th standard student, says, "Before joining the Better Me Programme, I would visit the library occasionally to borrow books. Now, I visit every Sunday to participate in CMCA's Better Me programme. My mentor Yamuna helps me with various activities. From the water activity, I learned to use water mindfully. An animal care activity taught me kindness towards animals. I also learned about COVID-19 through the program, which increased my awareness of the pandemic. Additionally, I wrote a letter to my parents. As part of the program, I received a file, badge, and notebook, which made me very happy."



Results of Can They Change questionnaire (baseline) and Have They Changed questionnaire (post intervention) administered to measure the CMCA members' shift in knowledge, attitudes, values and beliefs after the intervention (Source: CMCA website)

Another student mentioned that she enjoyed activities like *"Kasadinda Kale,"* where the mentor taught her how to create decorative items from scrap materials. In the event of her absence, the mentor ensures she catches up on the activities during her next visit to the library. She shared her excitement about the planned field trip to nearby farms organized by the mentor.

▶ Grantha Mithra

Rural students, particularly those in Kannada-medium schools, face significant educational challenges due to limited resources, lack of exposure, and insufficient guidance. The Managing Director of the Akanksha Charitable Trust (ACT), Shreesha Bhat, articulated the program's mission: "We want to help Kannada-medium students from villages be at par with

other students by the time they reach Class 10." *Grantha Mithra* aims to address these disparities by providing a structured educational framework to support the personal and professional growth of rural students.

Program Structure and Implementation

Grantha Mithra operates with a 32-week syllabus targeted at 5th to 7th standard students, enhancing skills across various domains. The syllabus includes team-building exercises, Kannada language proficiency, puzzles to develop analytical thinking, Vedic Math, arts and crafts, and English fluency. It also provides career mentoring and boosts confidence through talent shows and presentations, ensuring holistic development and an engaging learning experience.

The program leverages a dedicated network of college students, primarily National Service Scheme (NSS) volunteers. Initially, local colleges played a crucial role in mobilizing volunteers. As the program expanded, the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department (RDPR) intervened to facilitate volunteer mobilization through NSS coordinators across multiple districts.

Despite these efforts, cooperation from college-level NSS coordinators was inconsistent. The Higher Education Department intervened, mandating that colleges near participating GPs send a minimum of 10 students as volunteers. Additionally, to address the challenge of volunteers traveling from distant areas, RDPR issued a circular mandating GPs to provide travel allowances.

The program also faced challenges with student mobilization. Inconsistent support from Panchayat Development Officers (PDOs) and librarians impacted program effectiveness. To ensure better tracking and accountability, the organization mandated strict attendance recording and sharing with school teachers.

Impact and Outcomes

Grantha Mithra has reached more than 1,500 students across 59 GP libraries in the Dakshina Kannada, Uttara Kannada, and Udupi districts, with the support of over 650 volunteers. The initiative has brought about notable improvements in language proficiency, critical thinking, mathematical aptitude, and career awareness among students.

Gangadhar, the librarian at Kabaka GP Library, observed the positive impact: "ACT has been doing an amazing job through Grantha Mithra. Volunteers visit our library every Saturday, training students in academics and general knowledge, and encouraging them to read books."

Students have also expressed enthusiasm for the program. Sulochana M., a student beneficiary, highlighted the diverse learning experiences provided by Grantha Mithra: "I feel really happy to be a part of Grantha Mithra. Here I get to learn math, science, English, and many other things every Saturday. They also teach us fun games and activities."

Volunteers have reported significant personal growth through their involvement. Kavita, a volunteer, noted, "As a volunteer, I've had the opportunity to connect with diverse communities, promote literacy, and witness firsthand the transformative power of education." Vidhi, another volunteer, added, "It is a great experience indeed. I have gained a lot of knowledge through this. The students were all active in their participation and have a good opinion about the program. Personally, for me, I have gained a lot of confidence."

Satisfaction in *Grantha Mithra*	76.6%
Improvements in basic Maths skills	84.1%
Development in self confidence & competitive spirit	68.2%
Participation in extra-curricular activities	94.4%
Extra-curricular activities participated in	Debate & public speaking, sports, cultural programs
Activities beneficial to academic & personal growth	Reading & writing, Kannada dictation, Maths classes, book discussion, English classes

Feedback collected from students, where they self-assessed their improvement since Grantha Mithra was introduced, n=150 (Source: Akansha Charitable Trust)

The positive reception and the impact of Grantha Mithra suggest its potential for expansion. The CEO of Dakshina Kannada Zilla Panchayat remarked, "Grantha Mithra has helped in the overall development of the children. A similar initiative can be introduced in all GP libraries for the benefit of children from government schools."

▶ Conclusion

The transformation of Gram Panchayat (GP) libraries in Karnataka, driven by collaborative efforts between the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department (RDPR) and various NGOs, underscores the potential of targeted interventions to utilize rural library spaces for the holistic empowerment of rural children. This research paper has explored three key initiatives—Sikshana Foundation's Grama Digi Vikasana, CMCA's Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya, and Akanksha Charitable Trust's Grantha Mithra—each of which has played a crucial role in revitalizing rural libraries and turning them into vibrant educational hubs.

Sikshana Foundation's Grama Digi Vikasana has significantly enhanced rural education by equipping students with the tools and skills needed to thrive in the digital age. This initiative has transformed traditional libraries into dynamic knowledge hubs by providing digital resources that bridge the gap in digital access between rural and urban communities. By offering access to smartphones, tablets, and internet connectivity, GDV has opened new avenues for learning and growth.
CMCA's Nanna Oletigaagi Granthalaya has focused on instilling citizenship values and life skills among rural children. Through interactive activities and community projects, this program has turned libraries into centers of civic engagement and personal growth. Stories of children taking initiatives to improve their communities highlight the profound impact of fostering a sense of responsibility and active citizenship from a young age.

Akanksha Charitable Trust's Grantha Mithra has provided structured educational support aimed at addressing the educational needs of rural students. Through a comprehensive syllabus that covers various aspects of student development, this initiative ensures that rural students receive a well-rounded education that prepares them for future challenges.

Several key lessons emerge from these interventions for policy practitioners. Effective collaboration between government bodies and NGOs can significantly enhance public services by leveraging the unique strengths and resources of each partner. Engaging parents, local authorities, and community members is crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of such initiatives. Programs that actively involve the community tend to achieve higher impact and longer-lasting benefits. Maintaining engagement and addressing evolving needs requires programs to be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. Continuous innovation is essential to meet the diverse and dynamic needs of the communities.

While these initiatives have achieved notable success, there are areas for further development. Ensuring accessibility for students in more remote villages and sustaining long-term engagement will enhance the reach and impact of these programme. The sustainability of these efforts depends on continued focus from RDPR and its partners, effective training for librarians, fostering a strong culture of community participation, and maintaining quality through defined metrics while scaling up.

Looking ahead, the future of these initiatives depends on building on the lessons learned and addressing existing needs. By expanding access, maintaining engagement, and continually innovating, these programmes can serve as models for similar efforts in other regions. Ultimately, the goal is to bridge the rural-urban education gap and prepare students for a brighter, more equitable future.

(All names of students have been changed to protect their privacy)

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An In-depth Analysis of Rural Dynamics and Development Opportunities in *Mundla, Sehore* District, Madhya Pradesh

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▶ Abstract

The "Mundla Village Immersion Report" offers an in-depth analysis of rural dynamics in Mundla, Sehore district, Madhya Pradesh, based on my immersive experience as a CRISP Fellow. The report also highlights socio-economic challenges and opportunities, providing detailed observations and proposing targeted interventions. The support from local community members and stakeholders was crucial in shaping my comprehensive understanding of Mundla.

▶ Preface

The Village Immersion Programme is a cornerstone of the CRISP Fellowship, designed to offer Fellows a transformative experience by offering a firsthand experience of rural life, enabling them to understand the socio-economic and cultural fabric of Indian villages. By engaging with various stakeholders and observing the functioning of village-level institutions, fellows can critically evaluate and suggest improvements to enhance rural development initiatives.

The programme aims to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical realities. It emphasizes the importance of understanding and articulating expectations, opinions, and concerns before the immersive experience commences. This reflective process ensures that fellows approach immersion with an open mind and a clear focus on the objectives. By engaging deeply with the community, fellows can gain an understanding of the socio-economic challenges and opportunities in rural areas.

My attempt here has been to meticulously document the findings and insights gained during my immersion. I am confident that this report will serve not only as a detailed account of the current state of the village but also as a basis for proposing targeted interventions and improvements.

My journey to Mundla was made possible through the unwavering support of various stakeholders. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the local community of Mundla for their warmth and cooperation. I am deeply grateful to the Sarpanch of the village Sh. Kailash Patel for providing unwavering support and for accommodating me in his own house. I am also thankful to Anganwadi worker Smt. Anita Thakur, Anganwadi helper Smt. Sugandha, Asha worker Smt. Ramkala, various institutional heads, and government officials who facilitated my visit and shared their invaluable insights. Their willingness to share their experiences and challenges was instrumental in shaping my understanding and contributed significantly to my effective immersion.

▶ Introduction

Selection Process and Rationale

Mundla was selected for the Village Immersion Programme due to its representative nature of the rural agrarian economy, diverse demographic composition, and the presence of various government and community-led initiatives. The selection process involved a detailed assessment of various villages in Sehore district, considering factors such as socio-economic indicators, infrastructure, and the extent of ongoing developmental activities.

Mundla emerged as an ideal choice due to its balanced mix of challenges and opportunities. The village's demographic diversity, with different castes and communities living together, provided a unique opportunity to study social dynamics. Additionally, Mundla's active participation in various government schemes and programmes made it a valuable case for evaluating the effectiveness of these initiatives.

▶ District, Block, and Village Overview

Sehore District

Sehore, located in the central part of Madhya Pradesh, is known for its rich cultural heritage and agricultural economy. The district falls within the Malwa Plateau agro climatic region, characterized by fertile soil and a semi-arid climate conducive to growing wheat, soybeans, and pulses. Agriculture is complemented by horticulture, with significant production of fruits and vegetables. Sehore spans an area of about 6,578 sq. km. Administratively, it consists of 8 tehsils, 5 blocks, and 1,072 villages, including 1,011 populated ones. There are 497 gram panchayats, and seven agricultural markets.

Sehore District on the map of Madhya Pradhesh

According to the 2011 Census, Sehore has a population of approximately 1.3 million, with a significant proportion engaged in agriculture and allied activities. Each block in Sehore has unique socio-economic characteristics. The district's infrastructure includes educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and various government offices, making it a pivotal area for rural development initiatives.

Sehore's strategic location, close to the state capital Bhopal, provides it with certain advantages in terms of connectivity and access to markets. It is well-connected by road and rail, which is crucial for the economic activities in the district, especially agriculture, which relies on timely access to markets for selling produce.

The region has significant agricultural activity, with 1,14,041 hectares irrigated and a gross cropped area of 4,55,305 hectares. There are 1,265 primary schools, 167 post offices, and 1,008 electrified villages. Health care facilities are provided by 3 allopathic hospitals, 17 public health centres, and 12 veterinary hospitals.

Ichhawar Block

Mundla is situated in the Ichhawar block of Sehore district. This block is an administrative unit, with various villages under its jurisdiction. Ichhawar's economy is predominantly agrarian, with farmers relying on a mix of traditional and modern farming practices to sustain their livelihoods. The block's infrastructure, schools, hospitals, transport and other essential services cater to the rural population.

The Ichhawar block is characterized by its vibrant agricultural activities, with a focus on crops such as wheat, soybeans, and pulses. The block also has significant horticultural activities, with farmers growing fruits and vegetables for both local consumption and sale in nearby markets. Livestock rearing is another important economic activity, providing additional income to the farming households.

The block's infrastructure plays a crucial role in supporting these economic activities. Educational institutions ensure that children have access to basic education. Healthcare facilities although limited, provide essential medical services to the residents. The block administration works closely with various government departments to implement developmental schemes and programmes aimed at improving the quality of life of the residents.

▶ Mundla Village

Mundla, a small village in the Ichhawar block, epitomizes the quintessential rural life of Madhya Pradesh. The village's primary livelihoods revolve around agriculture, animal husbandry, and small-scale enterprises. Mundla's demographic composition is diverse, with various castes and communities coexisting harmoniously. According to recent data, the village has a population of approximately 1,300 individuals, with a literacy rate of around 60%.

The village's agricultural activities are supported by the fertile soil and favourable climatic conditions. Farmers in Mundla primarily grow wheat, soybeans, and pulses, with some engaged in horticulture. Livestock rearing, particularly cattle and goats, is another significant economic activity, providing additional income and food security to the households.

Mundla's infrastructure includes a primary health centre, an Anganwadi centre, a primary school, and other basic amenities. The village also has a Panchayat office that serves as the administrative hub for local governance. The presence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and various community-based organizations highlights the active participation of the village in community development initiatives.

Different castes and communities living together, add a unique dimension to the social dynamics. Despite challenges, the community's resilience and cooperative spirit are evident in its collective efforts towards development. The participation of the village in various government schemes and programmes reflects its proactive approach towards improving living standards.

▶ Sources of Information

The statistical information presented in this report is sourced from various credible platforms, including the Census of India, government reports, and data collected during the immersion programme. These sources provide a reliable foundation for analysing the village's socio-economic dynamics and formulating actionable insights. Primary data was gathered through interviews, surveys, and direct observations during the immersion, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the ground realities.

▶ Village Immersion Summary

Institutions

1. Primary Health Centre (PHC) - Dewoadia

- **Infrastructure:** The PHC in Dewoadia, serving the village of Mundla, comprises a modest building equipped with essential medical facilities. It includes examination rooms, a pharmacy, and a small ward for patients requiring short-term care. Although quite basic, it is functional and addresses the immediate healthcare needs of the villagers.
- **Functioning:** The PHC operates daily, with medical staff available, to attend to patients. However, the doctor is frequently required at the Civil Hospital in Sehore, which affects the PHC's capacity to handle emergencies. The availability of medicines and medical supplies is inconsistent, impacting the quality of healthcare services. The Anmol Portal is used by nurses to record patient data and vaccinations of villagers.
- **Community Feedback:** Villagers appreciate the accessibility of basic healthcare services but express concerns over the frequent absence of the doctor and the limited range of medical supplies. They also highlighted the need for better diagnostic facilities and more comprehensive healthcare services.

Challenges and Issues:

- Frequent absence of the doctor
- Inconsistent availability of medicines and supplies
- Lack of a lady doctor at the PHC
- Limited diagnostic facilities

Recommendations for Improvement:

- Enhance the availability of medical personnel, preferably consistent presence of a doctor.
- Expand the range of services offered to include diagnostic facilities.
- Upgrade infrastructure to better serve the healthcare needs of the community.
- Ensure a steady and reliable supply of medicines.
- Appoint a lady doctor to cater to the needs of female patients.

Local Practitioner: Mr. B.L. Thakur, a local health practitioner, has been serving the village since 2000. According to him, there are no persistent health issues in the village beyond minor illnesses such as viral fever, cough, and cold. If there is any emergency or severe case, he refers them to the Dewoadia PHC.

ASHA Worker: Smt. Ramkala has been working as an ASHA Worker in Mundla for 15 years. Vaccinations for children between the ages of 1.5 months to 5 years are administered by the nurse, by Smt. Ramkala at the Aarogya Kendra in the Anganwadi.
She maintains vaccination records in a register, of approximately 130 children aged 0 to 5 years. Vaccination sessions occur every third Tuesday of the month, and polio drops are administered alongside other vaccines.

Interacting with the Asha Worker at Anganwadi

Smt. Ramkala also assists with the delivery of pregnant women by calling for the 108 or Janani Ambulance. If the situation is critical, a doctor may be present in the ambulance. Normal deliveries are conducted at the Block Level Civil Hospital in Ichhawar, while emergency cases are referred to the District Hospital in Sehore. Smt. Ramkala accompanies patients in the ambulance and ensures they receive necessary care.

Conclusion: The PHC in Dewoadia provides essential healthcare services to the village of Mundla, but there is scope for significant improvement. Addressing the issues of medical personnel availability, infrastructure upgrades, and consistent medical supplies will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the PHC. The dedicated efforts of local practitioners and ASHA workers are commendable, and their roles are crucial in maintaining the health and well-being of the villagers.

2. Anganwadi Centre - Mundla

CRISP Fellow at Anganwadi Mundla with Anganwadi Helper and Kids

Infrastructure: The Anganwadi Centre in Mundla (Kendra No. 52) is a small structure equipped with basic amenities for early childhood care and education. It includes a classroom, a kitchen for preparing meals, and a storage area for educational materials and nutritional supplements. Anganwadi worker Smt. Anita Thakur, who has been working since 1995, and helper Smt. Sugandha were both present during my visit.

CRISP Fellow interacting with Anganwadi Worker

Functioning: Children usually arrive around 10 AM, with attendance varying between 10 to 25 children. The centre provides early childhood education by way of lessons in counting, prayers, singing, dancing, cleanliness drives, and storytelling. Lunch is served daily from 12:30 PM to 1:00 PM for children aged 3 to 6 years, while children aged 6 months to 3 years receive meals on Tuesdays. Pregnant and lactating mothers receive Take Home Ration (THR), consisting of Wheat and Chickpea Flour, Soya Barfi, and Khichdi. Every month from the 11th to the 20th, the height and weight of each child aged 6 months to 6 years are recorded. The Poshan Tracker Mobile App is used to record data of pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children up to 6 years of age. The Sampark Mobile App is used for generating monthly and yearly reports and logging location-based activities of the Anganwadi worker.

