

Aparajita

A people's campaign
to end child marriage
in **Koraput**



Smt. Anu Garg, Principal Secretary DWCD and MS

The state-level 'Advika – Every girl is unique' programme is a renewed commitment towards the empowerment of adolescent girls through education and life skills. Advika will be a common and coordinated platform for linking all schemes targeted at all adolescent girls of Odisha in the 10-19 years age group, across the State, in and out of school. It is the best example of the highest political commitment towards adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage and all kinds of violence.

The State Strategy Action Plan on ending child marriage rolled out in 2019 is a convergent plan of action for line departments, partner organisations including CSOs, and communities. We have formed a State Steering Committee on ending child marriage under the leadership of WCD department with membership from key line departments such as Home, Panchayati Raj and Drinking Water, Education, Skill Development, Health, Odisha State Commission for Protection of Child Rights, and representatives from UNICEF, UNFPA, and Action Aid. System strengthening is imperative for the success of these measures. Along with ending child marriage, the state is committed towards empowering adolescents, especially our young girls, to ensure that they are safe, secure, and have access to all facilities and services.

The State of Odisha gladly recognises the commendable efforts of district administrations towards adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage. Currently, as many as 1,700 villages have been declared child marriage-free by district administrations. I extend my thanks to the district administrations and the entire team. We are committed to ensure a bright future for our adolescents and work towards achieving the SDGs.



Shri Aravind Agrawal, IAS, Director DWCD and MS

Since our State and DWCD&MS are committed to and envision making Odisha child marriage-free by 2030, we are focusing on prevention mechanisms. District-level proactive interventions resulted in more child marriage cases being reported to the State. Frontline workers like AWWs, ASHAs and ANMs along with women's SHGs members are now more vigilant in their communities and many child marriages are being prevented. We have also involved religious leaders, local NGOs, CBOs, youth leaders, adolescent volunteers/collectives etc.

One of the key learnings for the department is that community ownership, working with partners as well as ownership by the local government in taking the campaign to end child marriage forward are invaluable. Secondly, system strengthening in terms of effective functioning of existing structures and mechanisms at various levels in the communities has played a crucial role. Thirdly, preventive measures are equally important to end child marriage.

Hearteningly, as many as 387 child marriages were stopped across Odisha in the COVID-19 lockdown period. Stopping child marriage requires proactive intervention, along with constant follow up with the victims. I encourage all districts to work consistently towards adolescent empowerment and weed out the practice of child marriage under the umbrella of Advika so that our youth can realise their aspirations and contribute to the welfare of our State.

A. Policy framework for ending child marriage in Odisha

Odisha stands at the 13th rank with respect to child marriages in the country, with an average of 21.3 per cent child marriages. Though high, this is a marked improvement from 37.2 per cent a decade ago (NFHS-4). However, even now, girls continue to face challenges of marrying at an early age in many districts. Child marriages curb the physical growth of girls and hamper their mental and emotional maturity. Early motherhood puts a girl's own health in peril and severely restricts her opportunities to move ahead in life. Pregnancy at an

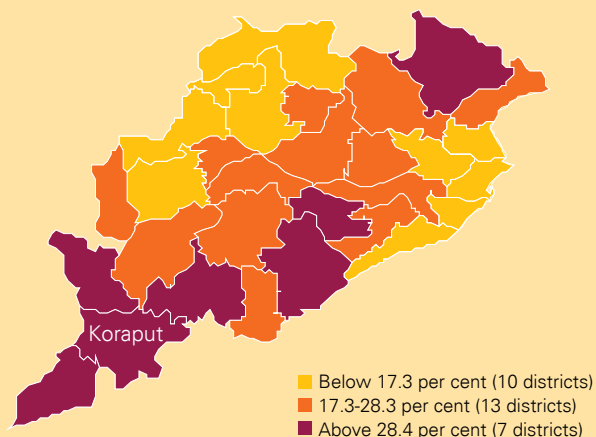
early age is also one of the main reasons of infant and maternal mortality.

