

# Nirbhaya Kadhi

**Accelerating action to end child marriage in Ganjam district**





### **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.

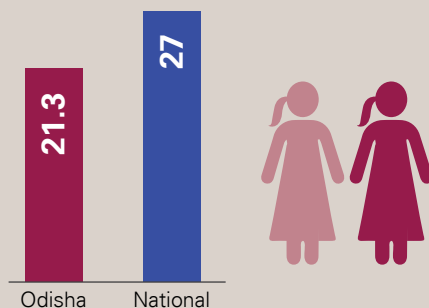
One of the key learnings for the department is that community ownership, working with partners as well as ownership by the local government in taking the campaign to end child marriage forward are invaluable. Secondly, system strengthening in terms of effective functioning of existing structures and 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.

## Child marriage in Odisha

Odisha has shown steady progress on several goals related to marriage and child-bearing in the past decade. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 21.3 per cent women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 18 years. This is a marked improvement from 37.2 per cent a decade ago and lower than the national average of 27 per cent. But this decline has been uneven with regional variations in the State. This practice of child marriage increases the vulnerabilities of girls and restricts her opportunities in all aspects of her life.

### % women aged 20-24 years who were married before 18 years



### 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 Panda<sup>1</sup> are members of this Committee. The Odisha Prohibition of Child Marriage Rules, 2019 were resultantly formulated with specific amendments.

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.



*'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.**

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.

<sup>1</sup>Programme Manager at ActionAid



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.

#### **Tiki Mausi Kuhe!**

Tiki Mausi, the mascot of DWCD, is a gregarious and empathetic protagonist. She is like a second mother to children. Tiki Mausi has extensive knowledge about issues related to women and children. She loves to talk to people and raise their awareness on key positive social behaviours and practices! The mascot ties together communication efforts around adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage.

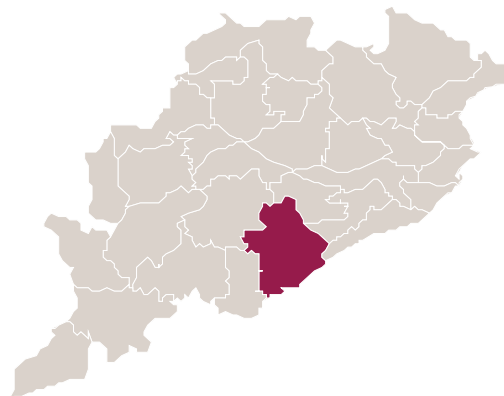


## **Taking forward the mandate of the State Strategic Action Plan in Ganjam**

### **Child marriage in Ganjam**

Ganjam is an agricultural district where 78 per cent of the population resides in rural areas and engages in agriculture as their predominant occupation. It has a high population density with a large geographical

area. The coastal plain region of the district falls in the disaster prone area with high vulnerability due to natural disasters and poor economic conditions. The overall literacy rate in the district is 71 per cent, with a noticeable disparity between male and female literacy rates. As per Census 2011, only 61.1 per cent females were literate as compared to 81 per cent males, indicating poor retention of girls in schools. Lack of education is one of the key drivers for early marriages in the district. According to NFHS-4, almost 1 in 3 (29.8 per cent) women aged 20-24 years are married before 18 years, making it the 7th highest district with incidences of child marriage. This practice of child marriage increases the vulnerabilities of girls who face many roadblocks in making a successful transition to adulthood.



### Ganjam's multi-sectoral action plan

puts in strong convergence and review mechanisms to ensure that relevant sectors – health, education, social empowerment, Panchayati Raj – commit to efforts to end child marriage

## The Nirbhaya Kadhi programme in Ganjam

Taking the State impetus forward, the district administration of Ganjam and District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) in association with UNICEF and ActionAid organised a meeting of the District Task Force (DTF) on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2019. The meeting was chaired by the District Collector and Magistrate. A multi-sectoral DAP for empowerment of adolescent girls and prevention of child marriages was formulated. The meeting laid the foundation for a special programme 'Nirbhaya Kadhi' or the Fearless Adolescent which was launched in September 2019. This programme aimed at reaching out to adolescent girls on a

### Key objectives



Track adolescent girls and boys in the district



Monitor adolescent girls for their vulnerabilities



Provide information, knowledge and counselling to girls on issues related to health, education and child marriage



Generate awareness in the community towards the ill-effects of child marriage.