Schemes / Yojanas:

- Pradhan Mantri Maitritva Vandana Yojana: Provides ₹5000 credited to the bank account of the mother of a baby girl.
- Ladli Lakshmi Balika Yojana: A state scheme providing financial support to girls, with ₹2000 in 6th grade, ₹4000 in 8th grade, and ₹6000 in 11th grade.

Challenges:

- Maintenance of records and daily app usage for data feeding.
- Administrative burden on AW from other departments, including election work and vaccination records.
- Random requests for information which creates pressure on the staff.
- Limited infrastructure, such as a lack of tables, chairs, and outdated or broken toys and playing materials

Opportunities:

- Upgrading infrastructure with additional tables, chairs, and educational materials.
- Providing uniforms for children to improve identification and a sense of belonging.
- Ensuring timely provision of materials like dari (mats), almirah (cupboards), and registers instead of staff using their own resources.
- Offering additional training for Anganwadi workers to enhance service quality.

Community Feedback: Parents value the role of the Anganwadi but highlight the need for better facilities and more consistent staffing. They expressed a desire for more engaging and comprehensive early childhood education programs.

Scope for Improvement: Enhancing the centre's infrastructure and ensuring consistent staff presence can significantly improve the centre's effectiveness. Expanding the range of educational materials and activities, along with additional training for Anganwadi workers.

3. Housing for Marginalized Communities

Infrastructure: Housing conditions for marginalized communities in Mundla vary, with many residing in semi-pucca houses. Access to basic amenities such as water, sanitation, and electricity is inconsistent. The houses are often small, crowded, and lack proper ventilation and sanitation facilities.

Functioning: Efforts are being made to improve living conditions through government schemes, but challenges remain in terms of accessibility and timely implementation. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) has been instrumental in providing housing assistance, but the pace of implementation is slow.

Community Feedback: Marginalized communities express a need for more robust housing schemes and better access to basic services. They also highlighted issues related to land ownership and tenure security, which impact their ability to improve housing conditions.

Challenges and Issues:

- Inconsistent access to basic amenities (water, sanitation, electricity)
- Slow implementation of housing schemes like PMAY
- Issues related to land ownership and tenure security
- Overcrowding and inadequately ventilated housing

Recommendations for Improvement:

- Strengthen housing initiatives to ensure equitable access to basic services.
- Accelerate the implementation of housing schemes to improve living standards.
- Provide technical assistance for house construction to ensure quality and sustainability.
- Address land tenure issues to enable residents to make improvements to their housing.

4. MGNREGA Worksites

Tulsi Sadan made under MGNREGA

Cow Shelter (Gaushala) made under MGNREGA

Infrastructure: MGNREGA worksites in Mundla are spread across various locations, involving activities such as road construction, water conservation projects, and afforestation. The infrastructure at these sites includes basic tools and materials necessary for the tasks at hand. However, the quality and availability of these resources vary, affecting the efficiency of the work. The Tulsi Sadan, Cow Shelter (Gaushala) and the laying of underground pipes in Narmada-Parvati River linking project were done by the MGNREGA workers.

Functioning: The MGNREGA scheme in Mundla has provided significant employment opportunities to the rural population, particularly during the off-season for agriculture. However, delays in wage payments and lack of adequate supervision have been reported, impacting the overall effectiveness of the programme.

Community Feedback: Villagers appreciate the employment opportunities provided by MGNREGA but express frustration over delayed payments and occasional mismanagement. They also suggested that more diversified projects under the scheme could better benefit the community.

Challenges and Issues:

- Delays in wage payments
- Inadequate supervision and management of worksites
- Inadequate quality and availability of tools and materials

Recommendations for Improvement:

- Ensure timely wage payments to maintain trust and motivation among workers.
- Supervision and management of worksites to enhance efficiency and effectiveness.
- Diversify the types of projects undertaken to better meet community needs and provide varied employment opportunities.
- Provide better tools and resources to improve productivity.

5. Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

Infrastructure: The SHGs in Mundla operate from various locations, often meeting in community spaces or members' homes. These groups have access to basic resources such as financial records, training materials, and loan application forms. However, there is a need for more structured support and dedicated spaces for SHG activities.

Functioning: There are a total of nine SHGs in the village, each with a minimum of 10 members and a maximum of 13. Notable SHGs include the model SHG, Uchit Mulya Karya SHG, which has 10 members and works with the Panchayat to provide rations to villagers. Other functional SHGs include Aadarsh Group, Mahila Bachat Group, and Parbati Group. Eight SHGs form a Samuh, with each SHG's Adhyakash (President) and Sachiv (Secretary) being members of this larger group. Financial support has been received from various banks: four SHGs received ₹1 lakh each from Maharashtra Bank, one SHG received ₹3.6 lakhs from HDFC Bank, and the Maha Samuh received about ₹3 lakhs. One woman used SHG funds to successfully open a cosmetics and apparel shop in the village.

CRISP fellow interacting with SHG women

Challenges:

- **Lack of Awareness:** Many SHG members lack information about their roles and responsibilities and how to utilize funds for business ventures.
- **Motivation and Trust:** There is a lack of motivation, trust, and vision among the women, leading to funds being used for non-productive purposes like building and repairing houses under PM Awas Yojana.
- **Market Linkages:** There is no effective market linkage for SHG products. Efforts to sell self-made products like washing powder, incense sticks, bags, Rakhi, and Gonyl (a mix of cow urine and phenyl) failed due to lack of demand. Although Surya Foundation provided training under Aajeevika Mission, operations ceased in the absence of a market.

Suggestions from SHG Members:

- **Finished Products:** There is a need to focus on selling final/finished products.
- **New Ventures:** Women expressed a desire to work with sewing machines and embroidery to produce women's apparel. They also want to manufacture disposable plates, cups, etc., which have a market in nearby villages.

Community Feedback: Members of SHGs appreciate the support and opportunities provided by the groups but express a need for more training in financial management and skill development. They also highlighted the importance of better access to credit facilities and market linkages for their products.

Scope for Improvement:

- **Dedicated Spaces:** Providing dedicated spaces for SHG activities can enhance their effectiveness.
- **Access to Credit and Training:** Enhancing access to credit and training opportunities is crucial. Partnerships with financial institutions, NGOs, and government programs can provide additional support and resources.
- **Market Linkages:** Promoting market linkages and diversifying income-generating activities can improve the economic impact of SHGs.
- **Skill Development:** Providing training in modern governance practices and financial management can empower SHG members to utilize funds more effectively.

6. Village School

Government Middle School, Mundla

Infrastructure: The Government Middle School in Mundla is a basic structure with classrooms, a small playground, and minimal educational resources. The infrastructure is functional and requires significant upgrades, including better classrooms, improved sanitation facilities, and additional educational materials.

Functioning: The school serves 86 students from Class 1 to Class 8, with a team of four permanent teachers and one guest teacher. There are two primary school teachers and three middle school teachers. The school management committee consists of 18 members, of which 14 are parents, 1 teacher, 1 female teacher, 1 Panchayat ward member, and 1 female Panchayat member. The committee changes every two years.

The school has directions from the government to promote Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) starting from Nursery Class, but there is no designated teacher for this purpose. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is provided through the Shishu Shiksha Kendra within the school, but it lacks designated staff, requiring existing teachers to manage these students. The school was closed for summer holidays from May 1st to May 31st, during the immersion visit.

A training program called *Balika Atmaraksha* Training, which focuses on martial arts, is available for girls in Classes 6 to 8 and runs for three months. The school also provides a mid-day meal for students six days a week, with special meals on Tuesdays.

Challenges and Issues:

- **Teacher Shortage:** There is a lack of pre-primary teachers and overall staff is insufficient as well.
- **Promotion Policies:** Teachers are instructed to pass students regardless of attendance or performance.
- **Sports Infrastructure:** The school lacks sports facilities and infrastructure.
- **Funding:** The school receives limited funding from the Gram Panchayat, approximately ₹4,000 per month, for maintenance.

Suggestions:

- Class-wise Teachers: There should be designated teachers for each class to ensure proper teaching at the school.
- Administrative Burden: Teachers should be allowed to focus more on teaching rather than administrative tasks.
- Convergence: There should be better integration between Anganwadi, ECCE, and the school to ensure smooth transitioning and overall development of students.
- Increased Funding: The grant for sports infrastructure, currently about ₹5,000 to ₹7,000 per year, should be increased.

Community Feedback: Parents and students appreciate the dedication of the teachers but express a need for better facilities and more comprehensive educational programs. They also highlight the importance of additional support for students, such as remedial classes and extracurricular activities.

Scope for Improvement:

- **Infrastructure Upgrades:** Improving the school's infrastructure, including classrooms, sanitation, and educational materials, is essential.
- **Teacher Training:** Implementing teacher training programs can enhance the quality of education.
- **Extracurricular Activities:** Introducing extracurricular activities and providing additional support for students can improve educational outcomes.
- **Resource Allocation:** Increasing funding and resources for both educational and sports facilities will significantly benefit the school.

7. Panchayat Office

Infrastructure: The Panchayat office in Mundla serves as the administrative centre for the village. It includes office spaces for Panchayat members, a meeting hall, and storage for official records. Basic furniture and office supplies are available, but there is a need for improved facilities and technological support. The village is divided into 10 blocks, each represented by a Panch and overseen by a secretary.

Functioning: The Gram Panchayat in Mundla plays a crucial role in local governance, managing administrative tasks and implementing government schemes. It is responsible for infrastructure development, public health, education, and welfare programs. The Panchayat operates through regular meetings to discuss village issues and plan development activities.

The Panchayat office manages administrative tasks such as issuing certificates, implementing government schemes, and resolving community disputes. Regular meetings are held to discuss and plan development activities. However, the effectiveness of the Panchayat is sometimes hindered by bureaucratic delays and limited resources. Notably, the Panchayat does not collect taxes (e.g., property tax, water tax, electricity tax) for village development.

Representation of Women and Marginalized Groups: The Panchayat includes representatives from women and marginalized groups, ensuring their voices are heard. However, the level of participation and influence of these groups varies, with some facing challenges in asserting their views and contributing effectively.

Effectiveness of Administrative Institutions: The Panchayat's effectiveness is influenced by resource availability, member capacity, and community engagement. While significant efforts have been made to address community challenges, improvements are needed in transparency, accountability, and responsiveness.

Addressing Community Challenges: The Panchayat has addressed community challenges like low juvenile sex ratio, juvenile death rate, and child marriage through awareness campaigns, educational programs, and health initiatives. The effectiveness of these initiatives varies.

Revenue Generation: The Gram Panchayat receives grants from higher government levels. These revenues fund local development projects and administrative expenses. The capacity to generate and manage revenue varies, impacting financial sustainability.

Community Feedback: Villagers recognize the importance of the Panchayat but feel it could be more proactive. There is a need for better communication and transparency in the Panchayat's operations.

Challenges and Issues:

- Bureaucratic delays and limited resources.
- Lack of technological support and modern facilities.
- Absence of tax collection for village development.
- Need for improved communication and transparency.

Recommendations for Improvement:

- Provide training in modern governance practices for Panchayat members.
- Increase community involvement in decision-making processes.
- Consider implementing a tax collection system for sustainable village development
- Promote greater participation of women and marginalized groups, in decision making.
- Promote greater community involvement in educational initiatives and ensure adequate resources for school improvement.
- Strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess initiative impacts.
- Enhance the Panchayat's capacity to generate and manage revenue through training and technical support.
- Promote better resource management practices, including budgeting, financial planning, and revenue collection.
- Encourage community involvement in revenue generation and ensure transparency in financial management.

▶ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Current Status and Gaps in SDG Implementation

Current Status: The implementation of the SDGs in Mundla is influenced by various factors, including resource availability, local institutional capacity, and community engagement. Some progress has been made in areas such as education and health, reflecting positive outcomes in these sectors. However, significant gaps remain in achieving other SDGs, particularly those related to gender equality, clean water, and sanitation.

Gaps Identified:

- **Gender Equality:** Persistent challenges in promoting gender equality and empowering women and marginalized groups.
- **Clean Water and Sanitation:** Issues with access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities, impacting overall public health and quality of life.
- **Resource Constraints:** Limited financial and infrastructural resources hinder the full implementation of SDGs.

▶ Role of Panchayat in Achieving SDGs

Functions and Efforts: The Panchayat plays a crucial role in advancing the SDGs by:

- **Implementing Local Development Initiatives:** Managing infrastructure projects, health programs, and educational improvements.
- **Promoting Community Engagement:** Conducting awareness campaigns and encouraging community participation in development activities.
- **Service Delivery:** Providing essential services such as mid-day meals, health check-ups, and educational support.

Effectiveness: While the Panchayat's efforts are vital, the effectiveness of these initiatives varies. Some programs achieve significant results, while others face challenges such as limited resources, bureaucratic delays, and insufficient community involvement.

Scope for Improvement

Capacity Building:

- Training and Support: Enhance the Panchayat's capacity to implement the SDGs through targeted training programs for members and staff. This should include training in project management, financial planning, and community engagement.

Coordination and Collaboration:

- Improved Coordination: Foster better coordination between local institutions such as schools, health centres, and community organizations. Integrated approaches can enhance the impact of development initiatives and ensure cohesive efforts towards achieving the SDGs.

Resource Management:

- Adequate Resources: Ensure that adequate resources are allocated for SDG related initiatives, by way of better financial resources, infrastructure development, and human resources.

Community Involvement:

- Enhanced Participation: Promote greater community involvement in SDG related activities. Engaging residents in planning and implementation can improve outcomes and ensure that initiatives are tailored to local needs.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Strengthened Mechanisms: Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact of SDG initiatives. Regular assessments can help identify areas for improvement and ensure that goals are being met effectively.

▶ Livelihoods in Mundla

1. Agriculture:

Current Practices and Crops: Agriculture remains the primary livelihood in Mundla, with farmers cultivating crops such as wheat, soybeans, and pulses. Farming practices vary from traditional methods to modern techniques, depending on resources and knowledge. The use of fertilizers and irrigation systems is inconsistent.

Challenges: Farmers must contend with irregular rainfall, limited access to modern farming methods, and weak market linkages, which impact crop yields and income stability.

Scope for Improvement: To enhance agricultural productivity, training on modern farming techniques and sustainable practices is essential. Improving market linkages and access to agricultural inputs like seeds and fertilizers, along with implementing irrigation projects and water conservation practices, can address these issues.

2. Animal Husbandry:

Livestock and Practices: Animal husbandry, including cattle, goats, and poultry rearing, is a significant livelihood activity. While some farmers use modern techniques, others depend on traditional methods.

Challenges: Livestock owners face challenges such as inadequate veterinary services, poor quality feed, and limited market access for livestock products, affecting animal health and productivity.

Scope for Improvement: Enhancing veterinary services and training on modern animal husbandry techniques can improve livestock health. Better feed management and market linkages, along with organizing veterinary camps, can support livestock owners.

▶ Gender Roles and Dynamics in Mundla

- **Women's Economic Participation:**

Women in Mundla are engaged in various economic activities, including agriculture, animal husbandry, and small-scale enterprises. However, traditional gender roles and societal norms significantly limit their access to resources and opportunities. Despite their active involvement, women's participation is often constrained by barriers such as limited education, restricted mobility, and inadequate financial resources, which impede their full economic participation.

- **Women's Participation in Governance:**

Women in Mundla are represented in local governance through the Panchayat and various community organizations. Despite this representation, they often encounter challenges in asserting their views and contributing effectively to decision-making processes. Their influence in governance varies and is sometimes limited by various socio-cultural factors.

- **Challenges:** Women face several challenges that hinder their economic advancement. These include restricted access to educational and training opportunities, limited mobility due to societal norms, and insufficient access to financial resources. Such constraints affect their ability to fully engage in economic activities and improve their livelihoods. These challenges impact their ability to contribute meaningfully to local governance and decision-making.

- **Scope for Improvement:** To enhance women's economic participation, it is crucial to expand access to education and vocational training. Addressing societal norms that restrict women's roles and promoting gender equality can empower women economically. Increasing access to financial resources, such as credit and savings, will also support their economic activities and independence.

To improve women's participation in governance, increasing awareness of their rights and providing training on governance and leadership are essential. Addressing restrictive societal norms and ensuring better access to information can enhance women's involvement in local decision-making processes and strengthen their role in governance.

▶ Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Women's Empowerment

- **Formation and functioning of SHGs:** Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are vital in Mundla for promoting women's empowerment and economic activities. These groups offer women opportunities to save, access credit, and engage in income generating activities through regular meetings and mutual support.

- **Challenges:** SHGs face challenges such as limited access to credit, inadequate training, and poor market linkages for their products. These issues impact the effectiveness of SHGs in supporting women's economic activities and improving their livelihoods.

- **Scope for Improvement:** To strengthen SHGs, improving access to credit and providing comprehensive training on financial management and skill development are essential. Promoting market linkages and diversifying income

generating activities can further support women's economic empowerment. Additionally, providing dedicated spaces for SHG activities and fostering partnerships with financial institutions and NGOs can enhance the effectiveness of these groups.

▶ Water Scarcity: A Big Threat for Mundla Village

The village faces significant water scarcity during the summer, as all wells used for domestic purposes dry up. With a population of about 1,300, the village relies on just three borewells for its water supply. Additionally, a large pond serves irrigation and domestic needs but typically dries out by mid-May. To address this issue, the village was included in the Narmada-Parvati River Linking Project, which involved laying underground water pipes. However, house connections were still pending at the time of the visit. The Panchayat has also constructed an overhead water tank with a capacity of approximately 100,000 litres to help alleviate the water shortage.

A dry well in the village.

