

# **Voices of Determination**

**Children Who Defy the Odds**



ChildFund India Country Director Neelam Makhijani participates in an awareness drive against child marriage.

## GIVING CHILDREN POWER AND VOICE

**W**

We at ChildFund India continue to dedicate our efforts towards the well-being of our children, young adults, and communities at large. As we grow from strength to strength, we will continue to listen to our children and make their world a safer, better and happier place to live.

In the past two years we have expanded our reach, currently working in 14 states and 2 UTs reaching nearly 2 million children and youth. Our holistic programs have contributed significantly in improving awareness of malnutrition, establishment of vibrant early childhood development centres, model government schools in line with the RTE (Right to Education Act) , well-equipped libraries in government schools, mobile libraries to provide access to quality of reading materials, provided scholarships to girls for higher education and vocational training and support to youth and young women to empower them to lead sustainable and dignified lives.

Our Country Strategy 2020, focuses on setting up of sustainable community structures as protection mechanisms to free children from early marriage, child labour and trafficking. We are placing special emphasis on child protection issues to prevent violence and exploitation against children in India and all over the world.

It gives me immense pleasure to share with you some successes of our children and how they have become champions in their communities and hope for other children. Trust you will find their stories informative and interesting.



**Neelam Makhijani**  
Country Director, India

## ANNAPOORNA GOES BACK TO SCHOOL

**A**nnapoorna lives in a village near Tirupati, a famous pilgrimage site in Andhra Pradesh. Her village is inhabited by about 230 families, who make a living from seasonal daily-wage labour. The inhabitants belong to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other marginalized communities. There is only one primary school and preschool to cater for everyone.

Though enrolled in school, Annapoorna did not attend it regularly as her parents could barely support their family and were incapable of thinking beyond ways to earn income to meet basic needs. They would rather have her work.

The village Children's Club held a meeting and decided to mobilize support to help Annapoorna resume her education. With coaching assistance to improve her scholastic performance, Annapoorna was back in school.

She went on to join the Children's Club (Bal Vikas Kendra) and lead its enrollment committee by personally taking on the responsibility of enrolling out-of-school children. At the same time, she was also instrumental in preventing many child marriages in the village.

After completing school, she got trained as a teacher with the objective of serving her village. Currently, Annapoorna teaches slow learners in the same school where she received her primary education, one of ChildFund's projects.

She says, "Education is most essential to lead a dignified life; it has given me an ability to think, develop and improve my personality. Most importantly it has built my self-esteem. Therefore, I am grateful to the fellow children's club members, for providing me this opportunity."

A Child Protection committee (CPC) has been formed in the village, comprising of a panchayat member (local village institution authority), a school teacher, an Anganwadi (Pre-school) worker, a School Management Committee member, parents, youth and children. Annapoorna is also one of its members.



*Annapoorna now teaches children in the same school where she received her primary education.*

## FROM CHILD LABOUR TO CHILD LEADER

**S**hakuntala is an 8th grade student who lives in Firozabad city of Uttar Pradesh - popularly known as the City of Bangles for the glass bangle industry it houses. She was just seven years old when she had to join her parents in bangle making work to help them earn additional income for the family.

But things started to change when Shakuntala was enrolled under ChildFund India's remedial classes, where she was encouraged to study and introduced to various child protection issues. She started attending trainings and workshops conducted by ChildFund. She joined the Children's Club and rose to become its president. She stopped working as a labourer and took upon herself to encourage other children to do the same.

Shakuntala formed a group that visits at least 10 households in their area daily to sensitize them on issues of child protection, immunization and hygiene. Last

year, the group was able to help 12 children enroll in school. This year, they have a list of another 14 children.

She led a rally on prohibition of child labour, which was organized in eight slums of Firozabad, where ChildFund works. All Children's Club members from the areas participated in the rally.

Today Shakuntala has emerged as an inspiration for other children in her community. Under her leadership, the Children's Club has helped the municipality of Firozabad to resolve several community development issues. Because of their efforts, their area is one of the cleanest slums in Firozabad.