## What makes the Nirbhaya Kadhi programme unique?

The programme's unique focus is on continuous tracking and mapping of adolescent girls in the district to promote their retention in schools and bring the dropout girls into the education system. A survey of all adolescent girls in each village is conducted to capture information in specified formats. This information is maintained in registers and also submitted to the Panchayat Extension Officer (PEO). Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) maintain village-wise registers which are updated regularly to capture additional girls who fall in the adolescent age-group. This has enabled continuous mapping and tracking of adolescents in each village. The programme also aims to build institutional capacity by setting up committees at village, gram panchayat, block and district levels. Each committee is responsible for engaging with adolescent girls on a regular basis and monitoring their vulnerabilities. All the committees are required to review and track progress of activities on a regular basis. They are empowered to play a proactive role in adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage in the district. This has enabled the administration to synchronise efforts and sustain its commitment to end child marriage.

## Launch of Nirbhaya Kadhi programme (18th September, 2019)

- Inaugurated by District Collector, Zilla Parishad Chairperson, Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and Members of Parliament (MPs) of Ganjam
- 255 participants including Block Development Officers (BDOs), Child Development Project Officers (CDPOs), officials of district-level departments, Self-help Group (SHG) federation and group leaders, adolescent girls
- Booklet on Nirbhaya Kadhi programme released and shared with AWWs

regular basis with information and knowledge, improving services of existing schemes, and promoting adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage.

### Programme approach

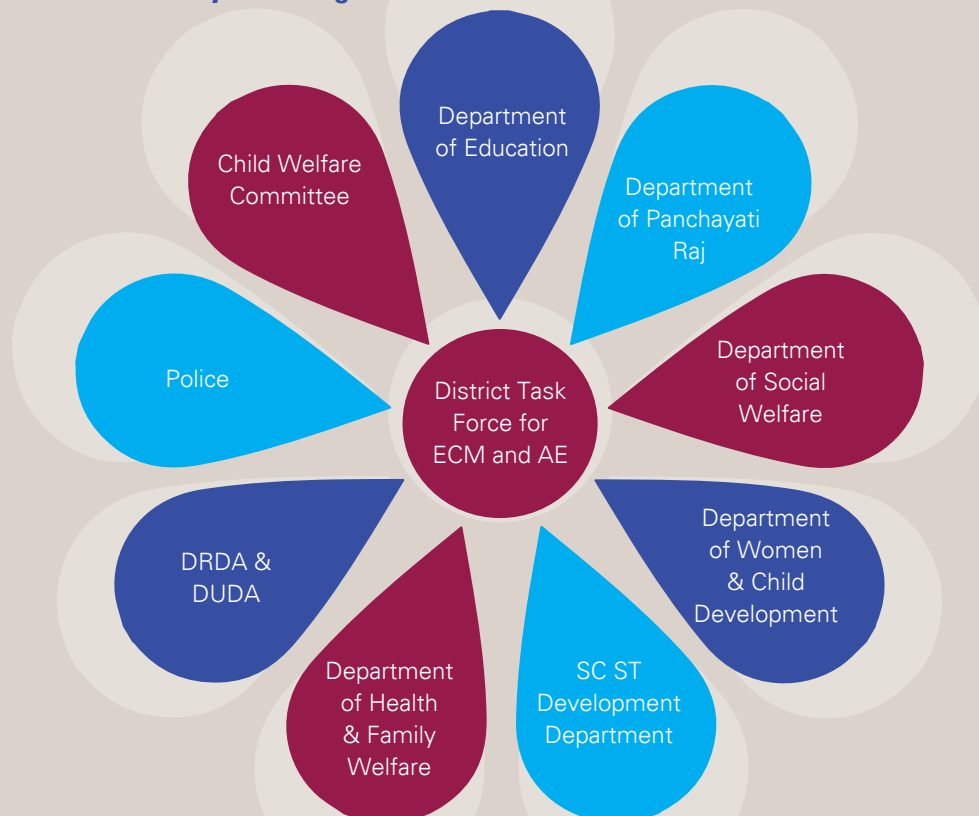
Recognising the need to drive change at multiple levels, the Nirbhaya Kadhi programme incorporated a comprehensive

strategy to deliver on its goal of reducing child marriage in the district.