A well being filled by the water supplied from a well in a nearby village via pump. However, people have connected their own motor pumps in the main pipe to take water into their homes thus leaving very less water in the well

Overhead Water Tank that was built recently in the village under Narmada-Parvati River Linking Project

▶ Scope for General Improvement

Feedback from villagers

- Sanitation: Enhancing sanitation facilities and promoting hygiene practices.
- Pollution: Addressing issues related to air, water, and soil pollution.
- Environmental Concerns: Implementing sustainable practices to preserve the environment.
- Water Scarcity: Improving water supply systems and ensuring equitable distribution.
- Livelihood and Financial Systems: Strengthening financial inclusion and providing support for sustainable livelihoods.

▶ Suggestions

• Enhancements to Physical Infrastructure

1. Healthcare: Upgrading PHC infrastructure and ensuring the availability of medical staff and supplies.
2. Education: Improving school facilities, teacher training, and expanding educational resources.
3. Housing: Strengthening housing schemes for marginalized communities.
4. Sanitation: Enhancing sanitation facilities and waste management systems.
5. Water Supply: Developing sustainable water supply systems to address scarcity issues.

- **Improvements in Functioning and Efficiency**
    1. Healthcare: Ensuring consistent availability of medical personnel and expanding services.
    2. Education: Fostering better integration between schools and community institutions like Anganwadis.
    3. Governance: Enhancing transparency and engagement in Panchayat operations.
    4. Scheme Implementation: Streamlining processes for more effective execution of government schemes.

- **Convergence of Schemes and Programmes**
    1. Education and Health: Promoting better convergence between educational and health initiatives to enhance overall community well-being.
    2. Economic Development: Integrating various livelihood schemes to create a more cohesive support system for economic activities.

- **Structural Changes for Comprehensive Development**
    1. Governance: Strengthening local governance structures to ensure more effective decision-making and resource allocation.
    2. Community Participation: Encouraging greater community participation in development initiatives to ensure they are more aligned with local needs.

- **Capacity-Building Initiatives**
    1. Local Governance: Providing training and support for Panchayat members to enhance their governance capabilities.
    2. SHGs: Offering capacity-building programmes for SHGs to improve their functioning and market access.
    3. Community Leaders: Empowering community leaders to drive development initiatives and engage more effectively with external stakeholders.

▶ Conclusion

The Village Immersion Programme in Mundla provided a profound insight into the realities of rural life in Madhya Pradesh. The experience underscored the resilience of the village community and highlighted both the achievements and challenges in various aspects of rural development. Engaging with the local community and institutions revealed valuable lessons about the effectiveness of government schemes, the role of local governance, and the community's aspirations for a better future.

The immersion programme emphasized the importance of holistic and inclusive approaches to rural development. Significant learnings include the need for enhanced infrastructure, better convergence of schemes, and strengthened local governance. These insights are instrumental in shaping future development initiatives and ensuring they are more aligned with the needs and aspirations of rural communities.

Overall, the immersion experience has left a lasting impact, fostering a renewed commitment to contributing to sustainable and inclusive development. The lessons and insights gained during the programme will undoubtedly inform my future efforts to support and empower rural communities across India.

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Village Immersion Report: Focusing on Tribal Development in Rajasthan

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▶ Udaipur District: A Detailed Overview of Its Tribal Population

Population and Literacy Rates

Once referred to as the "City of Lakes," Udaipur City is renowned for its cultural heritage and natural beauty. According to the 2011 census, the district's population is 2,633,312, which constitutes 4.47% of Rajasthan's total population. It has a substantial tribal population comprising 158,257 individuals from Scheduled Castes and 1,260,432 from Scheduled Tribes, representing 6% and 47.86% of the district's total population, respectively.

A significant majority of Udaipur's population, over 80%, resides in rural areas. The population density is 242 persons per square kilometre, with a rural literacy rate of 55%, which is even lower in tribal areas, especially among women.

Tribal Communities and Socio-Economic Conditions

The southern part of Udaipur district is inhabited predominantly by tribal communities, with blocks like Jhadol and Kotra having tribal populations exceeding 70%. The major tribes in this region are the Bhils and Meenas, with the Bhils being the ancient inhabitants of southern Udaipur. These communities live in widely scattered hamlets known as "Phalas." Despite their rich cultural heritage, which includes unique customs, languages, music, dance, fairs, and festivals, the Bhils continue to be one of the most socio-economically backward communities in the district.

The hilly terrain, scanty rainfall, and limited irrigation sources have resulted in much of the land remaining uncultivated. Bhils typically own minimal agricultural resources, such as ploughs and bullocks, which restricts their ability to farm effectively. Consequently, daily wage labour in towns, construction sites, roads, public works, and mines serves as the primary source of income for many tribal families.

Agriculture and Animal Husbandry

Udaipur's agricultural landscape varies significantly across regions. Blocks like Gogunda, Kotra, Jhadol, Girwa, Badgaon, Mavli, and Bhinder are characterised by lime-dominated soil, while Kherwada, Sarada, Salumber, and Lasadiya have red loam soil. The western part of the district is largely rocky, whereas the southeastern part has yellowish-brown soil. Agriculture in Udaipur is primarily rainfed, with nearly 60% of the cultivated area under single cropping during the monsoon season (Kharif). Approximately 70% of the area under cultivation is dedicated to cereals and millet; maize, wheat, barley, and gram being the main crops. Animal husbandry is a vital subsidiary occupation in Udaipur district.

The total livestock population is 3,233,814, the largest proportion being goats. The district also has 242,919 poultry birds, which contribute to the livelihoods of many families.

During my time in Udaipur, I visited over 10 tribal villages, including Nenbara, Sera, Dhol, Dheerji ka Gura, Wani and Ver ki Bagal, to observe and understand the functioning of different institutions within the villages. My first stop was Nenbara Village, an unelectrified village where people lived in tiny huts with roofs made of clay tiles or thatched straw. Women collected firewood during the day and used it for cooking. Locals had to travel several kilometres through treacherous mud tracks to the nearest town for basic repairs and for health checkups, incurring high costs.

I found the situation to be similar in all tribal villages that I visited in the state. All of them lie in mountainous terrain with limited road connectivity to the nearest town, making it difficult to implement projects and deliver services. Seven out of the nine villages we visited were unelectrified and had no access to grid-based power. Access to mobile phones and network connectivity was low in these areas, which are home to the poorest of the poor.

One of the key projects planned under CRISP Rajasthan entailed assessing the status of Forest Rights Act (FRA) beneficiaries, exploring issues related to their livelihood opportunities, and investigating ways to enhance community title status. Armed with only an amateur academic understanding of the FRA, I aimed to engage with tribal communities during my village visits, seeking to understand their ground realities and have grassroots-level conversations. This approach was adopted to solicit answers to the lingering questions I had after studying the FRA –

1. To what extent has the inclusion and participation of tribes in decentralised governance fructified in Rajasthan, with a focus on securing land titles?
2. How have the Forest Rights Committees used the powers under the Act on ground?
3. What technocratic/transformative elements characterise the decentralisation process in Rajasthan?
4. What role do NGOs and civil society organisations play in addressing the challenges of implementing the FRA in Rajasthan?
5. How do conflicts between conservation goals and the rights of forest-dwelling communities influence the implementation of the FRA in Rajasthan?
6. What is the rationale behind the approval, rejection, and pending status of claims in Rajasthan?
7. How do tribals utilise the land once their claim has been acknowledged and land titles have been transferred?

Forest Rights Status

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 aims to recognize the rights of tribal communities over traditionally occupied or used forest lands. As of recent updates, the status of tribal forest rights in Rajasthan is marked by both progress and challenges. Rajasthan has processed over 113233 claims under the FRA, with more than 43,905 of them approved, benefiting around 270,000 tribal households. However, many claims remain pending due to bureaucratic delays, insufficient awareness, and resistance from forest officials. The state government has made efforts to address these issues through awareness programs and training, but effective implementation varies across regions.

FRA Claims Status in Rajasthan	
Total Claims Received	113298
Total Claims Approved	43905
Total Claims Rejected	64085
Total Claims Pending	5308

Source: Tribal Area Development Department Website

▶ Formation of Forest Rights Committees

In Rajasthan, particularly in the tribal areas of Udaipur, the formation of Forest Rights Committees (FRCs) mirrored issues seen in many parts of India. By the end of February 2008, FRCs were hastily formed without adequately informing the local people. These FRCs were primarily established at the panchayat level, with a few exceptions in Scheduled Areas where they were formed at the village level.

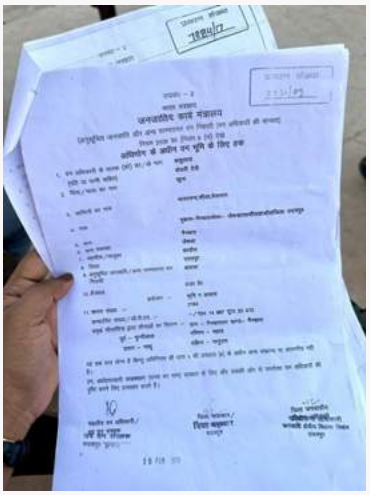
▶ Challenges and Allegations

Rajasthan faced numerous challenges. Allegations surfaced that Joint Forest Management (JFM) committees were converted into FRCs instead of the latter being constituted through Gram Sabha (GS) meetings as mandated. Due to inadequate awareness among the general population as well as the FRC members, there was no understanding of the responsibility of the FRC. As a result, the Forest Department (FD) had no difficulty bypassing them. The State Level Monitoring Committee (SLMC) was practically non-functional. Initially, GS meetings were convened by the panchayat secretary, who also served as the FRC secretary, although an elected village member should have held this role. Consequently, it was the panchayat office that collected the claims instead of the FRCs.

▶ Implementation Issues

The implementation process was controlled by Forest Department and Tribal Area Development Department officials, with minimal public participation. Foremost issues in the tribal villages of Udaipur included wrongful rejections and irregularities at the Gram Sabha level that went unverified at higher levels. Villagers were coerced into claiming only the land designated by the Forest Department, overriding the FRCs' authority. In many instances, claimants were uninformed about their claim status, and the ones whose claims had been rejected lost their right to appeal.

▶ Misappropriations and Violations



FRCs did not receive new applications after December 2009 for a short while, hindering potential claimants. This trend continues till date. The sarpanch reports that it has been over 5 years since any new claim was approved.

Misappropriations in land allotment were common, with only 1-2.5 hectares allotted per claimant, far below traditional landholding sizes. Additionally, allotment orders excluded the names of wives. Despite their holding priority status, underprivileged groups like PVTGs and nomadic tribes were overlooked. The role of the Tribal Area Development Department (TADD) was seen as merely that of forwarding statistical information instead of being an active one.

From a livelihood perspective, community rights are crucial for the Forest Dwellers' Programme (FDP). Initially, the Rajasthan FD had FRCs sign statements relinquishing community forest rights in favour of individual rights, only retreating after protests in 2009. Although community rights were eventually recognized, FD officials continued to promote infrastructural approvals under community claims, to allocate land more easily on unproductive areas.

By July 2010, only 287 community claims were approved in five districts, despite over 7,000 claims being registered. Claims from tribal-dominated districts like Dungarpur, Banswara, and Udaipur were largely ignored. This discrepancy has grown over the years. At the time of my visit, approved claimants were still awaiting formal certificates. Rajasthan has been accused of gross violations of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), with the FD following pre-1980 encroachment laws and limiting claimable areas, denying rightful claims and disrespecting the Constitution. The FD also undertook plantation and afforestation on claimed community lands.

▶ Livelihood and Relocation Issues

Despite the successful implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in Rajasthan, its effectiveness in supporting tribal communities remains significantly limited. The program's impact is overshadowed by the vast disparity between the job opportunities provided and the size of the tribal population, resulting in a substantial gap in the people-to-job ratio.

The tribal population in Rajasthan, particularly in remote areas, faces severe underemployment. The number of jobs generated under NREGA is insufficient to meet the needs of the tribal communities. Many tribal men and women eagerly seek employment opportunities through NREGA projects, such as local road construction or building projects, but these opportunities are few and far between.

The challenging geographical conditions and scarcity of alternative livelihood options further exacerbate the problem. The arid environment limits agricultural productivity, leading to minimal income sources. Consequently, many male members of tribal families migrate to urban centres like Udaipur and Jaipur in search of work. Some even venture beyond state borders to neighbouring Gujarat, where they take up menial daily wage labour jobs. This migration underscores the lack of local employment opportunities and the pressing need for more effective job creation strategies.

Additionally, awareness of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) among tribal communities remains alarmingly low, particularly among those who are illiterate. There is hardly any effort to educate them about their rights under the FRA, and its potential benefits. NGOs working in the area face significant challenges and are wary of repressive legal actions against them for advocating tribal rights.

Despite the state government's claims of settling individual title claims, evidence suggested otherwise. The overall implementation of the FRA in Rajasthan was seen as highly undemocratic. Livelihood experts noted that community rights could offer better benefits through forest resources and pastoral lands, but infrastructure benefits like community buildings, anganwadis, and schools often overshadowed these opportunities.

▶ Gender Balance and Participation in Forest Rights Committees

Women's property rights, access to forest resources, and their participation in forest governance are critical issues for both policy and practice legislation. In tribal communities of Rajasthan, tribal women's identity, property, and access to forests and its resources derive from their male relatives. Illiterate tribal women are unaware of the Forest Rights Act and believe that the government only grants household heads, typically men, the right to own forestland. The communication gap between government departments controlling forests and forest communities does not help.

Majority of Forest Rights Committees (FRCs) are predominantly male-led, with women serving merely as proxy members, holding little to no actual power. This gender imbalance has noticeable drawbacks for the effectiveness and sustainability of forest management in the region. Women's unique perspectives, particularly their focus on health and long-term family benefits, are largely absent from decision making and implementation. As a result, we see a skewed prioritisation towards immediate economic gains rather than sustainable forest management. The exclusion of women also perpetuates their

marginalisation, preventing them from contributing fully to the community's development and undermining the potential for more balanced and effective forest management strategies. Promoting gender balance in FRCs by encouraging genuine female participation and leadership can address these issues. Mixed groups, can leverage the strengths of both men and women, leading to better conflict resolution, resource monitoring, and a more holistic approach to community welfare and forest sustainability.

▶ Transforming Education And Community Welfare

The Impact of Maa-Bari Centers

Educating the next generation is a common aspiration, globally, but it holds special significance among the tribal communities in the remote areas of India. While Anganwadi centres are well-known, Rajasthan hosts a distinctive initiative under the Tribal Area Development Department known as Maa-Bari centres. As the name implies, these centres are managed by "Maa" or "Mothers" and serve as nurturing spaces that offer education, care, and empowerment.

Most of the Maa Bari centres I visited were humble, single-room structures, built with care and simplicity. Its walls were made of sturdy mud bricks, painted in earthy tones that blended harmoniously with the surrounding landscape. The roof, fashioned from corrugated metal sheets, gleamed under the sun and provided shelter from the frequent rains. Inside, the room was a flurry of colours and activity. The space was efficiently arranged to make the most of its limited dimensions. On one side of the room, a small chalkboard was mounted on the wall, surrounded by brightly coloured cheerful posters depicting numbers, letters, and animals.

The most energetic group of children greeted me with a hearty "Namaste...!" Their enthusiasm, innocence, and curiosity were contagious as they examined my bag, phone model, the way I waved, and the jewellery I wore. I expected them to be a very shy bunch with only local language knowledge, but to my surprise, Radhika, a 4th standard student, confidently read a story in English. The younger students were eager to showcase their talents by singing local rhymes and folk songs. "I like Meena Madam; she tells us stories," explained 7-year-old Ramesh. "I enjoy coming here, and I get to eat new things every day."

Since their inception in 2007-08, Maa-Bari centres have been established in tribal regions of Rajasthan where government schools are unavailable within a 1 to 1.5-kilometer radius. These centres cater to tribal children aged 6 to 12 who are not enrolled in any other government school. Each Maa-Bari centre accommodates up to 30 children, providing them with essential educational resources.

Given the severe weather conditions in these areas, the operational timings of Maa-Bari centres are adjusted based on directives from the District Collector. Each centre is staffed with one Shiksha Sahayak (Education Assistant) and one to two Mahila Sahayaks (Female Assistants) or Bhojan Sahayaks (Meal Assistants).

The centres provide free educational materials, including textbooks, notebooks, slates, pencils, and school bags. Children are also given free uniforms, shoes, socks, ties, belts, and winter jerseys. The centres are equipped with utensils and gas connections for preparing nutritious breakfast and lunch meals. Some older centres operate as day-care facilities, offering food and care from morning to evening.

Metric	Value
Total approved centres	3,100
Currently operational centres	3,000
Total children enrolled	89,775
Total Shiksha Sahayaks employed	3,000
Total Mahila Sahayaks employed	3,000 - 6,000
Textbooks distributed annually	89,775 sets
Notebooks distributed annually	269,325
Slates and pencils distributed	89,775 each
Erasers and school bags distributed	89,775 each
Uniforms distributed annually	89,775 sets
Shoes, socks, ties, belts, jerseys	89,775 sets annually
Meals provided daily	89,775 breakfasts & lunches

During my visit to over nine Maa-Bari centres, I encountered dedicated teachers who, despite challenging conditions and limited resources, strive to impart quality education. Mr. Sudhanshu Meena, a Shiksha Sahayak, shared his vision: "I want to change the way we are treated in our society. I want to ensure our children get a better life and achieve success, and I believe this is only possible through quality education." He added, "I make it a point to visit every home in my village to ensure that children are enrolled in Maa-Bari centres and continue their education beyond these centres. I personally accompany parents and children to enrol them in the nearest government school. I reached where I am today because a teacher took a chance on me and believed in my potential. I want to give back and serve as a source of motivation for my students as well." Beyond their teaching duties, Shiksha Sahayaks maintain connections with the village, educating residents about their political, health, social, and civil rights. They act as pillars of the community, resolving conflicts and promoting knowledge. Currently, out of 3100 approved Maa-Bari centres, 3000 are operational, benefiting approximately 89,775 tribal boys and girls.