B. State level efforts to end child marriage

The Government of Odisha has launched massive efforts to address the situation of child marriage in the State. It constituted a High-level Committee, under the chairpersonship of the Principal Secretary, Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD), to review the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006 and Odisha Prohibition of Child Marriage Rules, 2009, and formulate and roll out the State Strategy to end child marriage.

DWCD and Mission Shakti (MS), Odisha State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (OSPCPR), UNICEF, UNFPA and Mr. Ghasiram Panda¹ are members of this Committee. The Odisha Prohibition of Child Marriage Rules, 2019 were resultantly formulated with specific amendments.

Status of child marriage in Odisha



'Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls' is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) formulated by the United Nations in 2015. Action towards achievement of this goal would affect the outcomes of the other SDGs. Of the nine target areas of SDG 5, Target Area 3 spells out elimination of harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

The efforts being made by the Government of Odisha are in alignment with SDG 5, to eliminate child marriage from the State in a systematic and time-bound manner.



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¹ Programme Manager at ActionAid

The Committee has wide representation, which includes Departments of Schools and Mass Education, Higher Education, ST and SC Development, Minorities and Backward Classes Welfare, Panchayati Raj and Drinking Water, Home, Health and Family Welfare, Sports and Youth Services, Skill Development and Technical Education, Social Security and Empowerment of Persons with Disability and Law.

The State also launched a multi-sectoral Strategic Action Plan (2019–24) to ensure coordinated efforts by multiple departments to eliminate child marriage. The High-level Committee tasked district administrations to develop contextualised District Action Plans (DAPs) for smooth implementation of the State Strategic Action Plan.

Notable efforts by the Government of Odisha after laying this crucial groundwork for ending child marriage have been:

Regular training of functionaries

More than 5,000 District Social Welfare Officers (DSWOs), Child Marriage Prohibition Officers (CMPOs), Protection Officers (POs) and District Child Protection Officers (DCPOs), One Stop Centre, CHILDLINE staff and supervisors have been trained on an ongoing basis. During the COVID-19 period, webinars and online training sessions have

been conducted at state and district levels to continue the capacity building efforts across all 30 districts.

Issuing guidelines at district, block and panchayat levels

The guidelines mandate the formation of District/Block/Panchayat Level Child Protection Committees/Task Forces on Adolescent Empowerment and Ending Child Marriage. They also provide a clear outline of roles and reporting formats for the Committees/Task Forces.

Launching Advika programme

To maximise the impact of all its schemes across adolescent girls of all ages, the State Government launched the ‘Advika’ programme on October 11, 2020 on the occasion of International Girl Child Day. This State-wide programme, launched in partnership with UNICEF and UNFPA is envisaged as a renewed commitment towards the empowerment of adolescent girls through education and life skills. The programme will serve as a common and coordinated platform for linking all schemes targeted at adolescent girls within the State. It aims at making vibrant and adolescent friendly ‘Kishori Diwas’ (Saturday sessions) by imparting life skill education to deal with their day-to-day challenges and issues, and creating a space for girls to express themselves and find solutions to their problems. It provides them with the opportunity to become aware and connect with relevant social protection schemes for them and their families.



C. Taking forward the mandate of the State Strategic Action Plan in Koraput

Tribal populations and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Koraput

Koraput is one of the districts declared as a Fifth Scheduled Area of Odisha². The population in the district predominantly belongs to Scheduled Tribes (STs)³. Vulnerable communities, such as PVTGs, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and STs, residing in remote and inaccessible pockets are underserved due to difficult geographical access, resulting in social and economic disadvantages, isolation, illiteracy, extreme poverty, malnutrition, migration distress, relocation, loss of livelihood and unemployment. A total of 261 villages in the district are categorised as hard-to-reach areas under ICDS schemes. These areas are serviced by the DSWO and functionaries of ICDS to ensure that essential services reach them.