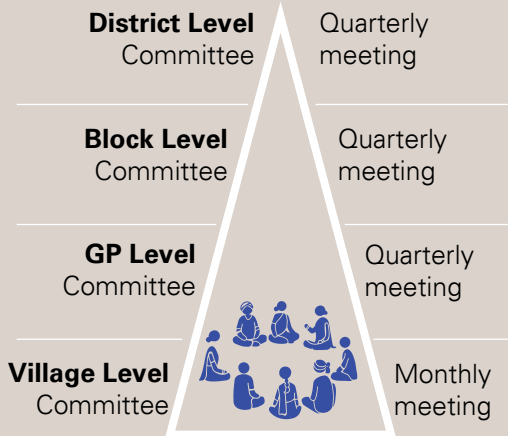
The key aspects of the programme include:

- **Convergence between various sectors** to provide context-specific solutions to end child marriage
- **Formation of committees** at village, gram panchayat, block and district levels to play a proactive role in stopping child marriage
- **Coordinated implementation approach and collaboration** among stakeholders to build alignment and maximise impact
- **Sensitisation of** staff, law enforcement officers, key government officials
- **Strengthening** of existing structures
- **Creating awareness in the community** – motivating adolescents, engaging traditional leaders, parents etc.
- **Regular review meetings** for monitoring programme activities, tracking and counselling dropouts
- **Appreciation and felicitation** of champions.