The dedication and enthusiasm of these teachers help maintain low student dropout rates. Some Maa Bari centres, such as the one in Sera, are located so remotely that during harsh summers, the Bhojan Sahayaks have to walk over 3-4 kilometres to find a hand pump with water or dig a hole to create a small water body to collect water for cooking. Most of the toilets lack water facilities.

The Tribal Area Development Department should develop strategies to tackle gender disparities in higher education by

launching awareness campaigns and implementing measures to address and prevent early marriage practices in tribal communities. Enhance Maa Bari centres by equipping them with essential amenities like electricity and bathrooms, making them more accessible and beneficial for the entire community. They should also consider establishing community resources such as libraries in the village to support children's education and create new opportunities for them.

▶ Empowering Tribal Communities through SHGs

Van Dhan Vikas Yojna

Rajasthan has established 100 Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) under the Van Dhan Vikas Yojana, each serving around 300 tribal families. These centres act as hubs for training, in processing, and marketing forest produce, directly benefiting approximately 30,000 tribal families. The state emphasises key Minor Forest Produce (MFPs) such as honey, tendu leaves, mahua, tamarind, and various medicinal plants. Through value addition and better marketing strategies facilitated by VDVKs, tribal families have reported a 30-40% increase in income. Produce from these VDVKs, like Sattu powder, is also used to prepare meals in Maa Bari centres.

A notable example is the Van Dhan Kendra in Palodra, Udaipur District, identified as a demo unit by the state implementing agency. Members have been organised into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), with bank accounts opened and a district-level advocacy workshop conducted in December 2019. These members received training in scientific harvesting techniques, quality maintenance, removal of foreign materials, and processing amla into value-added products.

Similarly, the Van Dhan Vikas Kendra in Jhadoli block, Sirohi District, focuses on the value addition and processing of Custard Apple, supported by a mentoring organisation. Members have been trained in Custard Apple pulping and preserving the pulp, enhancing the product's value.

Despite these successes, challenges remain. Robust market linkages for MFPs are lacking, necessitating continuous efforts to connect tribal products with larger markets. Infrastructure improvements at VDVKs, including storage, transportation, and processing facilities, are crucial for expansion and diversification. With ongoing support and development, VDVY has the potential to further uplift the tribal economy and contribute to the holistic development of these communities.

▶ Can We End all Forms of Exclusion?

My recent village immersion has highlighted profound disparities in infrastructure. Here are questions I do not have to worry about as I put myself to sleep: Where will I get my food? Do I have clean fuel to cook? Can I store food in a refrigerator? Where can I get clean water? Will my shower provide hot water? Can I read at night with an electric light? How can I communicate with distant friends? Infrastructure plays a significant role in why these questions are irrelevant for me.
This disparity between mainstream privileged lives and the lives I saw in Udaipur, underscores the urgent need to address infrastructure deficits in tribal areas. Programs like the Van Dhan Vikas Yojna and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are crucial steps toward empowerment and economic development. These initiatives not only provide training and resources for processing and marketing forest produce but also foster community self-reliance and financial independence. By integrating modern infrastructure with traditional knowledge, we can create sustainable development models that respect cultural heritage while improving living standards.

It also made me reemphasize the lesson I have learnt during numerous such social development visits; to not think in absolutes. Currently, my not having these worries is a privilege. But I want to make such privilege, a basic reality for everyone. One part of the solution lies in fostering infrastructure literacy, so that people like me, who often take things for granted, become mindful of and identify issues and gain the confidence to improve further.

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Analysis of Institutions of Rural India through the lens of Nehru and Gandhi with case study of *Yerrapanta* and *Chenampally villages* of Telangana

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▶ Introduction

The village has often been seen as a convenient starting point for gaining insights into 'traditional' Indian society (Jodhka, 2002). On August 23, 1944, Mahatma Gandhi wrote a letter to Nehru stating that India begins and ends in villages. The pre-independence villages of India signify authentic social life with a unique economy and cultural unit mostly uncorrupted by outside influences. The villages represented the masses, and most of the country was rural. A community of sociologists believed India was a land of "village republics" of self-sufficient corporately organized villages (Cohn, 2017). As stated above, the village's self-sufficiency and authenticity of culture and society were visible before independence. Nehru agreed with Gandhi that the traditional Indian village was once a 'community,' but he viewed the existing villages as characterized by class divisions, backwardness, and ignorance. This modernist perspective of Nehru on the village significantly influenced the official policies and rural development programs implemented by the Indian government post-independence, especially in the 1950s and 1960s (Jodhka, 2002). The government further advocated for the introduction of Panchayati Raj, a system of local self-government aimed at empowering vil-

lages and fostering their development. This initiative was a cornerstone for transforming rural India into a more inclusive and participatory society. The multi-dimensional approach to rural development was made through different institutions such as schools, anganwadis, panchayats, and primary health centers, which play crucial roles in rural villages' holistic development. Schools provide education, empowering the youth with the knowledge and skills necessary for personal and community advancement. Anganwadis serve as early childhood development centers, offering nutrition, health care, and pre-primary education, ensuring the wellbeing of young children and supporting working parents. Panchayats, established under the Panchayati Raj system, promote local self-governance by addressing community needs, managing resources, and fostering participatory decision-making. Primary health centers deliver essential healthcare services, addressing medical needs and promoting preventive care within rural communities. Together, these institutions form a comprehensive framework for rural development, addressing educational, health, governance, and socio-economic challenges to enhance the overall quality of life of villagers. This research paper will delve into the institutional mechanisms prevalent in the villages and the current scenario of the villages in the rural area of Telangana.

▶ Area of Study and Methodology

Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas claimed that by studying a village, a researcher could generalize the *'social processes and problems to be found in greater parts of India'* (1955). As practitioners of developmental studies, CRISP aligned with the ideals of M.N.Srinivas providing Fellows the opportunity to study two villages- Yerrapanta and Chenampally of Nagarkurnool district of Telangana as part of the Rural Immersion program. The field visit provides the necessary data collected through focus group discussions for this research paper. Eleven focus group discussions were held with the members of the gram panchayat, Anganwadi workers, MNREGA workers, villagers, students, and public health center workers.

Yerrapanta is a tribal village consisting of the Chenchus, an aboriginal semi-nomadic tribe of the central hill regions of Andhra Pradesh. The ecological interpretation of the Chenchu tribe indicates a person who lives under a 'Chettu' meaning trees (Ota & Mall, 2020). With the rapid development and introduction of the Forest laws, the Chenchus status changed from the forest's undisputed lord to a mere landless labour (Fürer-Haimendorf, 2022). The village was semi-nomadic, and villagers used to live in forests. After the forest was declared a state reserve forest, the villagers were asked to leave the forest area. The forest department, along with the help of the Rural Development Trust (RDT), provided pucca houses outside the perimeters of the forest. According to the Anganwadi worker, 123 families of 348 members reside in the village. The village is a classic example of an Indian tribal village.

Chenampally is a village consisting of both tribal and non-tribal villagers. According to a gram panchayat worker, 223 families of 768 members reside in the village. The village has a post office, a public health center, an upper primary school, and an Anganwadi. The village has a diverse economy, which the author tried to calculate based on housing typology. It must be noted that the tribals residing in this village are the poorest of the poor. Thus, to understand the reason for such discrepancies, the study of the institutions of the two villages using the lens of Gandhi and Nehru's viewpoints on the villages is needed.

▶ Analysis of Institutions

Gram Panchayat:

In rural villages, power dynamics traditionally revolved around land ownership, caste affiliations, and social status. Following India's independence, significant reforms were implemented, including abolishing the zamindari and caste systems and introducing new land policies. These reforms precipitated a transformative shift in the village power structure, now increasingly shaped by political influences and affiliations. Significant changes occurred in rural governance in response to these reform policies post-independence. Panchayats, local self-government bodies, were established as a cornerstone of these reforms aimed at fostering grassroots democracy and developing rural communities. These panchayats were intended to empower residents by decentralizing administrative authority and decision-making processes, thereby pivotal in shaping the evolving power structure within villages. Consequently, the transition from traditional power dynamics based on land

ownership and caste to a more politically driven framework was accompanied by the emergence of panchayats as key institutions driving rural development and governance.

The gram panchayat members of Chenampally and Yerrapanta were from diverse backgrounds, which was established by the 73rd Amendment of the constitution. However, the female empowerment that the government seeks needs to improve, as evidenced by the fact that during all meetings with the CRISP team, it was the husbands of the elected female members who were consistently present, not the elected female members themselves.

The implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin by panchayat members revealed notable shortcomings, particularly in meeting the housing needs of the community. Despite their diverse backgrounds, they were unable to effectively develop critical infrastructure such as roads, drainage systems, and street lighting. Moreover, residing near forested areas posed challenges as they struggled to negotiate with the forest department for compensation following wildlife attacks on cattle. The persistent issue of inadequate street lighting remained a significant concern across both villages.

Three years ago, under Mission Bhagiratha, water tanks, and taps were installed to provide potable water. However, villagers continue to favour borewell water due to concerns that tap water contributes to health issues like fever, colds, coughs, and other diseases. This indicates a failure on the part of the panchayat to adequately educate the community about the safety and purity of the supplied water.

Discrimination was evident in Chenampally village, which is characterized by a diverse population ranging from tribals to non-tribals. Notably, the Chenchu tribe, comprising the poorest families in the village, faced stark disparities. Despite implementing Mission Bhagiratha, where each household received at least one tap for potable water, the ultra-poor families, precisely seven Chenchu families, were excluded and compelled to share taps among themselves. Also, the economic situation of the families was highly dire as they were forced to work as bonded labor due to poverty. The inadequate housing conditions of these families prompted critical reflections on the harsh realities of rural life and the efficacy of existing institutional frameworks.

In Chenampally, the ultra-poor households were derogatorily referred to as 'Garib Admi' (poor people) by locals, hinting at a subtle form of untouchability. The panchayat's failure to promote awareness and enforce Article 15 contributed to perpetuating these social inequities. Additionally, some ultra-poor families were excluded from the MNREGA scheme due to a lack of official documentation, forcing them into bonded labor or accepting meagre wages. These systemic failures underscore the institutional shortcomings within Chenampally's panchayat, highlighting significant challenges in addressing and improving the socio-economic status of marginalized communities.

Nehru envisioned villages as vibrant centers of self-sufficiency and socio-economic progress, integral to India's overall development. However, the abovementioned challenges underscore how Nehru's idealism has yet to fully materialize in practice, especially in villages like Chenampally and Yerrapanta. Despite constitutional amendments aimed at decentralizing power to gram panchayats and promoting diverse representation, the effective empowerment of women within these institutions still needs to be improved, as evidenced by their marginalization in decision-making processes. Moreover, the implementation of flagship government schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin and Mission Bhagiratha

has revealed significant shortcomings in addressing fundamental infrastructural needs and ensuring equitable access to essential services like water and housing, particularly for marginalized groups like the Chenchu tribe. The persistence of discrimination and socio-economic disparities within these villages reflects a gap between Nehru's vision of empowered, self-sufficient villages and the harsh realities of inadequate governance, institutional failures, and socio-economic exclusion experienced by vulnerable communities.

Alcohol consumption was once pervasive across villages, but a shift is evident in the current generation, marked by aspirations fuelled by awareness programs initiated by RDT and the panchayat office. This transformation has also had a notable impact on social issues such as child marriages and domestic violence, which have significantly declined. These positive changes can be attributed to the proactive efforts of RDT through their awareness initiatives and the strategic interventions of the Panchayat.

Gandhi's vision of the village as the nucleus of societal change provides a philosophical underpinning to the positive transformations described. Gandhi advocated for villages to be self-sustaining, morally grounded communities where individuals were empowered through education, self-reliance, and collective responsibility. The reduction in alcohol consumption and improvements in social issues like child marriages and domestic violence reflect a movement towards Gandhi's ideal of Swaraj, or self-governance, at the local level. RDT and the Panchayat align with Gandhi's belief in grassroots empowerment and decentralized decision-making by fostering awareness and community engagement. These initiatives address immediate social challenges and cultivate a sense of civic responsibility and ethical conduct among villagers, echoing Gandhi's vision of villages as centers for holistic development and social progress.

Anganwadi and School:

Yerrapanta and Chenampally each host an Anganwadi center, yet their operational disparities highlight significant differences in service delivery and infrastructure. Yerrapanta benefits from support provided by RDT, resulting in a well-maintained facility equipped with essential amenities. This Anganwadi operates effectively, offering children early childhood education and regular food provisions. In contrast, the Anganwadi in Chenampally faces operational challenges, including periodic closures for up to four days and irregular distribution of food supplies, as reported by local residents. Moreover, the center operates only two to three days a week for brief periods, which is insufficient to meet the educational and nutritional needs of the village's children. These shortcomings underscore institutional failures in Chenampally to ensure consistent access to nutrition and early childhood education. The inadequate infrastructure of the Anganwadi building in Chenampally further impedes its suitability for effectively serving young children's needs. These shortcomings highlight systemic failures in governance and resource allocation that prevent rural communities, especially in Chenampally, from accessing consistent and quality educational and nutritional services for their children. This disparity underscores a gap between Nehru's aspirational vision of empowered villages and the practical challenges in ensuring equitable development and opportunity across rural India.

"Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself" (Dewey, 1897) is a quote that shows the value of education. Proper education is the need of the hour for rural development. Both the villages have one upper-primary school situated in Chenampally. The school is structured around three villages, and its functionality will provide the path to the future

of these villages. However, preliminary findings show that the number of teachers is inadequate. The teacher's failure in teaching can be observed when ten students from classes six to eight failed to add two numbers and write their names in English. Also, seven children from classes two to six failed to write all the alphabets of English. Villagers attribute these shortcomings to teachers' inconsistent attendance, often arriving late and leaving early due to long commutes from distant locations.

Moreover, high dropout rates persist among youth, driven by economic pressures and a perceived lack of relevance in traditional education pathways. This institutional failure to provide quality education and raise awareness about its importance echoes Dewey's sentiment, emphasizing how educational infrastructure and teaching quality deficiencies undermine rural youth's prospects and aspirations. Nehru envisioned villages as vibrant centers of growth and progress, where education would serve as the cornerstone of socio-economic development. However, the challenges highlighted in the essay demonstrate a significant gap between Nehru's vision and the current reality in Chenampally and Yerrapanta villages. These institutional shortcomings in providing quality education resonate with Nehru's emphasis on education to empower and uplift rural communities, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to bridge the gap between vision and reality.

Public Health Center:

"Access to healthcare is not just a luxury; it is a fundamental human right essential for rural development." Public health centers play a crucial role in providing rural villagers with this fundamental right. Access to quality healthcare not only enhances the human development index but also serves as a cornerstone for overall rural development. In Chenampally, the public health center (PHC) serves three villages, including Yerrapanta, operating from its own facility. However, the center's nurse acknowledges the need for improvements, as during summer months, they resort to conducting activities under a tree due to inadequate infrastructure. The PHC currently operates biweekly with a monthly visit from a doctor who conducts regular check-ups and provides free medications for the entire month.

Essential healthcare services such as iron supplementation for anaemic babies and girls, free vaccinations for children of all ages, and government schemes for pregnant and lactating women are also diligently provided by ASHA workers. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including the PHC's limited operating hours and inadequate infrastructure, which hinder optimal service delivery. Additionally, the lack of reliable transportation for medical emergencies forces villagers to endure a challenging ten-kilometre journey to the nearest city, further underscoring the need for improved healthcare access in rural areas. Addressing these issues through enhanced PHC services and infrastructure improvements would significantly benefit rural communities, promoting better health outcomes and advancing overall rural development. These institutional shortcomings reflect a failure to realize Nehru's vision of villages as self-sufficient centers with robust healthcare infrastructure, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to bridge the gap and ensure equitable access to healthcare in rural India.

▶ Conclusion

Despite Nehru and Gandhi's visionary ideals for Indian villages as centers of self-sufficiency, social harmony, and holistic development, the reality in villages like Yerrapanta and Chenampally in Telangana reflects significant institutional failures and persistent challenges after 77 years of independence. Nehru envisioned villages as engines of socio-economic progress, empowered through decentralized governance under panchayats, robust educational institutions, and accessible healthcare facilities. However, the findings from Yerrapanta and Chenampally reveal stark discrepancies between these aspirations and the actual implementation on the ground. The gram panchayats, despite their constitutionally mandated roles, often strug-

gle with inclusivity and effective governance, as evidenced by the marginalization of women in decision-making processes and the inadequate implementation of government schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Mission Bhagiratha.

Similarly, educational institutions, while established with the intent to empower youth through education, face challenges such as inadequate teaching staff, high dropout rates, and failure in teaching. These shortcomings indicate a failure to provide equitable and quality education, hindering Nehru's vision of villages as centers of learning and progress. Furthermore, the Anganwadi centers and public health facilities, despite their essential roles in early childhood education and healthcare delivery, suffer from infrastructural inadequacies, limited operational hours, and accessibility issues, thereby failing to meet the basic health and educational needs of rural populations.

The overall picture underscores a profound gap between the visionary ideals of Nehru and Gandhi and the persistent challenges faced by rural institutions in effectively addressing socio-economic disparities and promoting inclusive development. Moving forward, addressing these institutional shortcomings and revitalizing the foundational principles of inclusive governance, equitable education, and accessible healthcare will be crucial in realizing the longstanding aspirations for vibrant and self-sustaining rural communities in India.