"I want our club to work harder and make child labour history, while addressing other community based issues too," Shakuntala says. "We will keep on organizing rallies to spread the message and ensure that children do not get trapped in labour but are free to focus on their studies."

There are over 4.35 million child labourers aged between 5 – 14 years in India.

*(Census 2011)*

Children between 14-17 years engaged in hazardous work account for 62.8% of the child labour workforce, 10% of who are hired in family enterprises. Over half of working adolescents do not study.

*(ILO World Report on Child Labour 2015).*



Shakuntala led this children's rally to protest against child labour.

## YOUTH CLUB LEADS RESCUE EFFORTS

**I**n December 2015 areas in and around the city of Chennai in Tamil Nadu experienced unprecedented rainfall and catastrophic flooding as rivers breached danger marks. Hundreds of lives were lost, people had to be relocated, telephone connectivity snapped, and transportation was blocked. Schools, colleges, shops, offices and even hospitals were closed, while train and air services were cancelled for days.

During this calamity, a youth group from a gypsy community that ChildFund India works with stepped up to demonstrate extraordinary courage. Led by 20-year-old Ajith, a team of youth mounted a relief effort that

*Ajith (second from left) with other members of the Youth Club.*



**Led by 20-year-old Ajith, a team of youth mounted a relief effort that helped 66 families survive the worst of the floods.**

helped 66 families of the community survive the worst of the floods. Their efforts were successful due to the disaster preparedness training imparted by ChildFund.

Ajith, the son of a daily-wage labourer and a first-year student of commerce, is also the leader of the village Youth Club. He had earlier attended the disaster management training organized by ChildFund India, and this is what helped him and his group to support their community in times of need. "We were informed about the rising water levels by the police," recalls Ajith. "Although we are used to water entering our homes during the rains, this was shocking! Many families moved out with whatever they could carry. The water spared nothing that was left behind. We all had to take shelter in the church as our house was filled with water."

Though the government distributed food, water and milk in his area, it wasn't enough. Ajith's group mobilized

support from the church and a hotel owner, organizing food for 470 people for three days. The team also mounted a rescue effort to help those who lived close to the rivers. Without worrying about their own safety they arranged for a boat and rowed out to distribute milk and bread to affected families.

Ajith says, "For many days people were not able to enter their homes. Even after the waters receded, walls and floors remained wet for days. The damp and chill made the houses uncomfortable to live in. There was no electricity." Once again, with help from ChildFund India, Ajith & his team raised money to clean the houses and repair electrical appliances like fan, etc. It was through their consistent efforts that families were able to bounce back to normalcy.

**During this tragedy, to help the community members, ChildFund India also responded with relief support - distributed relief material as per their need as well as provided services towards their rehabilitation.**

*Sonam (third from left) impresses the importance of literacy upon other girls in her area.*



**In India, which has the most child brides worldwide, an estimated 47 % of girls are married before age 18, putting their physical, emotional and mental health at risk. Although it is illegal for girls under 18 and boys under 21 to marry, the tradition remains entrenched.**

## SONAM FIGHTS CHILD MARRIAGE

**C** ChildFund India has been working with parents and youth in Madhya Pradesh, where the practice of child marriage is particularly prevalent. Therefore, when 17-year-old Sonam's parents insisted that she get married, she protested, backed by Youth Club members who had taken an oath to become role models for others, by not becoming victims of early marriage. She stood firm and said she did not want to get married but to study further to achieve her dreams.

In 2015, at the launch of a 100-day awareness campaign in 75 villages, Sonam was recognized for standing up against the practice. "ChildFund changed my life," she said while accepting the award, referring to the counselling and training she received at the Youth Club. "It has given me the confidence and courage to dream about my future."

Sonam has actively participated in several of

ChildFund's programs, awareness camps and meetings on early marriage, taking on an ambassadorial role. She encourages mothers to get their children immunized and stresses the importance of providing nutritious food. She promotes literacy in her village with door-to-door counselling, helping enroll out-of-school children. With persistent efforts of the Youth Club, 62 community members have learned to read — out of the 142 illiterate village members they had identified.