### Ganjam DTF developed an inter-sectoral and convergent DAP by involving all relevant stakeholders



## Frequency of review meetings under Nirbhaya Kadhi programme



## Institutional arrangement to support implementation of Nirbhaya Kadhi

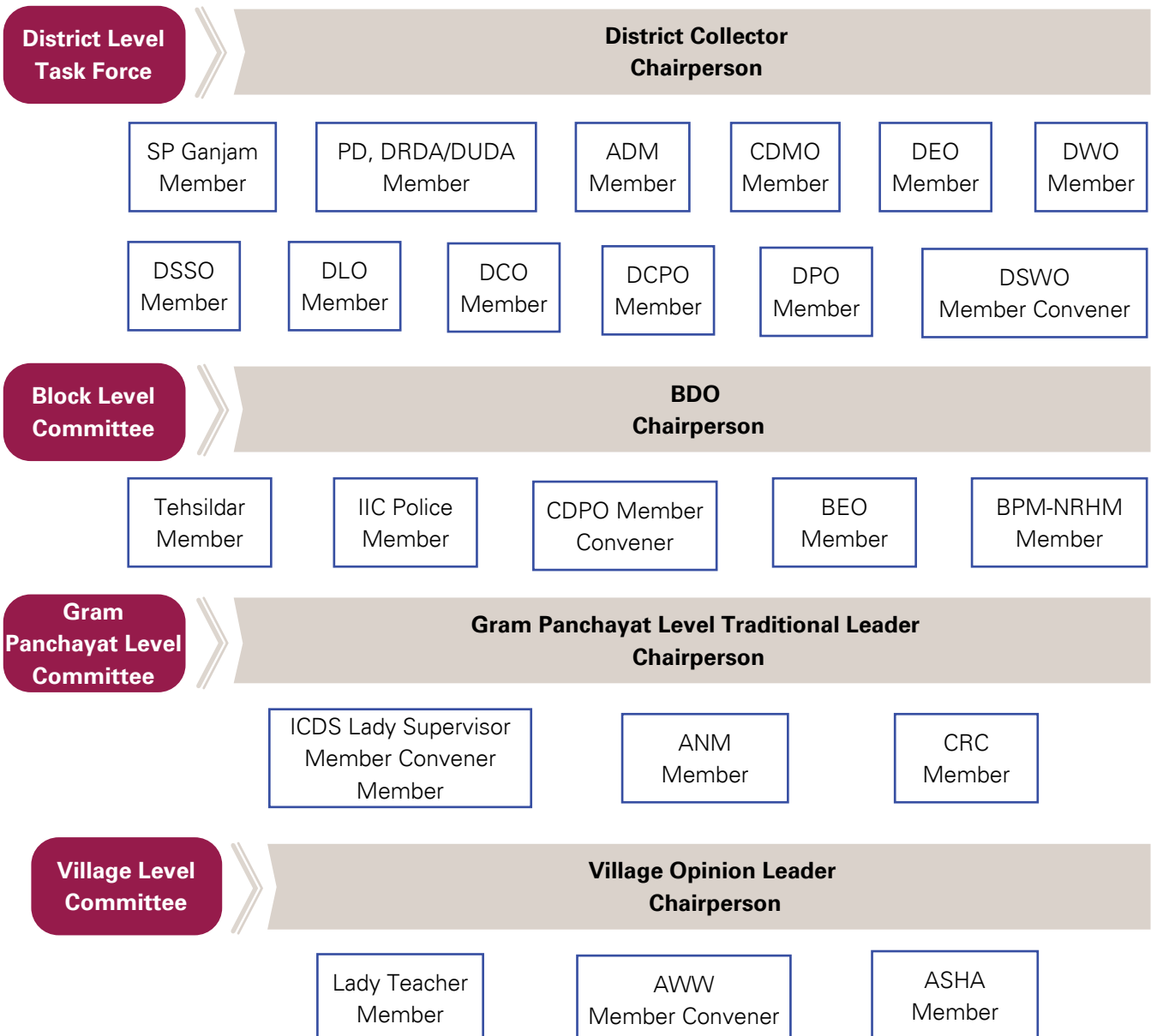




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## Activities undertaken

### Tracking adolescents

A village-wise list of adolescent girls (11-18 years) and boys (14-21 years) is prepared through a household survey. The list is kept at



Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) and also shared at the district level to develop a detailed database of adolescents. The database is used for monitoring programme coverage, mapping vulnerable children and linking them to social protection schemes.

The survey format contains useful information such as the Aadhaar numbers of adolescent girls which are used to accurately track their age and monitor any incidence of early marriage

**1,83,933**

adolescent girls between 11-18 years identified in the survey

Database of all adolescent girls available at village AWC, gram panchayat and district levels



S. No.	Name of Adolescent Girl (11-18 yrs)	Name of Mother	Name of Father	Name of Village	Name of GP	Name of Block	Date of Birth	Age	Her Contact No. (if available); else parent's contact no.	Status of Adolescent (school/college going [SCG] or out-of-school/college (OSC)	Aadhaar No.	Remarks
1												
2												

Format of 'Adolescent girls' survey for tracking by committee members at the village/ward level'





The survey has helped us identify dropout adolescents in the village. We invited the girls and their parents to a school counselling session and provide guidance to them. The girls have now returned to school.

**Manjushree Nayak**, CDPO, Sorada block



### Observing Nirbhaya Kadhi Day

A specially designated Nirbhaya Kadhi Day for the programme is observed on the third Saturday of every month for organising awareness programmes at the village level. Through the joint efforts of AWWs, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), *Kula Samaj* leaders and SHG leaders, adolescent girls are given counselling services on issues of child marriage, sexual and reproductive health, personal hygiene and health. They are also given information about existing government services and schemes, thus creating opportunities for further linkages. These meetings are attended by parents, ward members, and SHG members.

### Saying 'No' to child marriage

A mass pledge campaign in schools and health establishments was conducted across the district in November 2019 to empower students to contribute towards ending child marriage. The pledge was also taken by women's SHG members, Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs), ASHAs, and AWWs at the GP level. Health establishments like Community Health Centres (CHCs), Primary Health Centres (PHCs), Urban Health Centres, City Hospitals, and the MKCG Medical College also participated and committed to preventing child marriage. The Department of Education also conducted an oath ceremony during prayer classes in schools.

### Organising regular engagement meetings

Engagement meetings have been regularised to prioritise action against child marriage in all departments. Regular monthly meetings are held by AWWs and ANMs at GP level to share information about ongoing actions, harmonise key messages, and collectively address issues. Awareness meetings are also conducted at block and district levels

**4,50,000** students from **3,614** government schools made a public declaration to say 'No' to child marriage

to sensitise vulnerable communities about the negative impact of child marriage on the development of children. These meetings are attended by *Kula Samaj* leaders, ICDS staff, SHG members, PRI members, village leaders, CHILDLINE staff and ANMs and demonstrate their shared commitment to end child marriage in the district.

- Monitoring of progress of activities done by ICDS workers in monthly meetings
- CDPOs and Supervisors actively engage in reviewing actions taken against child marriage at village and project level

**3,259** villages and **1,83,933** adolescent girls in Ganjam district covered through these awareness meetings

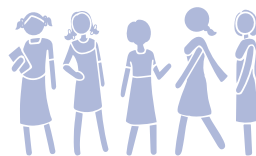


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## Creating an adolescent platform – Balya Bibah Pratirodh Manch (BBMP)

A strategic advocacy forum was created to engage adolescents for creating awareness to combat child marriage in the district. Around 60 youth who said 'No' to child marriage participated in the '2<sup>nd</sup> District Level Adolescent Collective Meeting' held on 29<sup>th</sup> November, 2019 and were mobilised to advocate against child marriage. BBMP provides support to the district administration by:

- Facilitating formation of adolescent groups at block, GP and village levels to involve other adolescents
- Supporting frontline workers in the process of tracking adolescents and making coordinated efforts to prevent child marriage
- Engaging with SHGs to create awareness in the community
- Providing peer support to fellow adolescents.