▶ Recommendation:

To achieve the visionary ideals of Nehru and Gandhi for vibrant and self-sustaining villages, several key recommendations can be made based on the institutional challenges witnessed in Yerrapanta and Chenampally villages of Telangana.

Gram Panchayat:

The Gram Panchayat is pivotal in fostering grassroots democracy and driving rural development. To enhance its effectiveness and align with Nehru's vision of empowered villages, several steps can be taken:

1. Firstly, there is an urgent need to strengthen female representation and empowerment within the panchayat. Despite constitutional provisions, the active participation of elected female members remains limited. Initiatives should focus on creating awareness, providing training, and actively involving women in decision-making processes.
2. Secondly, implementing government schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin and Mission Bhagiratha needs significant improvement. The panchayat should ensure equitable distribution of resources, address infrastructural deficiencies such as inadequate housing and water supply, and actively engage with marginalized communities like the Chenchu tribe to mitigate socio-economic disparities.
3. Thirdly, promoting inclusivity and social harmony is essential. Efforts should include sensitization programs to eliminate discriminatory practices and promote equality among different sections of the village community. Upholding constitutional values such as Article 15, which prohibits discrimination based on caste, should be a priority in all panchayat activities.

School and Anganwadi:

Education and early childhood development are fundamental to Gandhi's vision of villages as centers of learning and self-reliance. To align with this vision, the following steps can be recommended:

1. Firstly, enhancing the quality and accessibility of education is crucial. This includes recruiting qualified teachers,

providing regular training to improve teaching standards, and ensuring adequate infrastructure and resources in schools and Anganwadi centers.

2. Secondly, increasing community engagement and parental involvement in educational initiatives can foster a supportive environment for children's learning. Awareness programs on the importance of education should be conducted regularly to reduce dropout rates and encourage continued participation in educational activities.
3. Thirdly, addressing operational challenges in Anganwadi centers, such as irregular food supply and inadequate infrastructure, is essential. Investments in infrastructure improvement and ensuring consistent operational hours can significantly enhance the centers' effectiveness in delivering early childhood education and nutrition.

Public Health Center:

Access to quality healthcare is a fundamental right crucial for rural development, aligning with Nehru's emphasis on comprehensive health services in villages. Recommendations for the public health center include:

1. Firstly, improving infrastructure and operational capacity is imperative. This involves upgrading facilities to meet the community's growing healthcare needs, ensuring adequate staffing, and extending operational hours to provide timely medical services.
2. Secondly, enhancing outreach programs and awareness campaigns can promote preventive healthcare practices and encourage community participation in healthcare initiatives. Particular attention should be given to marginalized groups like the Chenchu tribe to ensure equitable access to healthcare services.
3. Thirdly, strengthening coordination with government schemes like ASHA workers for effective implementation of maternal and child health programs is crucial. Regular health camps, vaccination drives, and the provision of essential medications should be prioritized to improve health outcomes and reduce disease prevalence.

In conclusion, realizing Nehru and Gandhi's dream village requires concerted efforts to address institutional shortcomings across Gram Panchayats, schools, Anganwadi centers, and public health facilities. By prioritizing inclusivity, equitable resource distribution, quality education, and accessible healthcare, these institutions can play transformative roles in fostering holistic development and empowering rural communities in India.

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A Report of the Visit to *Totolapara* Village in *Bhergaon in Udalguri (Bhergaon)* District of Assam State

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▶ Preface

This report has been prepared as part of my engagement with the BTR-CRISP Fellowship which offered a five-day Village Immersion Program at Totolapara village of Assam. This program helped me understand the rural dynamics and the various challenges faced by the village community.

This report contains the *Salient features of the village, its agro climatic features, *Socio economic conditions of the people, *Different institutions in the village like Public Health Centre, Schools, Anganwadi Centres, Village organisations, SHGs and Village Council Development Committee. I have also included my observations and main points of discussion with community members, staff of organisations, and VCDC officials.

▶ Introduction

A Village Immersion Program was hosted by CRISP for Fellows, under the CRISP-BTR PEACE project. The objective was for participants to get an understanding of rural dynamics and grassroots development. We underwent this 5 day long transformative experience in Totolapara Village, in the Bhergaon Sub Division of Udalguri District. It gave us a holistic view of rural life, its challenges, and the resilience of communities residing there.

This village was chosen due to its strategic location within Bhergaon Sub Division of Udalguri District. It was identified through consultations with local authorities, community leaders, and stakeholders who emphasized its significance in terms of typical rural dynamics, developmental challenges, and the resilience of the people living there.

Udalguri lies in the Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam. The district was formed on June 14, 2004 as one of the four districts under the Bodoland Territorial Council. The name denotes a place around the Udal tree. It The district covers an area of 1,985.68 sq.km and has a population of 831,668, with a literacy rate of 74 percent.

The Bhergaon Block Development office serves as an administrative unit facilitating various government programs and initiatives aimed at rural development. Agriculture, supplemented by Livestock rearing, dairy production and poultry farming, form the backbone of the local economy in the block.

Totolapara falls in an agro climatic zone known for its fertile soil and conducive weather patterns. Agriculture is the primary livelihood activity along with allied economic activities like Backyard Poultry Cattle farming, Livestock farming. Cottage industries such as handloom weaving and handicrafts also play a pivotal role in the local economy, providing employment opportunities and preserving traditional artisanal skills.

▶ Profile Of the Village

Totolapara is located 35 kms west of the district headquarters at Udalguri. It is a medium-sized village spanning approximately 4.2312 sq.km. Its population is 1559, spread over 306 households. 706 are males while 753 are females as per 2011 population census. 1435 of the total number, 92.48 % belong to Scheduled Tribes (ST) and 0.14% belong to Schedule Caste (SC). Children below 6 years of age number 169 or 11.6 % of the whole population. In 2011, the village had a literacy rate of 71.01 % Male literacy stood at 79.94 % while female literacy rate was 62.80 %. In Totlapara village, most of the village population is from Schedule Tribe (ST). Schedule Tribe (ST) constitutes 98.36 % while Schedule Caste (SC) were 0.14 % of total population in Totlapara village.

652 people are engaged in Main Work (Employment for more than 6 Months). Others are engaged in Marginal activity (livelihood for less than 6 months). Among those in Main Work, 221 were cultivators (owner or co-owner) while 38 were Agricultural labourers. As per the Constitution of India and Panchayati Raj Act, it is administered by the Sarpanch or Gaonburah. (Head of Village). Bodo is the primary spoken language. The village has well connected Pucca Roads, facilitating easy access to nearby villages and strategic locations.

▶ Salient Features of the Village

Education

Totolapara LP School: No. 440 Totolapara Co-educational LP School (established 1946), has been an integral part of the community for over seven decades. It is managed by the Department of Education and caters to the primary educational needs of children from the village and its surrounding areas. It also has a pre-primary section. Bodo is the medium of instruction here. It is centrally located and therefore accessible to students from various households. At the time of the report, the school had 15 students, 8 boys and 7 girls.

Teaching staff consist:

- One permanent teacher: Responsible for providing primary education across multiple subjects and grades.
- One contractual teacher: To support the main teacher, especially in handling different grades and ensuring personalized attention to students.

Facilities and resources for its students:

- Classroom: A single classroom serves all students, accommodating various grade levels.
- Educational Materials: Basic teaching aids and educational materials are available to support classroom instruction.
- Playground: A small outdoor area allows students to engage in physical activities and recreational games.
- The school has separate functional toilets for boys and girls.
- It does not yet have a computer-aided learning lab.
- Mid-day meals are prepared and distributed within the school premises.

Challenges and Opportunities

The school faces several challenges:

- Limited Infrastructure: This impacts the delivery of education and student comfort.
- Resource Constraints: Hinder effective teaching and learning outcomes.
- Teacher Shortage: Limits its capacity to expand educational programs and initiatives

Despite these challenges, the school presents opportunities for improvement and growth:

- Community Support: Strong community involvement and support can enhance school infrastructure and resource availability.
- Government Initiatives: Continued government support through educational reforms and funding can uplift the school's standards.

Totolapara ME School: Totolapara ME School (established 1984), serves as a mid-level coeducational institution for students in Classes 6 to 8. Bodo is the medium of instruction in this school. It is housed in a private building and has 3 classrooms in good condition, for instructional purposes. It has 2 other rooms for non-teaching activities. There is a separate room for the Headmaster/Teacher. It has a broken but pucca boundary wall and there is no electricity connection yet. Drinking water comes from handpumps. There are functional toilets for boys and girls. The school has a playground but no library. The school has two tutors provided by the Department of Education, and a sokidar to support them. The current head of the institution is Kshitish Narzary, serving as the In-Charge (IC). There are 7 students, 2 girls and 5 boys.

Books and Materials: There is a significant shortage of books and essential learning materials, which severely hampers the quality of education provided.
Uniforms: There is no provision for school uniforms, which can impact the students' sense of identity and equality.
Meals: The school does not provide hot cooked meals, which is essential for the nutritional needs and overall health of the students.

Challenges
Resource Insufficiency. Absence of uniforms. No provision for nutrition

Anganwadi (AWC)

Totolapara Anganwadi Center (AWC) was established in 2021 with the aim of providing essential childcare services and promoting early childhood education in Totolapara village. It plays a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of children and educating mothers on childcare practices.

- Childcare and Early Education: Eight children are currently enrolled in the AWC, where they receive early childhood education and care under the supervision of trained caregivers.
- Nutritional Support: The AWC provides hot cooked meals daily to enrolled children, ensuring they receive nutritious food, essential for their growth and development. Additionally, take-home ration is distributed once every two to three months to supplement their dietary needs.
- Awareness Programs: Regular awareness programs are conducted for mothers on balanced diet, nutritional supplements, and the importance of breastfeeding. These programs aim to educate mothers about optimal nutrition for their children's health and well-being.
- Routine Immunization: The AWC facilitates routine immunization programs, ensuring that children receive essential vaccinations as per the national immunization schedule. This initiative helps protect children from preventable diseases and promotes community health.

Health

Ayush Health and Wellness Centre, located in Totolapara Village, is a vital healthcare facility managed under the guidance of Dr. Maino Narzary, CHO (Ayush), who joined the center in July 2023. The center operates with a team of 8 staff members: one ANM, one SW, and six ASHA workers.

Infrastructure and Facilities at the centre are highly inadequate:

- There are 2 ANC Beds, one IPD bed, 2 tables, 2 chairs, 2 almirahs, 1 stool, and 1 stretcher.
- Essential equipment such as an infantometer and glucometer are missing.
- The doors are damaged, the roof leaks, there is no facility for water and the boundary wall is temporary.

Management and Governance
The center is overseen by the Jan Arogya Samiti (JAS) Committee comprising the Village Headman, VCDC Chairperson, social workers, and the CPHC Team comprising CHO, ANM, SW and ASHA workers.

Services Provided:
The Ayush Health and Wellness Centre provides the following services:

- R1 Sessions on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday
- OPD Sessions on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday

- Home Visits on Thursdays
- Screening for NCDs, Sickle Cell Anemia, RBs, ANC checkups
- Treatment for common viral illnesses

Community Response:

The local community has expressed appreciation for the infrastructure provided by the government. However, there is widespread dissatisfaction due to the lack of adequate facilities at the center. Many residents unable to receive necessary services locally are referred to Bhergaon Model Hospital, which is 5-6 km away.

Health Challenges and Referrals:

The center registers critical cases like Diabetes Mellitus (DM), Hypertension (HTN), and Tuberculosis (TB). Unfortunately, due to the centre's limited medical facilities, patients with these conditions are frequently referred to Bhergaon Model Hospital for treatment.

Recommendations:

- Infrastructure: Urgent repairs for damaged doors and roof leaks, and arrangement of proper water facilities.
- Equipment: Acquisition of necessary medical equipment such as an infantometer and glucometer.
- Medical Facility: Expansion of medical capabilities to handle prevalent health conditions like DM, HTN, and TB locally.

Totolapara Ayush Health and Wellness Centre plays a crucial role in the healthcare ecosystem of its locality but it is not equipped to offer effective services to locals. Addressing these issues is crucial to enhancing the quality and accessibility of healthcare for the community it serves.

Village Council Development Committee(VCDC)

Totolapara VCDC is located 5 km away from the Bhergaon Block Development office and covers 33 villages which include 6 revenue villages and 27 sub-villages. The total population that this VCDC serves is approximately 5000 people, with Totolapara village alone having around 900 people.

The VCDC comprises 27 official members who are involved in its day-to-day functioning. As representatives of their respective communities, they are required to participate in the planning and implementation of community development projects, such as infrastructure development, sanitation initiatives and education programs. It is their responsibility to identify community needs and priorities through consultations and surveys.

For more inclusive and sustainable development, the participation of women in VCDC must grow as compared with previous years. This may be done by involving SHG members in decision-making and in various committees at the village level through capacity-building programs, ensuring their access to resources and information, and promoting a supportive environment within VCDC and other community committees.

The VCDC mainly focuses on:

- MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) works for infrastructural development in the villages.
- PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana - Gramin): 447 PMAY-G houses have been sanctioned so far, with most completed and 12 houses under completion.
- Other activities of land development, construction of dams, repairing of Dong Canal, plantation drives, and construction of Anganwadi Centers.

The VCDC can demand and execute 20 action plans per year from the community, as per MGNREGA guidelines, through Gram Sabhas that are held annually to discuss and demand community development plans. The VCDC also looks into the initiatives implemented by BTR Government like Village poverty Reduction Plan (VPRP) under Lakpati Mahila Kissan (Govt. of India). Social Welfare Schemes overseen by the VCDC are the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension (IGNOAP) for individuals above 60 years. The Assam Society for Social Audit conducts an annual audit of schemes completed and covered by the VCDC, facilitated by their social audit facilitator.

MGNREGA Work Site

In Totolapara (Madalmaka) Village, the VCDC primarily relies on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) schemes for community development. Annually, VCDC organizes a Gram Sabha to prioritize and implement community demands through MGNREGA initiatives. During the village immersion trip, I accompanied the VCDC Chairman to inspect an MGNREGA worksite: an Anganwadi Centre in Totolapara. This center, initiated in the fiscal year 2021-2022 with a budget of Rs. 5,00,000, is still under construction by a vendor. The budget breakdown includes Rs. 64,950.64 for labor, Rs. 4,21,391.58 for materials, Rs. 13,658 as a lump sum, and Rs. 289.96 for man-days.

Due to the incomplete state of the Anganwadi Centre, its services have been affected. Classes have been relocated and integrated into the nearby LP School. Essential materials, including play equipment, are stored in the homes of Anganwadi staff. Providing hot cooked meals to children has become a challenge.

Timely completion of infrastructure projects like the Anganwadi Centre is a must, to ensure uninterrupted community services, especially for children dependent on these facilities.

Self Help Groups and Livelihood of People

Totolapara community depends on agriculture for their livelihood. Most villagers cultivate paddy during the main agricultural seasons along with secondary crops including jute, other cash crops, and vegetables. A few individuals are engaged in local businesses, contributing to the economic diversity of the area.

Livelihood Activities:

Women in Totolapara Village play a significant role in the local economy. They are actively involved in backyard poultry, piggery, cattle and goat farming. These endeavors not only supplement household income but also contribute to food security and economic stability within the community.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs):

Women also participate extensively in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), where they pool financial resources on a monthly basis. This collective money is lent to group members at a fixed rate of interest. The SHGs serve as a crucial support system, allowing members to access capital for various purposes, including agricultural investments and small-scale business ventures.

Bardwi Sikla Society:

The Bardwi Sikla Society is a women's organization in Totolapara Village, that focuses on handloom and weaving activities. Women who are interested and trained in these skills become members of the society. The society provides a platform for members to engage in traditional crafts and also offers training programs facilitated by the Handloom Department and organizations like the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE).

Members of the Bardwi Sikla Society contribute a monthly fee of Rs. 30, which is utilized for the maintenance of the society and to fund loans for members at a specific interest rate. These loans support various livelihood activities, like furthering investments in poultry farming, piggery farming, and allied pursuits. This financial structure enhances economic independence among women and promotes sustainable livelihoods within the village.

Totolapara Village exemplifies a community deeply rooted in agriculture, with women actively participating in both traditional and modern economic activities. The presence of SHGs and the Bardwi Sikla Society highlights the collaborative efforts among villagers to support each other financially and professionally. As the village continues to develop, fostering these community-driven initiatives are essential for sustaining economic growth and improving the overall quality of life for its residents.

Poverty Alleviation Programs

The BTC government has launched several poverty alleviation programs aimed at improving the livelihoods of poor households and individuals residing in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) districts of Assam. These initiatives connect with various sectors: agriculture, sericulture, handloom, and women's empowerment, reflecting a comprehensive approach to socio-economic development.

I. Mainao Swrang Bithangkhi
II. Onsai Bithangki
III. Bodoland Sericulture Mission
IV. Bodoland Handloom Mission
V. Lakpati Didi (VPRP - Village Poverty Reduction Plan

Some women have benefited greatly from the sericulture and handloom missions, and are now able to contribute economically to their households. Several beneficiaries from Totolapara have submitted their Village Poverty Reduction Plans

(VPRP) through the VPRP portal, outlining their strategies for economic empowerment and development. These plans are essential for accessing government support and resources.