After much persuasion, Sonam's parents were convinced she should not be married yet. She is now studying further, with plans to become an engineer and help her family and village.

"If convinced properly," says Sonam, "parents will support their daughters' wishes to study instead of getting them married at an early age. And when they do, those girls will be able to make enormous contributions within their own communities."

## RAKHI DREAMS OF JOINING THE POLICE FORCE

**F**ourteen-year-old Rakhi belongs to a small village in Malkangiri district in Odisha. There are five members in her family – her widowed mother Rangalata, elder sister Manjulata (studying in 10th grade), elder brother Ranjeet (in 11th), and Rakhi. When Rakhi's father died, her mother had to take on the responsibility of making ends meet. The family slipped below poverty line and the children became more vulnerable.

It was during this time in 2007 that ChildFund India started working in her village. Rakhi was one of the children enrolled in the sponsorship program. ChildFund staff frequently visited the family, encouraging her mother to allow the children to continue their education.

Rakhi began to participate and excel in various games and sports competitions organized by ChildFund. Recognising her talent, the staff enrolled 20 children including Rakhi in a martial arts training program combining judo, self defence technique, yoga and

dance. The All-Odisha Martial Arts Academy (AOMAA) extended their support.

Seeing Rakhi's interest and dedication, ChildFund enrolled her in a better school that had linkages with the district administration, and also covered her board and lodging at a girls' hostel. They also influenced AOMAA to upgrade her martial arts training.

Since then, Rakhi has not looked back, working hard both on her academics and martial arts. She participated in state level judo championship and won the silver medal in 2014 and the gold medal in 2015. Her next target is a gold medal at the national level.

During the Independence Day celebrations in 2015, Rakhi was felicitated by the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, Government of Odisha. The District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police were also present.

Rakhi's aim now is to become a police inspector and serve her state.



*Rakhi (in blue) participates in a martial arts competition.*



Children and Youth Club members took it upon themselves to do something about the open defecation being practiced in the village.

*Members of the Children's Club with Lt. Governor of Puducherry, Dr. Kiran Bedi.*

## CHILDREN'S CLUB FOCUSES ON HYGIENE

**C** Change is sweeping a remote village in Puducherry, home to 3482 people belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other marginalized castes. Most people here live in huts and their livelihood is based on agriculture and construction labour.

Most of the homes had no toilet facilities and there were no public toilets either. As a result, people were forced to practice open defecation, which put adolescent girls and women at risk. People also suffered snake and insect bites.

ChildFund India is running a project in the area, and the enrolled children -- Children and Youth Club members -- took upon themselves to change the situation. First, they submitted a petition to the area MLA and the Panchayat officials. When they got no response, with the assistance of ChildFund staff, they met the Lt. Governor of Puducherry, Dr. Kiran Bedi.

During the discussion they expressed their concern about the lack of toilets and the dangers faced by girls and women. Dr. Bedi visited the village, and discussed this issue with the local MLA and the community. Soon after, the construction of toilets began in the village. At present 39 toilets are under construction, and more have been sanctioned.

The children did not stop there, carrying on their quest to clean their village. They went on to submit a petition to the Lt. Governor, to install garbage bins at several points in the village. These bins are visible across the village, and there are separate ones to segregate degradable and non degradable waste.

The Governor has exhorted the children to carry on working till their village is declared a model village.

## YOUTH GROUP FOILS CHILD TRAFFICKERS

**E** Every year, hundreds of children are trafficked from Gezvi Panchayat of Jhadol district in Rajasthan. The households easily fall prey to traffickers due to their poor economic conditions and large family sizes.

The Azad Bal Samooh, a group of children and youth, has played an active role in the recent past in combating child trafficking in the region. The group conducts monthly meetings in schools and within the communities.