The literacy rate of Koraput stands at 49.21 per cent, with the male literacy rate at 50.21 per cent and the female literacy rate at 32.43 per cent, indicating that most of the girls are out of school. Lack of education is one of the important causes for the high prevalence of child marriage in the district.

Child marriage in Koraput

In Odisha, Koraput district has the third highest percentage of child marriage at 34.7 per cent. Both SCs and STs have their own age-old custom of child marriage and rural Koraput has a higher percentage of child marriage than urban areas. Child marriage is prevalent among tribal communities of Kondh, Soura, Bhumiya, Bhotra, Durua and Gadava who reside in 14 blocks.

Daughters are married once they turn 13 or 14 years old. Education levels are low and so is awareness of the legal implications of child marriage. Extreme poverty also abets child marriage. An age-old custom among the tribals in Koraput called Udulia Vivah encourages teenagers to choose their

own partners and elope. Their parents then search for them, bring them back home and solemnise their wedding.

D. Building capacities in Koraput

The district administration in Koraput has made systematic efforts to build capacities of officials for prevention of child marriage. A three-phase district-level training was organised in 2019 to orient key district officials on PCMA, its legal provisions and their roles and responsibilities in implementing the Plan. Prior to the workshop, reports prepared on child marriage were unsystematic. Therefore, the workshop also delved into record-keeping on child marriage, especially details such as the age of the boy or girl at the time of marriage.

Participants in these district-level trainings included district level officials from all line departments including CDPOs, DCPOs, officials from Police, Health and Education departments, and block level officials. Orientation workshops were also organised for NGOs, women's groups, panchayat leaders, village-level traditional leaders, magico-religious practitioners (*Disaris*) and sorcerers (*Gunias*) to ensure their engagement and ownership in efforts to prevent child marriage. UNICEF, in partnership with ActionAid supported the district administration in conducting these trainings.

In Koraput, as in the other districts across the State, CDPOs have been given additional charge of a CMPO. During the orientation, CDPOs were informed about their roles and responsibilities as CMPOs and their power to lodge First Information Reports (FIRs) in case of child marriage. The workshop equipped the participants to prepare an informed work plan to stop child marriage in the district, through the ongoing activities and by planning additional focused activities. Later, Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) were oriented on child marriage in sector meetings. This is where the idea of a district-wide campaign germinated.

² Scheduled Areas are marked by a larger percentage of tribal population and a marked disparity in economic standard of the people, among other criterion. These districts are home to more than 60 per cent of the tribal population in Odisha. Although highly resource rich areas, they are marked by poor socio-economic indicators

³ The population of Koraput consists of 14.2 per cent SCs (Dom, Generic Caste Dhoba, etc.) and 50.6 per cent STs (Gadaba, Omatanya, Paroja, Saura, Bhumia, Bhattadas, Durua, etc.).

What makes the Aparajita campaign unique?

The Aparajita campaign builds on a multi-dimensional approach to understand the challenge of child marriage and intends to provide solutions in line with the SDGs and the International Convention for Human and Child Rights.

Convergence is the Stepping Stone

It is the outcome of convergence among all the 12 line departments of the district administration.

Multi-stakeholder Coordination, Engagement and Partnership

It includes development partners such as ActionAid Association and UNICEF, local NGOs, CHILDLINE and Rotary Club, Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS), as well as religious, caste and tribal leader forums.

Flexible, Adoptable and thus Sustainable

The campaign design is sustainable in nature.

Massive and Last Mile Outreach

It reaches out to the farthest person, covering primary, secondary and tertiary stakeholders.

Sensitive to the Local Content and People's Emotions

It has been designed to take into account cultural sentiments of the community members.

Comprehensive and Strategic Coverage of the Issue and Policy Solutions

The campaign design deals with prevention, protection, prosecution and rehabilitation aspects of child marriages.



Aparajita is the name of a flower. The word also means 'undefeated'. It was considered appropriate to call the campaign 'Aparajita' as young girls have the potential to blossom and remain undefeated provided they have access to the right opportunities.