Agriculture

Totolapara farmers depend largely on paddy cultivation along with other crops such as vegetables and jute. Paddy fields dominate the landscape, reflecting the agricultural heritage and the staple food production of the community. Farmers engage in both rain-fed and irrigated paddy cultivation methods, utilizing traditional techniques passed down through generations. Some villagers also engage in supplementary occupations such as small businesses, handicrafts, and seasonal labour to diversify income sources. Alongside paddy, villagers cultivate a variety of vegetables, catering to local consumption and sometimes for small-scale commercial purposes. Agriculture remains the primary livelihood for a significant portion of the population.

Veterinary Hospital

Animals are an important component of an agricultural economy. Veterinary hospitals provide emergency and specialized care and contribute to animal welfare efforts. Although Totolapara does not have a Veterinary Hospital, there is one at Bhergaon, approximately 6 kms away. In cases of emergencies, having a veterinary hospital within a reasonable distance ensures that animals receive prompt medical attention.

The availability of mobile veterinary services is particularly beneficial for rural communities. This allows veterinary doctors to visit Totolapara directly in case of emergencies, eliminating the need for farmers or pet owners to transport injured or sick animals over long distances. The presence of a veterinary hospital in nearby Bhergaon not only supports individual animal owners but also contributes to the overall animal welfare efforts in the region. It fosters a sense of community care and responsibility towards animals. While it entails some travel, the services provided by the Bhergaon Hospital, including mobile veterinary care, greatly enhance the health and welfare of animals in the village. These facilities are indispensable for ensuring that animals receive timely and appropriate medical attention when needed.

▶ Observations

Totolapara appears to be relatively well-off as compared to others known to me. It is well connected with pucca roads that lead to the daily markets and to other important locations. Each household has at least one Bank Account, consistent Electric supply and ownership of some sort of vehicle for daily use. Most households have pucca houses which is indicative of a higher standard of living compared to villages with predominantly kutcha houses. Many villagers have benefited from government housing schemes (Awas Yojnas). These facts paint a picture of a village that has seen improvements in infrastructure, economic conditions, and access to amenities, largely through government initiatives and possibly other local economic activities.

▶ Suggestions

Totolapara Village can see a better and faster growth with some attention to filling the gaps in its infrastructure, improving on service delivery, empowering local governance, and community organisations to foster comprehensive village level development. Here are my suggestions:

- Improve road connectivity for better accessibility
- Ensure access to potable water through installation of community water supply System (JJM-PHED)
- Strengthen the Primary Health Centre with adequate staff, supplies and equipment.
- Involve local leaders, influential community members, and educators to endorse the benefits of education and encourage enrolment.
- Implement a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of schemes, ensure accountability, and promote transparency in institutions that are often neglected.

- Strengthen the capacity of the Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) and other local governance structures to effectively plan, implement, and monitor development initiatives.
- Promote active participation of villagers in decision-making processes and project implementation to ensure ownership and sustainability.
- Conduct training programs for VCDC Official, community leaders, and youth leaders.
- Raise awareness about different government schemes and entitlements, to villagers.

▶ Conclusion

This experience offered a direct insight into the advantages and challenges faced by the villagers, in a socio-economic context. It highlighted the significance of local governance and the critical role of community participation in driving sustainable development initiatives. It helped understand the operational dynamics of schemes like MGNREGA and PMAY-G and their impact on rural infrastructure and livelihoods. The villagers were cooperative and willing to share comprehensive information that gave depth and accuracy to the report. It was very reassuring to witness the empowerment of villagers through initiatives like Gram Sabhas and community-driven development plans. Recognizing the importance of sustainable agricultural practices and natural resource management in rural settings, understanding the challenges of seasonal variations, limited access to healthcare and education, and witnessing the resilience of the community in addressing these issues were very enriching lessons.

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A Report on Village Immersion at *Alagjar Village* under *Barama* VCDC and *Barama* Development Block in District *Baksa*, Assam

Prepared by:

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▶ Preface

The village immersion program conducted by CRISP (Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies) is aimed at offering a deeper understanding of rural life and a development perspective to fellows. Through the immersion, CRISP fellows engage with ground realities and living cultures and social activities in different rural areas of India. This understanding of reality can enable policies that can transform rural lives. Interacting with stakeholders on the ground and institutions in rural areas can give rise to fresh ideas and solutions to long lasting development problems.

There is need to examine the implementation of schemes, public participation, living conditions, resource allocation, infrastructure and means of livelihood, if the fellows have to be develop a proper perspective. Only when we learn about the challenges of rural life through daily interactions with diverse cultures, can we plan for equitable development.

With this village immersion program we gain new experiences and bring with us fresh ideas of livelihood,

education, health, infrastructure that can be further enhanced.

▶ Introduction

The Village Immersion is a part of the " Project for Enhancing Administrative Cohesion and Efficiency" (PEACE) program launched by Govt of BTR in collaboration With Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies (CRISP) organization. An MoU was signed between CRISP and BTR Govt on February 22nd, 2024. As part of the program, PEACE fellows are required to experience village life for a maximum of 5 days and a minimum of 3 days, in a selected village. The purpose of village immersion is to understand rural life and the culture, tradition and social development of people living in villages.

Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) is situated in Assam and is administered by the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The PEACE program launched by BTR govt has five sub projects
(1) Streamlining Administrative and Systems Accountability (SASA),
(2) Strengthening and Advancing VCDCs Empowerment,
(3) Decentralized Planning Process (DEP),
(4) Poorest of Poor strategy(PoPs),
(5) Social Audit and Transparency System(SATS).

Each sub -project is headed by one fellow. The fellows were allotted villages randomly in different districts, from a list recommended by the council. I was allotted Alagjhar village under Barama VCDC of Barama Development Block in Baksa District of Assam. Alagjar is a revenue village divided into two sub villages known as Milangaon and Kadamtola. The village is home to 80 families and around 357 people living on a stretch of 690 hectares approx. The main livelihood is agriculture. The nearest town is Barama, 7 kms away and the nearest railway station is Nalbari,17 kms away. Alagjar has Kotobari to its west, Doulguri to its south, Kadamtola1 to its east and Kadamtala 2 to its north.

▶ Village Immersion Summary

Village Profile:

Alagjar village to the north of Barama Town in Baksa District. Barama College lies on a straight stretch to the south. From NH 37, through Barama Market, the village is accessible only by private vehicles. There is no public transport, bus or auto rickshaw service to reach Alagjar.

Bodo and Koch Rajbongshi are the two dominant communities in the village. The main crops are paddy, betel nut, jute, mustard and pulses. There is a local market in the village known as "Showk", from where people procure their basic needs like edible oil, rice, home grown crops, meat etc.

The institutional infrastructure of the village comprises an LP school, Health Sub Centre, Village library, VCDC office and a JJM water supply tank. There is no Anganwadi Centre but several MGNREGA work sites can be seen. The houses are mainly made of mud or "kutcha" houses. There are some houses with the typical Assam structure with brick and cement.

The primary religion followed by the people is Hinduism.

Primary Health Centre: Alagjar Sub Centre is the only health related institution in the village, functioning with 1 ANM and 3 Nursing staff. They provide assistance for general ailments like cough, fever, cold and diarrhoea.

For women and child they offer more specific services like:

Antenatal Care (ANC): This includes regular check-ups during pregnancy to monitor the health of mother and baby. ANC services involve weight and blood pressure monitoring, nutritional counselling, administering iron and folic acid supplements, and screening for potential complications and guidance to pregnant women.

Postnatal Care (PNC): The Primary Sub Centre attends to the well-being of the mother and baby after childbirth. This includes monitoring the mother's recovery, breastfeeding guidance, immunization for the newborn babies, and addressing any postpartum issues.

VHSND (Village Health Sanitation & Nutrition Day) : The ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwives), prepare a monthly VHSND plan for the villages that are assigned to them. This plan outlines the services offered, manpower deployment, and IEC (Information, Education, and Communication) materials to be delivered in coordination with AWW (Anganwadi Worker) to ensure pregnant women, mothers with young children, and other beneficiaries are informed and encouraged to attend VHSND sessions. On the day of the program Doctors from PHC need to be present at VHSND sessions to offer consultations for complex cases identified during screening. PHCs also support basic diagnostic tests like blood pressure checkups or blood sugar monitoring during the VHSND program and also deliver services like supply of medicines, vaccines, and iron and folic acid tablets for adolescent girls.

Anganwadi Centre

Anganwadi Centres are institutions working on the foundations of early childcare in rural areas. They offer many services aimed at improving the well-being of children aged 0-6 years , pregnant women, and lactating mothers by providing nutritious meals.

In Alagjar village there is no AWC but villagers have provided a community hall for delivery of services and for functioning as Anganwadi Centre. One Anganwadi worker and one Anganwadi helper are assigned to the village. They cater chiefly to the well-being of children under 6 years, pregnant women, and lactating mothers. Every morning except on Sunday they provide hot cooked meals for the children, along with eggs. Occasionally they deliver Rice, Dal, Suji at the homes of those who cannot reach the community hall.

Houses of Marginalised Communities: Houses are generally made of mud (Kutcha house) and some are made of Assam type house infrastructure.

Families and Livelihood

There are only 7 job holders in 80 families. All others depend on agriculture and allied work for their income. About 8 families are engaged in village market activities like running tea stalls, sell goods at the daily market, hold a

meat stall, or sell locally produced vegetables. Rice, jute, pulses and jute are the main crops. Some families produce and sell Areca nuts. Most families living here fall below the poverty line (BPL). Average members in a household is 4 to 5. I observed that each family has one or two elders.

MGNREGA Worksite

Some specific projects under MGNREGA are implemented in the village such as-

Rural Connectivity: Main road from the Barama town to Alagjar connects the village to all necessary destinations. Also smaller roads are covered. Block roads and small culvert are built through the village under MGNREGA projects which are providing better connectivity in the area and making it easier for villagers to transport goods and access markets for daily needs.

VCDC (Village Council Development Committee):

VCDC Structure: The Barama VCDC consists of 24 members, including a chairperson, representatives of the women, Scheduled Castes (SC), farmers, one Below Poverty Line (BPL) member, a social worker, and general members selected by the VCDC institution. Each village has at least one representative and larger villages have more than one representative per area.

Function of VCDCs: The committee's primary role is to plan and implement development projects at the village level through Gram Panchayat which is held 4 times in a year. These involve initiatives related to infrastructure, education, healthcare, sanitation, or social welfare development and prioritization of stakeholders in scheme integrations. VCDC also plays a vital role in beneficiary selection processes and prioritization of scheme selection under its jurisdiction.

Challenges: There are many crucial challenges in VCDC functioning. Since VCDCs are financially not funded by any agency or government schemes they face many problems in resource mobilization and awareness campaigns. VCDC chairman and members do not fully understand scheme guidelines and policy or they don't have proper knowledge about them. As a result the villagers face many issues.

VCDC Chairman and members require awareness and training on schemes policy and their implementation process and prioritization activities. VCDC are a dominant grassroot level organisation. The chairman is directly selected by the ruling political party or council, which leads to many biases in rural governance. The chairman has the power to select his own people as beneficiaries of schemes and projects and the needs and interests of others may get neglected.

Gram Sabha

Gram Sabha is organized four times a year by VCDC. In gram sabha they discuss schemes implementation and prioritization of the schemes and try to raise public awareness on guidelines etc as per VCDC chairman. Officials from Block Development Office attend the Gram Sabha and discuss issues with the villagers.

Rural Library

A village library was established in 1964 and provincialised in 1987. It remains open between 1 pm and 7 pm . There are some rules and regulations for borrowing books and also guidelines for readers. I met with the librarian who has been working here for more than 20 years. From him I got to know that, in the previous generation many people

came to study and read books in the library, nowadays only 3 to 4 persons visit in a month. Since the revolution of the modern era, the internet, mobile and laptop have changed the reading habits of people. The village library is equipped with space to store books and there is a reading room as well. Different kinds of novels, storybooks, poets, biography and educational books, and magazines numbering 1592 are kept here.

SHGs in the Village:

There are 11 women SHGs (small and big) in the village.

Financial Empowerment: Self Help Groups consist of marginalized communities who pool their savings and access microcredit for income-generating activities through microfinance activities.

Economic development: SHGs promote entrepreneurship and small businesses within the village, leading to economic growth and poverty reduction. They have different small enterprises in the village. Some SHGs are engaged with pickle production, mushroom production and locally available agro allied micro activities.

Social assistance: SHGs provide a platform for members to share experiences, access training, and build social connections. This can be particularly beneficial for women who might face limited social mobility and awareness.

Village School Profile

Alagjar village has only one LP School, Alongbar LP School established in 1949 , the medium of education is Bodo. The school has a good RCC structure consisting of four rooms: one office room, two class rooms and one storeroom. School kitchen is where a mid-day-meal for students is prepared during school days.

Class	Number of students
1	6
2	8
3	9
4	8
5	3
Total	34

Presently there are three teachers: 1 Head Teacher and two female assistant teachers. Two cooks are working in the school kitchen and both are from the village itself. School is well equipped with a School Garden and they cultivate seasonal crops in the garden and use the produce for MDM. As per their record no there are no dropouts. As per teachers some students are still finding problems in mathematical subjects, especially after the Corona lock down period. Many families have admitted their child in nearby missionary schools .

The school organizes many programmes on special occasions like independence day, Teachers day and school week with some extracurricular activities like quiz competition, games & sports, extempore speech etc.

▶ Government Scheme Implementation in the Village

Many central and state government funded schemes are implemented in the village. Some are listed below:

JJM (Jal Jeevan Mission): One of the central govt funded schemes was built recently in the village. The water is supplied twice a week. But the houses that are in the farthest part of the village do not receive even one drop of water. According to the villagers no one from the supply committee ever checks this.

PMAYG (Pradhan Mantri Awaz Yojna Gramin) : In the previous financial year in Alagjar village only 22 houses were sanctioned.

NSAP (National Social Assistance Programme): The households with priority for old aged persons are getting an old age pension under the programme.

Arunodoi Scheme: Villagers are benefitted from the Arunodoi schemes, but families that should have given priority miss out because of the biases of officials.

Peoples opinion: Since the VCDC is the vital agent in rural areas, villagers want VCDC to serve everyone equally and not be selective towards people they like or be influenced by political pressure. People feel that the committee doesn't play a transparent role in grassroot governance, hence scheme prioritization and selection process is always unfair. They want to choose VCDC chairman in a democratic way by an election system. They feel that, to develop the rural area, it is necessary to develop systems and monitoring systems. No social audit is ever conducted transparently so most people are left behind.

▶ Scope for improvement:

The basic needs of life are food, shelter and water. Missing any one may affect health and wealth. In rural areas, to ensure all needs are met, there has to be road connectivity, health infrastructure facility & markets etc.

As I have observed in Alagjar village, road connectivity is good enough for accessing basic needs. The village has only one LP school which is not enough for good quality education, to enhance the higher education the villagers need to travel to different locations. There is only one degree college near the village, Barama College at Barama town, which can be accessed by the villagers. The village has a Health Sub Centre which is in the middle of the village, servicing the entire village for more than 6 years. The Sub Centre is not well equipped with modern facilities. For better health services this Sub Centre can be updated and equipped with more beds and Doctors and staff and ambulance facilities.

Village Road: According to elders, the village was not connected to any main roads earlier but now the village has good road facilities to commute to any possible destinations in private vehicles. Public transport is necessary for everyone to reach the Highway.

Public Awareness: My understanding is that the village has potential for sufficient livelihood and income generation but due to inadequate business ideas and knowledge it is not happening.

▶ Suggestions:

Water Facility: Many villages under Barama VCDC lack access to clean and reliable drinking water. Water supply must improve. A study should be done on available ground water of Barama. It is known to contain high amounts of iron which is not directly usable for drinking and daily maintenance. A study can suggest ways of getting clean and sufficient water supply.

Installing a piped water supply system with taps in each household and daily supply of water in time would significantly improve access to clean water for drinking, cooking, and sanitation in daily life of the villagers.

Information delivery: Organizing village level meetings frequently, utilizing bulletin boards to keep villagers informed about available services, upcoming events, and grievance redressal procedures may encourage people's participation in rural development initiatives.

Awareness campaign: Organize awareness campaigns to educate villagers about their rights and entitlements related to various government schemes and services.

▶ Conclusion:

My experience in the village immersion in those five days was an immensely complex experience. I learnt and experienced their culture, living style, behavior and their understanding about the modernised world. The bonding of villagers and neighborhood feeling is a significant character in a village which plays a vital role in the creation of a humble society. The views of rural people toward social development are crucial. In streamlining of daily life the basic needs are very simple: their food, drinking water and homes to live in are what they want. Improving road connectivity, schools, water drainage system and houses and construction of institutions like Public Health Centre, Anganwadi Centre, Water supply and sanitation system can lead a village towards sustainable development.

Most of the scheme implementations here are not transparent. The Village Council Development Committee lacks proper implementation as they have to maintain some margin for the ruling party . The VCDC system needs to be strengthened and improved for better administration and rural development.

With this village immersion programme I have personally developed my communication and humbleness and respect and value for village life. I have connected with diverse people and learnt their beliefs and thoughts which I could not have been aware of without this programme.

Madan Bitaw: Being in Harmony with Simplicity. A Field Immersion Report

Prepared by:

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▶ Preface

The Field Immersion program undertaken by CRISP was designed for Fellows to get a firsthand experience of and to understand a world which is very different from the one they are familiar with. Rural life is an ultimate example of the simplicity of existence and CRISP allowed its Fellows to experience it, which would not have been possible in any other organisation. It has been an experience of a lifetime for every one of us. So much so that I am looking forward to more in the coming days. Just waiting for the organisation to tell me "Niharika You have to stay in a village for a week!" Jokes apart, this exercise has done more than exposing us to the simplicity of village life. It has also opened our eyes to the everyday struggles that villagers go through which is very different from the urban world because even the basic facilities we take for granted, seem like a dream in the villages where mobile networks are a luxury, even in this century. The Immersion required us Fellows, to get submerged in the lives of the villagers and live in harmony with them and participate in their everyday chores. The objective was to understand the grassroot level social and political issues

of the village and the role the Government plays in improving the livelihoods of the people in the village. The other important thing we had to look at closely was, how rural women contribute to the improvement of the village livelihood ecosystem.