The group was trained and exposed to the issue under the Prevention of Child Trafficking project by ChildFund India. In the recent past, with the support of local police officials and social organizations, they have successfully helped to rescue several children from the clutches of traffickers.

Akhilesh , who is the president of the Bal Samooh said, "Children are very vigilant and are the first ones to get information regarding any kind of trafficking which is

**"Children are very vigilant and are the first ones to get information about any kind of trafficking in our village at night," says Akhilesh, President of the Children's Club. "And the moment we get this information we inform the local police."**

going to happen in our village at night. The moment we get information we inform the local police and local social organizations. We also conduct regular night patrolling, and have been able to carry out 7 rescue operations".

"This model is the best and most effective medium for eradicating child trafficking and providing children a

safe environment," said one of their teachers, who lives in the village.

The children's group is not only involved in rescue operations but is also involved in motivating and re-enrolling children who drop out of school, looking in to the proper functioning of the schools with respect to teaching, proper implementation of mid-day meals and many other issues in their locality.



*Children's group paints social messages on walls to raise awareness.*

## SUNITHA CAMPAIGNS FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

**S**unitha, 23, is an active youth member of her village in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh. She is currently pursuing her post graduation in commerce. She observed several meetings of the ChildFund-supported Youth Club in her village and was inspired by its activities, particularly the enrollment campaign in her village to enroll girls back in school.

"I feel education is most important to obtain a better life and to eradicate social evils," she says. "I started identifying and interacting with dropout children and sensitizing their parents on the importance of education. I also participated in several Self Help Group meetings to interact with their mothers to gain their support in bringing children back to school.

"I got to understand the rights of children and issues related to them. After forming a good rapport with the parents, I was able to enroll three girls in my village. My parents and the project have encouraged and

**Sunitha observed several meetings of the ChildFund-supported Youth Club in her village and was inspired by its activities, particularly the enrollment campaign to bring girls back to school.**

extended full support to my initiatives. Now, I would like to extend my initiatives in neighbouring villages also."

Utilising her time after college hours and on holidays, Sunitha launched campaigns against social evils, and succeeded in discouraging child marriages in and around her village.

"I heard about the concepts of 'Child Friendly Village' and 'Child Led Projects' and was very impressed," she said. "I began to interact with teachers, village elders, project officials and line departments regarding solutions to the problems identified. Now I am able to influence officials in many ways and have been able to help address many village issues."



*A Youth group meets to discuss village issues.*

## MEERA, AN AGENT OF CHANGE

**T**he state of Rajasthan, in western India, is known not only for its prevalent child labour issue but also for the rising numbers of child trafficking cases. Jhadol, Kotada, Kherwa and Sarada blocks in the Udaipur district in southern Rajasthan, are most prone to incidents of child labour and child trafficking.

Raising voice against this malpractice is a teenage girl studying in 10th grade -- Meera, living in Udaipur district in Rajasthan. Born to marginal farmers Jalam and Sakki Bai, Meera is the youngest of their six children, and the only one to get an opportunity to study while the rest had to drop out to help make ends meet.

Meera has taken upon herself the role of a change agent, making a difference in her own way. She began her fight right at home, when she prevented her uncle from sending her cousins to Gujarat to work



as child labourers. Her training and guidance from ChildFund India paid off when she was able to counsel and convince him. "It was a very difficult situation for me, being a child, standing against the decision of an elder family member," Meera recounts with pride.

This enhanced her confidence and since then there has been no looking back.

Meera, who aspires to become a teacher, has been an active member of the local Children's Club. She has attended awareness and training programs organized by ChildFund India on prevention of child labour as well as on how to influence peer groups. She has also received training on how to motivate children to continue studying and has made remarkable efforts to enroll children in school in her own village.

"I feel privileged to be able to contribute towards rehabilitation of children in my village and eradication

of child labour; I will keep fighting," she adds.

After ChildFund's intervention, there has been a 70% reduction in cases of child labour and child trafficking in Meera's village.