Aligning their priorities with the State-level commitment, the district administration of Koraput geared up to address child marriage with a strong resolve. In November 2019, the district administration launched Aparajita, a campaign against child marriage to prevent such marriages.

Developing the campaign blueprint

The District Task Force (DTF) was formed under the leadership of the District Collector, with membership of all line departments. A meeting of the DTF was held with representation of key officials from member departments and stakeholders from district, block and panchayat



levels. In this meeting, a large-scale district-level awareness campaign named Aparajita was conceptualised as an integral part of the DAP. Along with conceptualising the campaign, a detailed implementation and monitoring plan was also developed by the district administration, with support from ActionAid. The meeting ensured participation of key departments such as DWCD, Health, Urban Development, SC and ST Welfare, Agriculture and others, making it a convergent effort.

Aparajita aimed to bring focus on the issue of child marriage and enthuse both the administration and communities to stand up and act against it. **The key objective of the campaign was to make Koraput child marriage free.**

DWCD was at the helm of the campaign. The DTF also provided critical oversight on a regular basis. A team consisting of the District Collector; District Programme Manager, Nutrition Operation Plan; District Coordinator, ActionAid and a UNICEF representative visualised the logo and banner of Aparajita.

Aparajita was planned as an intensive 100-hour campaign with a definitive beginning and end.

Today, Aparajita is owned by the district administration as an action oriented, continuous campaign.

Translating plans into action at the block and community level

The campaign was officially launched on Children's Day, November 14, 2019, at the district level. All 14 blocks in the district launched the campaign on November 30, 2019, with the participation of key departments. A district-level WhatsApp group was created with block representatives, where all the blocks could share their action plans, photographs and videos of their campaign launch.

Preparation at block level

Every block prepared an action plan to combat child marriage, with the participation of key line officers including Block Development Officers (BDOs), Tehsildars, CDPOs, social welfare organisations and development partners – UNICEF and ActionAid. CHILDLINE provided support in organising the campaign.

The BDOs – nodal officers of the campaign – initiated Aparajita in their blocks with a meeting in which the Block Education Officer (BEO), CDPO, Medical Officer In-charge (MOIC), a representative of the police, CHILDLINE representative, gram panchayat and local leaders, traditional leaders, ward members, Disaris (quacks) and *Gunias* (sorcerers) were present.



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020



Intensive activities undertaken

Information, education and communication (IEC) materials developed at the district level were displayed in prominent areas in blocks and villages such as block-level offices, gram panchayat premises, schools, courts at the block, subdivision and district levels, police stations, District Hospital and Anganwadi Centres (AWCs). Posters were made and walls were painted to promote the message of ending child marriage in schools and noticeable locations. Regular meetings were conducted through convergence of line departments at the district, block, gram panchayat and village levels. Ending child marriage was included in the agenda of all these meetings. *Disaris* and *Gunias* organised village-level programmes such as storytelling, song and dance performances.

Ensuring readiness of gram panchayats

Committees were formed at the gram panchayat and village levels and given the responsibility of organising and monitoring the campaign. Gram panchayat and village level nodal meetings ensured the attendance of traditional leaders, ward members, teachers, frontline workers, *Disaris*, *Gunias* and adolescent girls and boys. Adolescent ambassadors too participated in these meetings where child marriage and its ill-effects were discussed. Activities were then kick started at the block and community levels. Aparajita was made an agenda point in all gram panchayat meetings. Weekly Aparajita meetings were held at the village level to motivate adolescents.

As part of popularising the toll-free CHILDLINE number, the district administration got these numbers painted on walls at 12 different locations in the municipality area. There is a plan to display these numbers at all AWCs in the district, for which a fund has been mobilised from the District Mineral Foundation and the District Urban Development Agency.