## Engaging traditional leaders as allies

Traditional leaders were actively engaged in the programme to influence community members. In the district level meeting, 60 traditional leaders from 15 different caste groups participated. They collectively formed a forum and agreed to support the district administration in their efforts against child marriage by:

- Providing information about any child

marriage to AWWs, Sarpanchs and ICDS functionaries

- Coordinating with them to stop any marriage in their locality
- Facilitating awareness building activities in the community/village.

## Communicating the message



**"We take part in rallies organised by the AWW and ASHA and so do adolescent children and community members. We talk to community members, parents and adolescents about the issue of child marriage. We also talk about the importance of education of the girl child. We fully support these rallies and spread awareness. Nowadays, adolescent girls are becoming increasingly aware and tell us about any plans of their families to get them married. They ask us to intervene and prevent the marriage."**

**Antaryami Gauda**

Gauda Samaj President, Patrapur block



In their efforts to prevent child marriages, traditional leaders do not issue marriage certificates if under-aged adolescents get married



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

Home visits are made by ASHAs, AWWs and SHG members to counsel parents on the ill-effects of child marriage. Folk art, wall paintings, banners and hoardings, conducting rallies and audio announcements are the communication tools and methods used to generate awareness and engage in community dialogue.



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

### Celebrating and commemorating success

Successful efforts in preventing child marriage are amplified by spotlighting champions of positive behaviour. Their narratives are publicly shared so that they can resonate and motivate others. These champions are recognised and awarded for their efforts in larger forums.

### Recognising and felicitating champions at district and state level forums

- 20 youth champions felicitated in 2<sup>nd</sup> District Level Adolescent Collective meeting on 29<sup>th</sup> November, 2019
- Six youth champions attended State Level Adolescent Collective meeting at Bhubaneshwar
- Ritu Nayak from Aska block was awarded

by OSCPCR for raising her voice against her early marriage

- Barsa Rani Muni from Dharakote block was awarded by Department of Women and Child Development and Mission Shakti for stopping her marriage
- Mamali Adhikari was declared as the brand ambassador of the Nirbhaya Kadhi programme and was felicitated by the Honourable Chief Minister of Odisha.

An award of INR 5,000 is given to those who provide prior information about child marriage



## Challenges faced

The convergence of various departments for such a programme posed some challenges and required extensive planning. At the community level, some elders did not accept the campaign both due to social norms and lack of knowledge about the harmful effects of child marriage 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. Regular meetings, counselling and home visits eventually supported community members to understand the ill-effects of child marriage.

## Catalysing change

Local leaders and government staff all reported that the programme has shed light on the consequences of child marriage for girls and communities. Several community members have shared success stories of the work on the ground, including an increase in awareness of community members towards the ill-effects of child marriage. The convergent intervention and efforts by the

district administration have prevented 45 child marriages between January and December 2019. Dropout girls identified through the survey have been admitted to schools after counselling their parents, thus giving these girls brighter prospects for the future.



**“Now people have become aware about child marriage and its problems. Parents have started giving equal importance to both boys’ and girls’ education. The interest of adolescent girls in higher studies has increased. Instances of child marriage have reduced to some extent at the village level. As a result of girls marrying after the legal age, low birth weight rates have come down.”**

**Simanchal Mandal**  
BDO, Sorada block



The programme has provided adolescent girls with the opportunity to seek information and support on issues that affect them. And the results are clear. Several functionaries, including the Block Education Officers (BEOs), CDPOs and AWWs talked about building confidence in adolescent girls to speak about matters that are important to them. More trust has now been built in local institutions, with cases of adolescent girls, school teachers and locals reporting instances of child marriage to AWWs, ANMs and traditional leaders. An FIR is also launched in case any instance of child marriage is found.