I spent 4 nights and 5 days in a quaint village of Meghalaya with no network connectivity. Before leaving for my field immersion, a lot of questions crossed my mind and I found myself overthinking. Before starting the program, I visited the village for a day to meet the Village Headman (Rangbah Shnong) and get familiar with the geography of the village with my Fellow colleague but a serious foot injury on the field led to a delay of a month and a half. I was nervous, excited and anxious at the same time as I had no idea where, with whom and how I would be staying in the village. I was not expecting anything but I was scared about life in a state whose language was not known to me.

I was nervous about communicating with the villagers, about my food, and my stay. I had no idea how I would survive for a week. But nonetheless, I was very much excited and looking forward to staying in the village because the first time I visited it, I was taken aback by its beauty.

I would like to thank Bah June Warjri, Village Headman (Rangbah Shnong in Khasi) of Madan Bitaw Village for helping me throughout the week whenever I needed him and for making my experience so meaningful and insightful. I would like to give a big vote of thanks to Kong Wandasisha Warjri for handholding me and being my shadow each step of the way. Had she not been there, I couldn't have communicated or understood anything. Thanks are also due, to the mentors of CRISP Sir R S Julaniya, Sir R Subrahmanyam and Mam Sandhyarani Kanneganti for guiding us during preparation for the trip. Lastly, I convey my sincere thanks to my team Dr Minnette Ireen Passah (State Lead, Meghalaya team), Akho Phira (Fellow, Meghalaya Team), and Ibankyntiewlin Rynjah (Intern, Meghalaya Team) for being with me through thick and thin during the field immersion and for settling me up in the Village for a week.

▶ Introduction

Madan Bitaw is a quaint little village in the Sohiong Block of East Khasi Hills District. The Assembly Constituency is also Sohiong. In Meghalaya, the Block and the Assembly Constituency are the same. The village is located around 45 kms away from the district headquarter Shillong and around 27 kms away from Mawphlang sub divisional C&RD Block which was the former block of Madan Bitaw until Sohiong was constituted as a C&RD Block in 2022. The reason behind choosing this village was that the CRISP Meghalaya team has been working in this village for one and a half years to make it a Hub Model village for Rural Development, to develop the Village Level Development Plan (VLDP), and to promote the Localisation of Sustainable Development Goals in the Village. I was assigned this village to get a broader and wider perspective of development in the village.

According to Census 2011 information, the location code or village code of Madan Bitaw village is 278179. It is bordered by Laitnongrem and Wahlyngngia to the East, Mawsniang and Pyndenglitha (Mawphlang Block) to the West, Kyndong Wahlang, Wahumjarain and Wahlang to the North, Pyndengkhah and Phanbhur (Mawphlang Block) to the south. The village is headed by the Rangba Shnong (village headman), who has 7 Rangba Dongs under him who oversee the 7 communities/wards in the

village. Above the Rangba Shnong and the Rangba Dongs is a 'Sordar' who is the King (Syiem) of Hima (Kingdom) Sohiong and the head of 9 villages including Madan Bitaw.

The 7 Wards/Communities (Dongs) of Madan Bitaw are: Dong Mawroh, Dong Mawtiebah, Dong Hani, Dong Lomlynter, Dong Ummalang, Dong Dukan and Dong Sohjur with a total of 225 households (hh) and a population of 1152. Out of 225 hh, 220 fall under Below Poverty Line and 20 are headed by women. The male adult population is 298 (25.8%) and the female adult population is 296 (25.69%). The number of children 0-3 years are 104 (9.02%), those between 3-6 years are 131 (11.37%), and between 7-17 years are 323 (28.03%), those with disabilities number 9 (0.78%) and senior citizens (those above 60), are 78 (6.77%).

I stayed in Dong Lomlynter in the village, at Kong Julia's house, which was arranged by the Village Headman.

The main livelihood are agriculture and daily wage labour. Crops cultivated are potato and green leafy vegetables. The weather of Madan Bitaw is pleasant in the summers with patchy rain during June and July. The main occupation of the villagers is Agriculture and most of the income comes from it. Pace of life at Madan Bitaw is very slow. There is s no Mobile Network Tower either.

80% of the population is dependent on agriculture, their routine consists of working in their farmlands from the morning while the children attend the schools in the village. The village has no Govt Schools, it has three SSA Primary schools and one Senior Secondary Private School. There are two Anganwadi Centres A and B with one Anganwadi worker and two helpers each. There is only one ASHA in the village and 15 SHGs. The caste composition comprises 81% Khasi Christian Catholic, around 14% Khasi Christian Presbyterians and around 5% Khasi Christian, Church of God. It is a 100% Christian Village dominated by Catholics.

▶ Village Immersion Summary

During my 5 days in Madan Bitaw village, I also visited the nearby villages of Nongspung and Pyndelitha but I only studied Nongspung in the Mawphlang C&RD Block, for a comparative analysis of the services in the two villages. My hostess Kong Julia is a teacher. She has been teaching Khasi language in Stella Maris Senior Secondary School for 28 years. Even the Headman of the village was once her student! Every night she sat with me after dinner to talk about different subjects like religion, culture and other things. She was very curious about my Assamese Hindu culture and in return she shared hers with me. I loved every bit of staying with her in her house. It felt like family.

During my stay I engaged with SHG workers, Anganwadi workers, teachers, Head teachers, poorest of the poor families, pregnant women and children, farmers who were mostly women, MGNREGA workers, members of the Village Organization (VO) and the Village Council (VC). I walked around in the whole village visiting everything that I came across. It is so small that I could cover all of it on foot. People everywhere knew me as the "Kong who broke her leg a month back." Villagers greeted me from across the paddy fields and across the ponds from their houses shouting "How is your leg now Kong?" in Khasi, which Kong Wanda would translate to me and I would answer with the same intensity. The village felt like my home. At one point the villagers started relating me to the Dong (Community) where I was staying. I guess my leg accident was a blessing in disguise. Anyway, continuing with the analytical part of the program, what I found out during my immersion is that the village is lacking in many basic facilities and services. They are very backward in their approach due to the lack

of connectivity with the larger world, both physical and cellular. Good thing is that the Headman and his Village Council are very active and enthusiastic about bringing change in their village. I have explained in details about the many different components of the village in the section below:

a. Infrastructure: The village is lacking in basic infrastructural development. It does not have an office of the Dorbar Shnong (Village Council) and the Village Organization (VO). It has no PHC and only one Sub Centre where there is no access to doctors. The CHC has two nurses and the Sub Centre is not open every day as the nurses have to go for home visits to smaller villages around. In the absence of a Mobile network tower the villagers are unable to receive any important news from around the country or the State. The schools in the village do not have enough classrooms to accommodate all the students, nor do they have the requisite number of teachers. The two Anganwadi Centres are in very bad shape. The student enrolment in the Anganwadi Centres for ECCE is very low. Public toilets in the village are in disrepair. The two SSA schools have no drinking water and sanitation. There is no bank in the village which makes it difficult for the villagers to manage their finances. 17.7% houses do not have electricity. JJM has been sanctioned in the village but has not been implemented yet. Only 2.2% households have access to piped drinking water supply. 97.7% do not have access to taps for treated potable water. 64.44% have toilets in their homes. 30.22% of them need repairing. Only 35.5% households have benefited from the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana although 63.11% Households are eligible. There are no waste management facilities in the village or street lights.

b. Functioning: Madan Bitaw is one of the most underdeveloped villages of Sohiong Block. The services take a very long time to reach the village. The BDO is cooperating with the Village Council to bring in all the schemes of development but due to its remoteness and lack of connectivity, it takes time. The village council is participating actively in developing its Village Level Development Plan (VLDP) with the help of CRISP team to address the demands and needs of the people. It is taking proactive steps to promote LSDGs, taking up the nine themes in its VLDP. The VC and the VO are developing their social action plans which have elements for developing infrastructure in the village along with many livelihoods plans as well. The VO and the VC are very accessible to the public which makes it easier for the villagers to put forth their demands and issues.

c. Softer Aspects of Village Dynamics

i. **Panchayat Powers and Governance:** There is no Panchayati Raj Institute in the state of Meghalaya. The Governance system in the villages of Meghalaya is based on Village councils headed by the Village Headman. This originated from the traditional Kingdoms, Himas. The villages inside the Kingdoms are known as the Dorbar Shnong. As stated earlier, the Kingdom is headed by the Syiem (King), currently referred to as the Sordar of the village. He is the head of 9 villages and below him comes the Village Headman (Rangba Shnong) and then the Rangba Dongs. This traditional structure is incorporated into the modern political structure of the Village Council. Most of the power lies with the Headman who cooperates with BDOs and the Sordar to bring about development and to solve the social and political issues in the village. The village organisation and other councils like the Village Employment council, Village Water and Sanitation committee, Village Health Council are wings of the Village Council that attend to each domain separately but in coordination with other councils. Gram Sabha is held every three months, in the Community Hall, to discuss the issues of the people of the village.

ii. **Source of Revenue in the Village:** The village revenue comes mostly from Agriculture and Daily wage Labourers. The harvesting season is the most profitable season. The ploughed harvest is sent for sale, to different parts of the state mostly Shillong and nearby headquarters. Around 25% of the village population is dependent on the MGNREGA scheme for employment and generating personal income. The village lacks financial capabilities as the funds received are uneven and untimely. Meghalaya falls in the sixth schedule area so its funds are mostly received from the Fifteenth Finance Commission.

iii. **Sustainable Development Goals:** The VLDP in collaboration with CRISP is being planned mainly to localise SDGs. The Village Council has taken conscious decisions to meet the SDGs by 20230. The plan includes the 9 themes of SDGs. The Village council is doing its best to spread awareness about LSDGs in Madan Bitaw with the help of the BDO and the Line Departments. It is also trying its best to bring all available state and central schemes to the villagers. CRISP along with MSRLS conducted a Convergence Camp on the last day of the Field Immersion program where 32 Line Departments attended the meeting and spread awareness about their various schemes available for the villagers. Among the stakeholders, the MLA of Sohiong Assembly constituency Sir Synshar Kupar Roy Lyngdoh Thabah attended the Camp and assured the people that he would take necessary steps for the VLDP goals to be met at the earliest.

iv. **Effectiveness of Scheme Implementation:** MGNREGA has been the most successful in the village. 25% of the total population is dependent on MGNREGA and are improving their livelihoods through the jobs obtained through job cards. Although the central govt has promised 100 days of employment, the case on ground is different. The reduced number of work days, disrupts the financial stability of the daily wage labourers. The lack of jobs is due to the lack of infrastructural development in the village which is a result of delayed funds for the implementation of govt schemes.

- **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)** has been implemented successfully with 80 of the 225 households (35.5%) having benefited in the first phase itself. However, 145 (63.11%) pending households have been struggling to acquire a house under the scheme. The funds never come on time.
- **Public Distribution System (PDS)** Ration is distributed unequally to the households. Many BPL HHs complained about not receiving an adequate amount of ration as they are still not registered and recognised as a BPL Household due to the delay in the new Census.
- **There has never been any skill development** scheme or workshop conducted in the village for the SHG workers and the other villagers. The SHG workers complained about not receiving adequate training to enhance their incomes.
- **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)** has been sanctioned in the village but it still hasn't been implemented. Only 5 households have access to a proper drinking water system through JJM.
- **Only 45 (20%) HHs are covered under SUBHAGYA Scheme** and 40 (17.7%) HHs do not have any electricity connection.
- **Social Security Coverage (like OAP, Wid ow Pension, Disability Pension, Post/ Pre matric Scholarship) has benefitted 18 (72%)** out of the total 25 widows in the village. The ICDS scheme needs major upgradation. There are only two AWCs; AWC 'A' and AWC 'B.' Anganwadi Centre (AWC) A has its own building but it needs repairs and renovations. AWC B has been functioning without a building since 2015. There is no enrolment for preschool education and ECCE in the AWCs. The children come just for half an hour, for the Hot Cooked Meals (HCMs) and Take-home rations (THRs). The TLMs in AWC A gathered dust and was eaten up by termites, which was a sad sight. There is serious need to establish the importance of ECCE in the village. Parents prefer to send children directly to the formal schools rather than the AWCs. Student enrolment from 3-6 years in AWC A is 22.2% and 38.46% in AWC B which is 60.66% of the total population in the village. But these 60.66% are only coming to the AWCs for HCMs and THRs. The centres are lacking infrastructural developments. Ujjala Scheme has benefitted only 74 (32.8%) Households out of the total 225 Households in the village.

v. **Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** There are 15 SHGs in the village out of which only 2-3 are fully functional. There is a lack of convergence between the Village Council and the SHGs. The SHGs are not a part of the Cluster Level Federation (CLF) of the Block, which is intended to optimise the functioning of the groups. There has been no awareness workshop held for them, either about their role in the development of the village or about ways of enhancing their income. While spending time with the SHGs I found they felt the lack of skill development as a big setback. They are demanding skill development training in pickle making, embroidery and other saleable options. Currently the SHGs are participating in livelihood activities to help the VC when required but there is no convergence between the two groups. The activities of the SHGs are very limited which has resulted in most of them slipping into inaction.

▶ People's Opinions

The people of Madan Bitaw are very simple and they are happy with their Headman's leadership because of his simplicity and humility. But they are extremely dissatisfied with the half-hearted implementation of schemes. They have found loopholes in every scheme they have received. They think the allocation of funds to the beneficiaries is neither timely nor adequate. Many feel they are not even informed about programme and projects they can rightfully avail. Older women and widows working in the fields would often ask me when I walked through the fields, "Is there any scheme for us old people and widows?". That shocked me because there is recorded data of 18 out of 25 widows in the village receiving Social Security Coverage from the Government but these women had no knowledge of it even though the village is so small. The people of the village are open to new opportunities but they are just not getting the scope to access them. It is good to see that they are not complacent and are willing to participate in any way possible to bring development to their village.

▶ Scope for Improvement

There is a huge scope for improvement in this village and the Village Council and the people are conscious of the challenges. The Convergence Camp conducted by CRISP and MSRLS was very helpful for the people and the leadership of the village to get insights into the available services for the villagers to avail. CRISP has chosen this village as a HUB and Model Village because the team could see the potential in the village. Few points are mentioned here regarding Infrastructural and service improvement on a prioritised manner according to the opinions and the demands of the people:

- There is an urgent need of setting up a Mobile tower in the village at the earliest as the absence of a mobile tower is restricting the villagers from getting information that is relevant and in connecting with the world.
- The sub centre in the village must be upgraded to a PHC for the villagers to get access to a Doctor at any given point.
- The Anganwadi Centres must be upgraded. The AWC B must be provided with its own building at the earliest.
- Empowerment of the SHGs in the village is very crucial. Skill development training and workshops must be conducted in the village at the earliest for the SHG Groups to become effectively active.
- There is an urgent need for convergence between the Village Council and the SHGs. Almost 85% of the SHGs in the village are inactive.

- The SHGs must undergo a workshop highlighting their roles and responsibilities and the importance of the groups as a very crucial part of development of the village.
- Extra classrooms in the SSA schools must be built at the earliest to accommodate all the students.
- Teacher deployment to the schools is an urgent requirement in the village.
- SSA new curriculum books have still not reached the schools, there is an urgent requirement for the release of the books to the schools as the students are still studying the old syllabus.

- There is no Higher Secondary school provision in the schools in the village. The students are compelled to leave their village after Grade 10 to go for higher Education in a different village which places a financial burden on BPL families. There can be provision for building Higher secondary sections in the SSA schools itself. These possibilities should be explored.
- There is an urgent need for offices for the Village Council and the Village Organisation.
- There is a requirement for a Bank in the village at the earliest; Meghalaya Rural bank is available in the nearby village Nongspung which is 35-40 mins away. There is scope for bringing in a branch of MRB in Madan Bitaw too.
- There is a requirement for farmers to be exposed to new ideas like Natural Farming so that crops can be diversified.
- 63.11% Households eligible for PMAY. 60.44% HHs do not have Pucca houses in the village. PMAY must be implemented at the earliest through the BDO.
- 97.7% of the total household do not have access to taps for treated potable water. JJM pipelines and other equipment are already supplied to the village, only the implementation has not yet been started. It must be implemented at the earliest.

► Suggestions

After spending a week at Madan Bitaw observing and understanding the functioning of the village, I came to know that life in the village is very slow and stagnant. The stagnation has led to the slow development of the village. Even though this life seems to be very peaceful and sugar coated from outside, the villagers struggle every day to achieve even the most basic things. I have a few suggestions that i would like to put forth here in the report to improve the daily lives of the people at Madan Bitaw Village:

- There needs to be more cooperation between the Village Council and the BDO to hasten the process of development in the village.
- There needs to be a Convergence between the SHGs and the Village Council in conducting livelihood activities and taking up development initiatives.
- There needs to be Convergence between the village Organization and the Village Council to take up initiatives to improve the standard of living in the village.
- The Village Council must be more active in providing the necessary schemes to its people in real time with rigorous follow ups from the BDO and the Line Departments. The standard of living is deteriorating due to the delay in implementations of the state and Central schemes, especially the central schemes.