AWWs and ASHAs play a central role

A rally was organised as part of the Aparajita campaign in every block in participatory mode to deliver the message of ending child marriage to the community and mobilise school students, adolescents and community members. AWWs and Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) took the lead in



Our block was the first one to launch the programme on November 28, 2019 and to take it further to the community level. We conducted special meetings every Saturday. We began to give greater focus to the issue of child marriage in these meetings attended by adolescent girls who are school dropouts. We also organised orientation programmes for sector-level workers at AWCs. We made communities aware of legal provisions and punitive measures against child marriage. We also organised awareness programmes at our local college to sensitise adolescents. ASHAs and AWWs are making home visits and sensitising people.

During our sector meetings, the Lady Supervisor of Pattangi ICDS oriented us on child marriage. She discussed child marriage and its impact on society. We now understand the legal implications of PCMA.

Arati Mohapatra

Block Mission Shakti Coordinator, Boipariguda block

Urmila Boi

AWW, Pottangi block

planning these rallies and in reaching out to the community, with the support of ward members, adolescents, village leaders and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs). This was a strategic step since community members know AWWs, respect them and have faith in them.

Banners and placards in the local language, with slogans for elimination of child marriage were used extensively. Awareness was created among communities during distribution of Public Distribution System (PDS) ration.

Leaflets on child marriage were distributed at gatherings by AWWs and ASHAs. Every Saturday, they made home visits, handed the leaflets to families, explained the messages and answered queries. They also actively undertook counselling of adolescents, mothers and other family members by organising meetings to build awareness on child marriage. AWWs kept the CDPOs informed about the situation in their villages. These messages were reiterated during Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Days (VHSNDs). Alongside, ward members and gram panchayat members supported them.

Traditional and Kula Samaj leaders join in

Traditional leaders and *Kula Samaj* leaders too provided valuable contribution. They welcomed the campaign in their villages and supported it wholeheartedly. They closely

coordinated with the *Sarpanchs* and took a pledge to end child marriage. Wherever they got an opportunity, these leaders took up the issue of child marriage to build a public discourse around it. They spoke at community-level functions, festivals and other such occasions, and remained in close touch with the CDPOs to keep them informed about the village events.

Sarpanchs on their part, conducted meetings at the village level to create awareness on child marriage. Adolescent girls and boys were called for these meetings and the implications of early marriage on health and overall wellbeing of women and family were explained to them. They were motivated to be brand ambassadors of the campaign and link with more adolescents in their village. These adolescent ambassadors also shared information about child marriage in their villages with the CMPOs.



We gathered all adolescents from our village along with the Anganwadi *didi* and ASHA *didi*. Every Saturday, we organise rallies around the village on prevention of child marriage. Our adolescent group members make regular home visits. We make these visits even in the absence of the AWW and ASHA.

Members of adolescents' group
Kamarbelgan village, Nandapur block



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

Self-help groups extend their support

Odisha Livelihoods Mission (OLM) actively engaged with adolescent girls and instilled the message of the Aparajita campaign. Since self-help groups (SHGs) are from the same village and very active, their words have a great impact on families. OLM took support from SHGs to counsel parents of adolescent children and discuss the issue of child marriage. OLM conducted meetings in villages and counselled families. Gram sabhas were being used as a platform by OLM to highlight the issue. Sarpanchs, traditional leaders, ward members and frontline workers were present in these meetings and counselled the families of adolescents. They also informed ICDS Supervisors, CMPOs and police in case a child marriage related matter did not get resolved through counselling and needed further action.

Naranga Pujari, President, SHG Federation played an active role in organising the Aparajita campaign. She worked among the community members with commitment and told them about child marriage and its harmful effects through banners and storytelling, using the local language 'Desia' and the tribal dialect 'Kuvi'.

SHGs created awareness among parents, grandparents and young children about the ill-effects of child marriage and provided support in organising rallies. They were completely involved in village-level awareness campaigns and some of them organised rallies themselves. Adolescents with good oratory skills were selected and trained to carry the message further in their adolescent groups, friend circles and families.