The key staff involved in implementation of the Nirbhaya Kadhi programme have started pitching the issue of child marriage in existing programmes observed in the village like Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Days (VHSNDs) and the Mo Gelha programme. This keeps the child marriage prevention agenda at centre stage and continues to draw attention of relevant stakeholders towards the issue.

The commitment and contribution made by the district administration of Ganjam



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**“We recently stopped five such marriages in Podamari. Ten members of our SHG group (Manikeswari SHG) and the Anganwadi didi counselled the parents and were able to stop the marriages from being solemnised.”**

**Sabita Mohanti**

SHG leader, Podamari GP  
Sanakhemundi block



in driving the State’s mandate to end child marriage was duly recognised at the State level. On OSCPCR’s 9<sup>th</sup> Foundation Day, OSCPCR and DWCD felicitated the efforts made by the Ganjam district administration in 2019.

### **Engagement of adolescents and youth in COVID-19 response**

The strong network of adolescents and youth developed as part of the programme was 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, 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.

### **Using social media to communicate and share updates**

Along with traditional methods of engaging adolescent girls through meetings, the programme also leverages mobile use to engage them in areas with connectivity. Kiran Barik, an adolescent girl and a gram panchayat committee member in Ward No. 5 talked about using WhatsApp to be in constant touch with other girls, the ASHA and AWW worker, ANM and teachers. They have created a WhatsApp group in which messages to address child marriage are circulated.

This has given local communities a greater acceptance of adolescent and youth leadership from their own community. It has also provided these trained volunteers with the confidence and tools needed to engage with their communities in such emergency responses.

## Charting the future course

The Nirbhaya Kadhi programme has enabled creation and strengthening of child protection structures at village, GP, block and district levels and facilitated participation of key stakeholders in prevention of child marriages. The programme has successfully used a mix of strategies and activities to target different groups: adolescents, parents, traditional leaders, school teachers and health establishments. It has empowered government functionaries at all levels to take responsibility for change.

Going forward, the programme aims to increase the community level ownership by identifying local role models and champions to lead the change. There are plans to increase engagement with SHGs, religious leaders, village elders and panchayat members, who can play an influential role in preventing child marriages at the community level. This will enable ownership and



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020

sustainability of the programme at the ground level.

The success of the Nirbhaya Kadhi programme has paved the way for its adoption by the Government of Odisha. The programme and the tracking system initiated in it will now be implemented at the State level. By leveraging existing schemes and engaging multiple stakeholders in various systems – school, healthcare, child protection services and the community – the programme shows high potential for replicability and impact to end child marriages across the State.



Photo Credit: © UNICEF/2020



“*Nirbhaya Kadhi*” i.e. the fearless adolescents is the special initiative of our district to end child marriage and empower all adolescents to become fearless, ensure their rights and pursue their aspirations and dreams. All 1,83,933 adolescent girls in Ganjam district in the age group of 11-18 years should be Nirbhaya Kadhi and be able to say ‘no’ to child marriage and continue their studies and higher education. Child marriage is prevalent in our district; every fourth girl is forced to marry at an early age and we are at seventh position in the State. As part of the efforts to end child marriage and operationalisation of the DAP, we, at Ganjam, initiated the campaign. In this effort, all stakeholders from every front like adolescents, parents, women SHG members, community leaders, religious and traditional leaders, teachers, PRI members and government functionaries are reached out to through different interventions to empower adolescents.

This campaign is very significant and relevant in the context of Ganjam where less value given to the girl child leads to child marriage. The campaign empowered adolescent girls and boys to become change agents and bring social transformation. The campaign worked to keep track of adolescent girls and boys through ICDS frontline workers and engage with them through the Nirbhaya Kadhi Committee to monitor conditions of vulnerability. Committees were formed at the village/ward/GP/block/district levels. As part of this campaign, every third Saturday of the month is called Nirbhaya Kadhi Day for effective engagement and awareness generation to end child marriage and address other child protection issues.

I think this campaign is effective in terms of mobilising stakeholders from all sections of society who play an important role in marriage and can influence the community. In the campaign, each stakeholder played a vital role in providing a strong voice to adolescents to address the issue of child marriage. The campaign has now reached the ground level and all fronts of society. It will continue with more and meaningful participation from all with the targeted objective to end child marriage in the district. We will keep working to support children to continue their education, pursue their aspirations and become fearless enough to say ‘no’ to child marriage and ensure their rights.

**Vijay Amruta Kulange, IAS**  
Collector and District Magistrate  
Ganjam, Odisha



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and Mission Shakti  
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