- The intensity of Gram Sabhas must be increased in the village and there must be encouragement of more women participation in these gram sabhas.
- The community meetings must also be inclusive towards women.
- There must be more women representatives in the Village level Committees.
- The farmers associations must be empowered as the village is highly dependent on Agriculture as the primary source of income.
- There must be Skill development workshops and training for the SHGs for capacity building every 6 months with the help of Skill development Organisations like JSS, Skill India Mission etc.

► Conclusion

As I come to the conclusion of my report, I am reflecting back on those 5 days of sheer happiness and bliss that I felt at Madan Bitaw. I had a huge language barrier as I know only the basics of Khasi Language but I still had fruitful conversations with the villagers. I could understand them through their gestures and facial expressions and they could understand me. It felt almost like a mystical experience. I also had Kong Wanda with me, to translate every word to me and be my shadow during my field immersion which was a blessing. Kong Julia gave me love like she would give her own child and took care of me while I stayed at her house. She was always so sweet to ask about whether I had food or not and the best part of my days were her wishing me "Good Morning Niha!" every morning with the warmth of a mother. The villagers made me feel safe and secure among them. My biggest learning has been the simplicity of that life; how to lead a simple, slow and happy life. The villagers might be struggling with the basic services but they always maintained a smile on their faces, they were happy. They taught me how to live simply too. Another life lesson for me was that leading a life with no expectations brings happiness. I felt the children in the villages were way smarter and independent than city children. They are closer to nature and self-reliant as their parents are always at work in the fields or on work sites. They are also more conscious about natural surroundings as they are exposed to agriculture from a very young age. The most important learning for me was understanding the importance of being satisfied with what we have; to be happy in your surroundings.

Lastly, I just want to share a story in short about how my leg accident in the village was a blessing in disguise. A month before heading for my Field Immersion, on 26th April 2024, I visited the village to get familiar with the geography of the village and to introduce myself to the Village representatives. At the time I twisted my right ankle on a paddy field even though I was wearing a sports shoe, while my colleagues who wore heels were perfectly fine! Instantly, the villagers came running to help me and the Village headman called the local practitioners to have a look at the ankle but the biggest surprise was that out of nowhere a woman came running with a walker, for me. Within minutes there were around 20 people who gathered and each one of them were helping me in some way.

One old man taught me how to use the walker. When I returned to the city and consulted an Orthopaedic doctor, he said exactly what the local practitioner had already told me. The difference was that the doctor charged for his consultation and the local practitioner did it for free! During the following month, the villagers kept asking my team when they visited the village, about my leg. Information about my status would then spread across the whole village. After a month, on 10th July 2024, when I finally started my field Immersion, I was moved to see everyone I came across, enquiring about my condition. This gave me a warm and friendly environment to work in. The villagers greeted me with cheerful shouts from wherever they happened to be, as if I was a part of their community and a permanent resident of the village. I did not feel like an outsider even for a second. With this, I conclude my report on my Field Immersion experience which has been the greatest experience of my life so far and will be etched in my memory forever. Thank you CRISP for letting me have this incredible experience and I am looking forward to more such experiences in the coming days.

A Report on Village Immersion at *Serfanguri* Village in *Chirang* Disitrict of Assam State

Prepared by:

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▶ Exclusive Summary

CRISP (Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies) is a renowned organization with a mission to enhance the effectiveness of government schemes and policies. Through in-depth research and analysis, CRISP evaluates implementation of various initiatives and the impact they have, providing actionable recommendations to stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, and the communities being studied. With a focus on capacity building and advocacy, CRISP empowers stakeholders to drive inclusive and equitable development. Its work spans diverse areas, such as social welfare, rural development, healthcare, education, livelihood promotion, and gender equality, ultimately informing policy decisions and fostering sustainable development outcomes. By bridging the gap between research and practice, CRISP plays a pivotal role in shaping policies that positively impact lives. With a team of experts and a strong network of partners, CRISP has established itself as a trusted resource for evidence-based policy-making, contributing to the betterment of society since its inception.

Village Profile: As part of the Village Immersion Programme, I undertook an immersive research journey in Serfanguri

Village, under Bengtol-Serfang VCDC in Chirang District of Assam. Through a rigorous selection process, Serfanguri Village was chosen for its unique blend of cultural diversity, geographical characteristics, and socio-economic dynamics.
Our selection criteria included:

- **District:** Chirang District was chosen for its strategic location and representation of the region's socio-economic landscape.
- **Block:** Bengtol Serfang VCDC, under Sidli Chirang Development Block was selected for its diverse population and access to various government schemes and interventions.
- **Village:** Serfanguri Village was chosen for its representative demographics, availability of resources, and willingness of the community to participate in the research.

Serfanguri is a medium size village located in Bengtol Circle of Chirang district, Assam with 1115 families residing currently. According to the 2011 Population census, children in age group of 0-6, number 127. This is 17.54 % of the total population. In 2011, literacy rate of Serfanguri village was 42.88% compared to 72.19 % of Assam. Male literacy stands at 51.62 % while female literacy rate was 33.56 %.

The Village has 2 Primary Schools, 2 Anganwadi Centers, where all the study materials are provided by the government. During the visit I observed that Serfanguri village has many challenges. There's no good healthcare, not enough food and nutrition for kids, and many families live in poor conditions. The village needs better healthcare, education, and ways for people to earn a living. But the community is strong and has taken some good initiatives. To make things better, we need to improve healthcare, help families in need, and support the village's efforts to grow and develop.

▶ Introduction

As part of the Village Immersion Programme, I visited Serfanguri Village, under Bengtol-Serfang VCDC in Chirang District of Assam. We had an opportunity to closely observe and understand the lifestyle of the Villagers in Serfanguri Village. It helped us to gain deeper understanding of their living conditions, infrastructure, government schemes implementation, source of livelihood and other aspects of their life.

For understanding the situation of any village or villagers a brief knowledge about the area is needed as every village differs from the other. Serfanguri Village is home to a population comprising four distinct communities: Muslim (5%), Bodo (80%), Santali (10%), and Urao (5%)

▶ Methodology

Both Quantitative and Qualitative data were collected. The quantitative data was population of school students, ICDS students, and the qualitative data was used for quality of house, quality of drinking water, quality of road, which were obtained from villagers and various representatives of the village like Village Headman, VCDC Chairman, etc.

▶ Scope of the Study

The study focuses on the four sub-villages within Serfanguri revenue village: - Serfanguri 1, Serfanguri 2, Serfanguri 3 and Serfanguri 4. Its scope is limited to the households within these sub-villages, aiming to look into various aspects of village life, including health, education, employment, livelihood, sanitation and more.

▶ Limitations of the Study

- **Gender dynamics:** Women's hesitation to share sensitive information with a male surveyor.
- **Language barriers:** Communication Challenges between researchers and villagers.
- **Resource constraints:** Limited availability of resource persons and time constraints.

Despite these limitations, our research provides valuable insights into the complexities of life in Serfanguri, shedding light on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges faced by the community.

▶ Village Immersion Summary

Primary Health Centre (PHC)

During my Village immersion, I discovered an alarming lack of healthcare infrastructure in the village. There is no functional Primary Health Centre (PHC), Community Health Centre (CHC), or Sub Centre, leaving villagers to rely on the Dispensary in Bengtol town, 6-7 kms away. The Dispensary can only treat minor ailments and in the absence of an ambulance service, villagers often transport patients, casualties, and pregnant women via E-rickshaws. They also seek alternatives like, ojhas and kabiraj for ailments like broken bones, jaundice, etc.

The healthcare situation of the village deteriorated with the departure of a resident MBBS doctor and his homeopath wife, who previously provided treatment to the villagers. The absence of a healthcare system has left the community vulnerable, particularly in emergency situations. The ANMs and ASHA Worker shared concerns about the challenges faced by villagers in accessing quality healthcare. This highlights the urgent need for a Sub-Centre, for providing ambulance service, and for ensuring regular health check-ups and awareness programs to bridge the healthcare gap in this rural community

Anganwadi Centre

There are two Anganwadi centres in Serfanguri. Each is staffed by One Anganwadi Worker and an Anganwadi Helper, who work to provide essential services. Every Wednesday, the Anganwadi Workers supported by ANMs, distribute medicine to children and pregnant women, ensuring they receive timely medical attention in their respective Anganwadi Centres.

The Anganwadi Centres are also hubs for nutrition, where hot cooked meals are served to children through the Akshaya Patra program. While the centers primarily cater to children aged 3-6 years old, additional children often visit to benefit from the mid-day meal program. The Anganwadi worker informed that recently, the State Government of Assam introduced a new policy, depositing the expenses for the hot-cooked meals directly into the bank accounts of Anganwadi Workers. This innovative approach empowers workers to procure a variety of

nutritious food items, such as eggs, kichidi and suji to serve to the children. This shift from relying on the Social Welfare department's food materials, distributed through Child Development Protection Offices, marks a significant improvement in the program's efficiency and effectiveness. As a result, the Anganwadi Centers can now provide more diverse and nutritious meals, further enriching the lives of children and pregnant women in rural areas.

Houses of Marginalised Communities

During my village immersion, I had the opportunity to visit a humble abode of an elderly couple, residing in a bamboo and mud house located in a paddy field, approximately 10-15 meters away from the village road. The house, which was in a state of disrepair, had holes covered with cloth patches, and lacked a proper approach road, and I had to walk through the paddy field's bunds to reach it. The couple, aged 60 and 45 respectively, struggled with limited access to basic amenities, including a toilet, despite having a tube well for water supply. The wife, a daily wage earner, faced uncertainty with irregular work opportunities, which further exacerbated their economic vulnerability. It is known that their children lived separately in another village. My visit to their hut highlighted the realities of poverty, inadequate housing, and limited access to basic services faced by vulnerable household.

MGNREGA Worksite

There are 1115 Job Card Holders in the Serfanguri. During my visit to VCDC Office, I had an opportunity to visit a recently completed MGNREGA project- The construction of an Anganwadi Centre with a Kitchen garden. The project, amounting Rs. 9,68,029.00, was completed under the supervision of the VCDC.

Key Observations:

- Daily wage rate for workers: Rs.234
- Project Status: Completed, but yet to be handed over to the Anganwadi Worker.
- VCDC Chairman and members expressed concerns about delays in wage payments and material bills.
- No new works have been issued in last 2 years to the VCDC due to pending closures of existing schemes in the Block's MIS.
- The completed Anganwadi Centre with a Kitchen Garden is a valuable asset for the community, showcasing MGNREGA's potential in creating sustainable infrastructure.
- The rule limiting Community Schemes to 20 per VCDC at a time may be the cause for delay and inefficiency.

Village Council Development Committee (VCDC)

During my immersion, I visited Bengtol-Serfang VCDC and gained valuable insights into that community's governance structure and development initiatives. The Bengtol-Serfang Village Council Development Committee (VCDC), comprising VCDC Chairman, VCDC Vice-Chairman and 17 VCDC members representing 4 Revenue Villages and 13 Forest Villages (F.V), plays a pivotal role in prioritizing schemes and allocating resources. Through the Gram Sabha, held between October and December, the community voices their demands and prioritizes schemes, ensuring inclusive decision-making. The VCDC's focus is on MGNREGA and PMAY-G schemes on improving rural infrastructures and enhancing livelihoods.

The VCDC had made significant progress in PMAY-G, completing 447 out of 647 targeted schemes, with 200 pending. Notably, the VCDC has supported Self-Help Group (SHG) members with Piggery, Goat rearing and Poultry sheds under MGN-

REGA funds, which is among the initiatives by BTR Government as part of "Lakhpati Mahila" initiative to empower women. These efforts are part of the Village Poverty Reduction Plan (VPRP), informed by annual surveys conducted by the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM).

Self Help Group (SHG)

There are 27 SHGs in the Village. They are linked with Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission Society (ASRLMS). After registration, the SHGs usually receive two types of funds for their operations: Revolving Fund (RF) and Community Investment Fund (CIF). Generally, the SHG members of the village are engaged in livestock activities like Piggery, animal rearing, bird farming, etc. During Village immersion, I got an opportunity to attend Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Program (SEVP) organized at the Block level for the SHG members interested in Start-up Livelihood activities (Non-Farm) like Tea Stalls, Make-up Artists, Grocery Shops, etc. Discussion with the beneficiaries proved that they were satisfied by the Government's initiative.

Veterinary Hospital

I observed there is no dedicated veterinary hospital in the village. In case of animal health issues, the villagers rely on calling a doctor from the Bengtol town, 6-7 km away. They also seek help from local villagers who possess basic knowledge and skills for undertaking minor procedures like castration of cocks and pigs This underscores the resourcefulness and self-sufficiency of the community in addressing animal healthcare needs.

Village School

Serfanguri Village is home to two Lower Primary Schools, namely Taikajora L.P School and Serfanguri L.P School that serve as the primary educational institutions for the majority of the village children, providing a foundation for their academic and personal growth. While a small number of students go to private schools in nearby Bengtol town, the majority attend these government schools, which offer a supportive and inclusive environment conducive to learning and development. The schools are equipped with basic infrastructure, including playgrounds and resources that promote mental and physical development, as well as libraries that provide access to a range of books and educational materials, fostering a love of learning and academic curiosity.

Discussions with village representatives, including the Village Headman, VCDC Chairman, and School Teachers, revealed that socio-economic factors significantly influence the choice of schools, with higher-income families preferring to send their children to private schools, while farmers and low-income families rely on government schools. The Mid-Day Meal program, a crucial initiative, ensures that every student receives a nutritious meal, regardless of their background, helping to bridge the gap and provide equal opportunities for all children to learn, grow, and thrive, thereby promoting educational equity and inclusivity.

Class	Bodo Medium
Ko-Sreni	6
1	1
2	4
3	4
4	4
5	7
Total	26
Total Students: 26 Total no of Teachers:4	

Table 1. No of Students in Taikajora L.P School

Class	Bodo Medium	Assamese Medium
Ko Sreni	1	8
1	NIL	8
2	NIL	7
3	1	11
4	2	5
5	1	10
Total	5	49
	Total Students: 54 Total no of Teachers: 4	

Table 2. No of Students in Serfanguri L.P School

Drug Abuse

I met with village representatives like Anchalik Headman, VCDC Chairman, Village Headman and few Senior Citizens who expressed concern about bad habits, particularly drug abuse, among college and school students. They attributed this trend to the decreased activism of NGOs that previously worked towards educational development in the village. These NGOs used to play a crucial role in promoting education and values among the youth, but their reduced presence has left a vacuum, allowing negative influences to take hold.

The representatives emphasized the need for renewed efforts to support the educational and personal development of the village youth. They suggested that revitalizing the NGOs' initiatives or introducing new programs could help counter the growing menace of drug abuse and other bad habits. By addressing this issue, we can ensure that students receive the guidance and support they need to thrive and reach their full potential.

▶ Observations

I observed that Serfanguri faces significant challenges in healthcare, with no functional Primary Health Centre, relying on a Dispensary 6-7 km away, leading to inadequate access, especially in emergencies. The Anganwadi Centres provide essential services, but more diverse and nutritious meals are needed to address malnutrition and health issues. Vulnerable households struggle with inadequate housing, limited access to basic amenities like toilets, and economic uncertainty. MGNREGA projects, like the Anganwadi Centre construction, demonstrate potential for sustainable infrastructure creation, but delays and inefficiencies hinder progress. The VCDC plays a crucial role in prioritizing schemes and allocating resources, but more inclusive decision-making and focus on livelihood enhancement are needed. SHGs promote entrepreneurship and livelihood diversification, but expanded initiatives and support are necessary for greater impact. The absence of a dedicated veterinary hospital or clinic leads to reliance on external services and local practitioners with limited expertise. Village schools provide a supportive environment, but require better infrastructure, resources, and teacher training to bridge the gap with private schools. Lastly, drug abuse and other negative influences affect youth, highlighting the need for revitalized NGO initiatives or new programs promoting education, values, and guidance. These observations highlight the challenges and opportunities for development in Serfanguri village, emphasizing the need for targeted initiatives and support.

▶ Suggestions

1. Primary Health Centre (PHC) Establishment of a functional Sub-Centre in the village, providing regular health check-ups, awareness programs, and ambulance services to bridge the healthcare gap.

2. Anganwadi Centre: Enhance Anganwadi services by providing more diverse and nutritious meals, increasing medicine distribution, and supporting Anganwadi workers through training and resources.

3. Marginalised Communities Houses: Implement initiatives to improve housing conditions, access to basic amenities, and livelihood opportunities for vulnerable households, ensuring inclusive development and enabling their access to schemes like PMAY-G, JJM, Ayushman Bharat, etc.

4. MGNREGA Worksite: Expedite wage payments, material bills, and pending scheme closures, while exploring new projects to sustain community development and infrastructure creation.

5. VCDC Office: Strengthen VCDC's role in prioritizing schemes, allocating resources, and ensuring inclusive decision-making through Gram Sabha, focusing on MGNREGA, PMAY-G, and livelihood enhancement. Involving VCDC in various developmental schemes like SOPD, FC, etc

6. Self Help Group (SHG): Expand SHG initiatives, providing training, resources, and market linkages to promote entrepreneurship, livelihood diversification, and women's empowerment.

7. Veterinary Hospital: Establish a dedicated veterinary hospital or clinic in the village, providing accessible animal healthcare services and training for local practitioners.

8. Village School: Enhance educational infrastructure, resources, and teacher training, while promoting inclusive education and bridging the gap between government and private schools.

9. Introducing of new programs focusing on educational development, value promotion, and guidance for youth, addressing drug abuse and other negative influences.

▶ Conclusion

The people of Serfanguri village are strong and they find ways to overcome challenges despite having limited resources and infrastructure. However they do urgently require improved healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities. By addressing these gaps and strengthening community governance, we can empower the villagers to build a more sustainable and equitable future.

▶ References & Bibliography

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