I got married before the legal age of 21. I now realise it was a mistake. Child marriage caused me many problems. This campaign has provided us a positive thought with the slogan 'Say no to child marriage'. It is a good effort, which will enable the community to prevent child marriage at the village level.

Subasini Sagar

25-year-old, Narayanpatna village and block





OLM's programme Swabhiman also became a vehicle to propagate Aparajita's key messages. As part of Swabhiman, the OLM community resource person conducts meetings with adolescent girls. The forum is now being used to discuss issues related to child marriage, in addition to health and hygiene. OLM reaches out to adolescent girls in schools too. Group meetings are organised, with some being exclusively for adolescents girls and in others, adolescent boys are invited too.

Snehalata Parida

OLM Block Coordinator, Koraput



Aparajita campaign taken to schools

The ST and SC Development, Minorities and Backward Classes Development Department took the campaign to its residential schools.



A young girl in our school was good at studies and always held the first position in class. She was calm and quiet in nature. When she got to know that she had secured a good rank in her HSC examination (in 2013), she told me that her father wanted to stop her studies and arrange her marriage. After hearing this, I called her father and explained the ill-effects of child marriage. I was able to motivate him through counselling and a detailed discussion. In the end, he agreed to continue her education. Now his daughter has graduated from Jeypore Women's College, Koraput. Though this was long ago, it still makes me feel good that I could support a young girl's future.

Sabita Sadangi

Teacher, Government Girls High School
Koraput



Every day, three minutes were dedicated during prayer meetings to discuss the issue of child marriage. In their life skills education classes, girls were counselled by the hostel in-charge and matron to inform the police in case they came across any instances of child marriage in their villages. Debates, drawing and slogan writing sessions, story writing and cultural activities were organised on child marriage.

Children made beautiful paintings on ending child marriage, which were shared by the ST and SC Development, Minorities and Backward Classes Development Department on its official Facebook page. These paintings received a lot of appreciation. Wall paintings were made based on stories written by the girls.

Teachers in every school were given the responsibility to discuss child marriage with children in schools. They explained the harmful effects of child marriage and how it can be stopped. Students took an oath to say no to child marriage and oppose it whenever they came across one. Child marriage was included as an agenda point in the parent-teacher meetings and School Management Committee (SMC) meetings. Teachers tried to change the mindset of the parents through counselling.

Felicitation of adolescent ambassadors

Adolescents who took a bold stand against child marriage were brought to the forefront and felicitated as adolescent brand ambassadors. They were encouraged to play an active role to reduce child marriage in their villages. Trainings were organised for them. Some adolescent ambassadors were felicitated on large platforms, in the presence of state and district level dignitaries, with a cash incentive of INR 5,000 for informing the relevant authorities about child marriage in their villages and initiating FIRs. Some of the adolescent ambassadors are yet to be felicitated since the campaign was affected due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Five adolescent girls from Laxmipur block, who had said no to child marriage and worked against it were declared brand ambassadors of the Aparajita campaign and became role models for other adolescents. They were felicitated with 'Parab Sanman' at the district level Lok Mahotsav 'Parab' for their remarkable efforts. At the function, they shared their experiences and efforts to reduce child marriage. The girls were also rewarded at the State level.

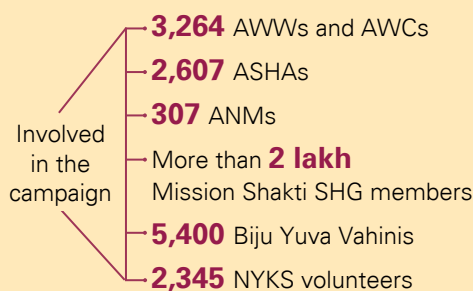
The brand ambassadors will visit other blocks, motivate and counsel adolescents about child marriage and share their experiences. The district administration will bear the travel expenses. The girls have been invited to attend VHSND sessions to create awareness among adolescents, parents, SHG members and other community members about child marriage. They have also been invited to other community level activities and traditional functions to counsel the community. They participated in the Kishori Mela organised at the block level to motivate others.