*ChildFund organises street plays to raise community awareness on child protection issues.*

## ABOUT CHILDFUND INDIA

**C** ChildFund India is a local entity of ChildFund International, one of the world's leading child development organizations that operates in 25 countries working with over 17 million children and their families globally. ChildFund International is a member of the ChildFund Alliance – a global network of 11 child-centred development organizations working in 63 countries to implement long-lasting and meaningful changes for millions of children and families living in poverty.

ChildFund India strives to ensure that deprived, excluded, and vulnerable children have the capacity to improve their lives and become young adults, parents, and leaders who inspire lasting and positive change in their communities. It promotes communities whose individuals and institutions participate in valuing, protecting, and advancing the worth and rights of children. ChildFund India has been representing the

voices of underserved children in India since 1951. It works in over 60 districts across 14 states and 2 union territories.

Through long-term partnerships with grassroots NGOs and direct implementation, ChildFund India annually reaches nearly two million children, youth, and their families in over 6,000 communities/villages.

Through its unique programs, ChildFund India provides comprehensive support to children from birth until they reach 24 years of age through holistic interventions integrating health, nutrition, gender, education, livelihoods, and child protection.



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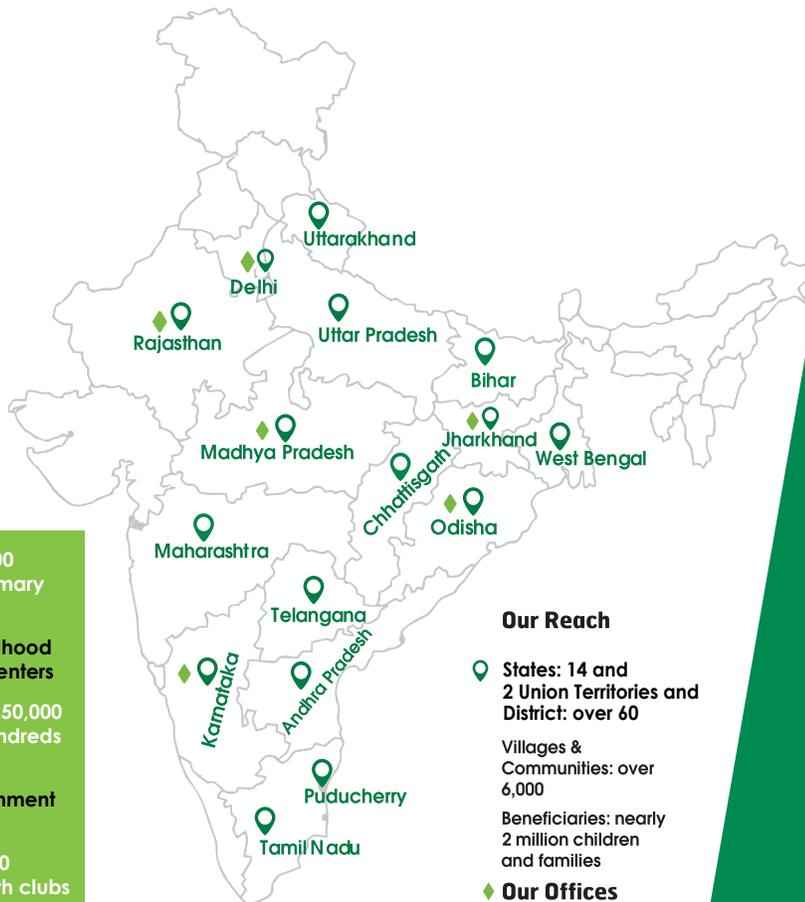
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All names have been changed to protect people's identity.



- Reaching 150,000 mothers and primary caregivers
- 2,000 Early Childhood Development Centers
- Reaching over 250,000 children and hundreds of teachers
- 2100 plus government schools
- Impacting 50,000 youth: 1900 youth clubs
- Local Partners: over 60

### Our Reach

- States: 14 and 2 Union Territories and District: over 60

Villages & Communities: over 6,000

Beneficiaries: nearly 2 million children and families

### ◆ Our Offices