Some brand ambassadors were given the title 'Mita', which means best friend. They initiated conversations on child marriage in their friend circles. Since children are more open with their peers, they were able to conduct these discussions more openly.

The Aparajita campaign covered the two sub-divisions, **14** blocks, **240** gram panchayats and **2,049** villages of the district with adequate structural and functional apparatus and modus operandi, creating a chain of duties and response among people.

It elicited participation from **4,50,763** adolescents and **2,65,280** community members.



Thus, building the concept of Aparajita was a challenge at the start. Alongside, bringing all departments together for such a vast campaign required extensive planning. Elders in the community did not initially take kindly to the campaign and bringing them around was a formidable task. In many instances, lack of proper proof against girls and boys who had married before the legal age became a constraint.



Building community awareness was a major challenge. The social stigma around marrying a girl at a later age is tough to break. Some areas in the district are also geographically hard to reach and connectivity is poor. In these areas, people soon forget the messages delivered during a campaign or a programme. COVID-19 has also affected the campaign. These have been some of the challenges that we had to deal with.

F. Challenges faced

Udulia (eloping) is a cultural practice and thus tough to erase entirely. The Aparajita campaign has to deal sensitively with this challenge. Teenagers falling in love and eloping is a common practice in the district and parents do not have much say in this matter.

Shri Debendra Pradhan
Additional District Magistrate, Koraput

G. Engagement of adolescents and youth in COVID-19 response

During campaign implementation, a strong platform of adolescents and youth was developed. They were engaged by the district administration in COVID-19 response initiatives, to create awareness and demonstrate safe practices to communities such as social distancing, handwashing and use of masks.

The existing volunteer base of Aparajita, with training support by frontline service providers, was helpful in reaching out to a large number of people with information on prevention of COVID-19. Convergent and collective efforts of departments towards mobilising and training existing volunteers and engaging them in the COVID-19 response supplemented the efforts of frontline workers in reaching people with information and services.

On the one hand, this has given local communities a greater acceptance of adolescent and youth leadership from their own community and on the other, adolescent and youth leaders have a clearer understanding of their potential through actively engaging in COVID-19 response. These trained volunteers have gained valuable experience by working with health emergency teams and can always be useful for both communities as well as the government to manage such emergency situations in the future as well.

Mu Paribi – I Can (Young people's engagement platform during COVID-19)

An online meet with adolescents and young people during the COVID-induced lockdown brought forward their priorities clearly. They are: 1) continuation of education; 2) concern about their futures and pursuing their dream careers; 3) increase in child labour; and 4) increase in child marriage.

During the COVID-19 situation, the district administration, with the support of ActionAid and UNICEF, made efforts to create an online platform for adolescents and youth to share and discuss their issues. An online programme called 'I Can/Mu Paribi' was organised and adolescents and youth, along with SHG members were encouraged to share their issues, concerns, thoughts, and possible solutions to different problems. This helped in raising awareness and understanding about their issues and aspirations and the support they needed from the administration.



Young volunteers leading COVID-19 response

The district administration mobilised and engaged

1,30,560

Aparajita adolescents and youth

2,000

Biju Yuva Vahini volunteers

1,000

NYK volunteers

50

National Cadet Corps

100

volunteers from civil society organisations.



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

‘*Mu Paribi*’ was led by young people and engaged family and community members as supporters. Representatives from the community and families were invited to participate in the interactions and motivated to encourage others in the community to uphold child rights.

This online forum enabled:

Interaction with youth icons and successful professionals:

These interactions allowed adolescents and youth to get first-hand information from successful young people and celebrities such as actors, sportspersons, MLAs, ministers etc. on how to pursue their goals and overcome challenges. Youth icons from local areas shared their success stories and experiences for a better connection with adolescents. The influencers also got an opportunity to hear the concerns and ideas of young people.

Leadership training and critical thinking skills:

Adolescents and youth were connected across different districts with leadership trainers who provided them easy to follow guidance on how to become advocates of issues.

Orientation on child rights: Given the increased vulnerabilities during COVID-19, adolescents and youth were oriented on their rights and provided knowledge of networks from where they could seek support for themselves or their peers. These orientations were participatory and supported adolescents in expressing the problems they face in their day-to-day lives. They were also informed about government schemes relevant for them.

Call to Action and submission of recommendations:

The series of online engagements with adolescent and youth helped gather inputs from them on the systemic and policy changes they recommend. This process helped capture their opinion, views and suggestions, which were compiled as a set of recommendations ‘for young people, by young people’ in Koraput and Dhenkanal districts and presented to the district administrations. Once the process gets completed in all the districts, these recommendations will be presented to the Government of Odisha as a Call to Action by adolescents and youth. The district administration, UNICEF and ActionAid also advocated for formal integration of youth into the decision making process.

“Aparajita is the outcome of the collective efforts made by different departments of the district administration and development partners (ActionAid and UNICEF) who have been instrumental in rendering technical and professional support to the district administration to strengthen the District Task Force in achieving its aim of joint action against child marriage.

I congratulate every member of the District Task Force for their contribution and their involvement in all the efforts towards ending child marriage in the district. The role of the District Social Welfare Section was vital in running the Aparajita campaign. They were actively involved in convergence process, addressing issues related to child marriage, creating

awareness and planning for further action at the ground level. In recognising the impact and effective collaborative efforts of the district administration in implementing the Aparajita campaign, Odisha State Child Protection Commission felicitated Mrs. Susama Mohapatra, CDPO-cum-CMPO, Koraput block for her excellent contribution towards the campaign, on their foundation day.

The Aparajita campaign has been earmarked as a Coffee Table Best Practice for the prestigious PM Award for Public Excellence 2020 and SKOCH Award 2020. It is a great achievement for the district administration.”

Shri Madhusudan Mishra

OAS (SAG), District Magistrate and Collector
Koraput, Odisha

Campaign successes

The Aparajita campaign has been selected for the **Prime Minister's Excellence Award**, which is a great motivator for everyone who has been involved in the campaign.



Around **250** cases of child marriage have been prevented through the Aparajita campaign.



6 youth champions who said 'No' to child marriage have been declared ambassadors and provided with cash support of INR 5,000 from the Red Cross Fund.



H. Looking ahead

Though the response to Aparajita was lukewarm at the start, it gradually picked up and different stakeholders and community members soon began to support it. There is now a clear realisation that ending child marriage is not a small task. It requires continuous and relentless efforts. The campaign was initiated in November 2019, and despite the fact that its implementation was affected due to COVID-19, the response has been encouraging. It has proved to be a successful model and its reporting structures are now more systematic which provides opportunities for institutional learning.

Largely, the community now realises that child marriage needs to end. Adolescent girls and boys are aware of the impact of child marriage. Many dropout adolescents have been re-enrolled in schools to complete their studies as a result of counselling during the Aparajita campaign. The district administration is planning to institutionalise Aparajita and establish an exclusive office for the campaign, with its own branding and logo. The campaign against the practice of *udulia* will be strengthened. A grievance redressal mechanism will be set in place. Alongside, a programme to stop female foeticide and a scholarship programme to promote education of the girl child are also on the anvil. The seeds of change for adolescent empowerment have been sown in Koraput.

- District Rural Development Department has issued a letter to all BDOs to declare 'child marriage free villages' under the Aparajita campaign by passing village-level resolutions refusing permission to conduct any child marriage.
- BDOs have ensured wall paintings in public buildings and structures (schools, AWCs and gram panchayat offices), with the message of 'Say No to Child Marriage, Yes to School' and other child protection issues, in the local language.
- The DSW unit has played an important role in the Aparajita campaign in terms of planning, implementation, coordination, and consolidation of efforts.
- Awareness and FIR drives have been launched on Uduilia.
- More than **2 lakh** IEC materials have been distributed to adolescents.
- More awareness drives are being planned.



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