










Stories of Change by Youth

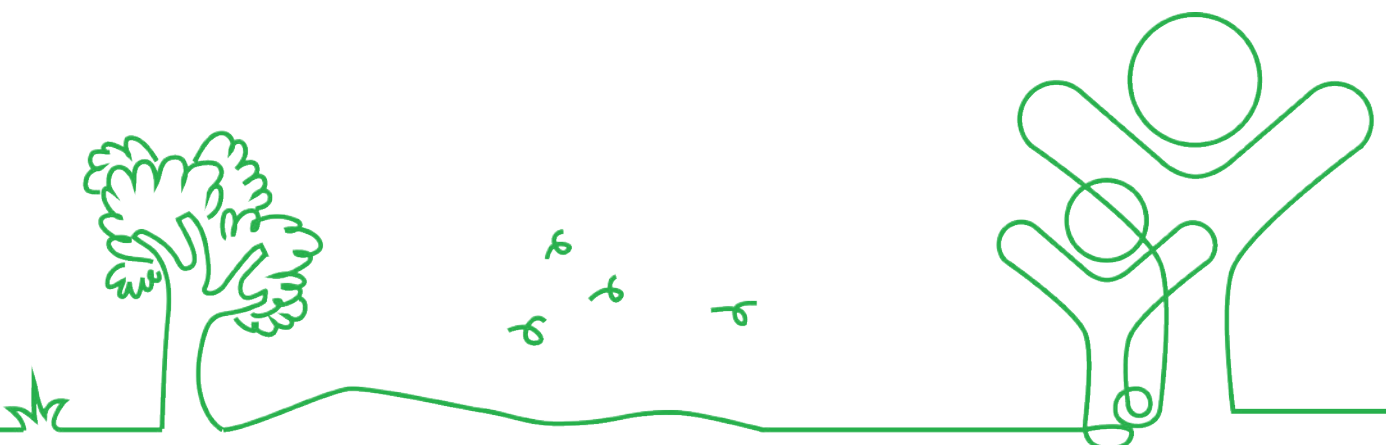
Actions for Environmental and Planetary Health in tribal
areas of West Singhbhum district, Jharkhand, India

The Yuva Saathis (Youth facilitators) facilitating monthly PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) meetings under the Jharkhand Initiative for Adolescents Health (JIAH) program are motivating ~1400 adolescents in the villages to practice nutri-gardens in their backyard, 500+ adolescents to participate in campaigns, trekking activities in the hope of safeguarding the environment and also restoring forest in the neighbourhood, creating/activating Van Samitis (forest committees) to ensure protection of forests. These have supported in improving the quality of their diet, improving the planetary health and strengthening their livelihood during the pandemic. The nutri-garden approach when attempted with a few individuals with severe psycho social disabilities, the practice added to their mental wellbeing.



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Discussion on the forest ecosystem services among participants during a trek.

1 Revival of Bandaburu Forest

Bahaleen lives in porlong village adjacent to the Bandaburu forest patch in the Khuntpani block. People in this village are dependent on the forest for various reasons, such as medicinal plants, forest produce used in daily life, in different rituals, and also income through selling of firewood etc. Growing over the years this forest was full with native trees such as Sal, Neem, Karanj etc. but people failed to recognize the value and importance of the forest resulting in rampant felling of the trees and the manmade fire destroyed the forest. While large animals could survive by escaping the fire but small ones and insects succumbed to death. Later, the villagers planted a few saplings but was not responsive enough so those could survive.

In 2017, when PLA meetings with adolescents started, this was an opportunity to discuss the revival of the forest around. Over time, elders and also adolescents from the nearby villages started taking part in the activities safeguarding forest. These attracted forest department officials to come forward and extend their support and the van samiti got re-vitalized. At the moment one person from the same village gets selected to take care of the forest around. Known as Dakua he remains vigil of any destruction to the forest, and get grains, pulses and vegetables from all the families time to time. This sets a brilliant example of community initiative of revival of the forest.



Several dependencies on the forest produce.



Sapling distribution to the adolescents of the village.

2 Community-Based Landscape Restoration

Sikander lives in sangajata village, which is mostly inhabited by the people from Ho, Mahali and Gope community and has altogether 140 households. Though their livelihood is largely agriculture based but depending on the perennial water resources, forming a better irrigation mechanism is difficult here because of the undulating terrain as well. This compels the communities to suffer from poor yield. To supplement their livelihood individuals from the Mahali community make some small-scale bamboo-based materials to sell in the local market while the ones from the Gope community depend on daily labor to survive. In absence of sufficient scope, people are often forced to migrate in search of suitable jobs.

At a time like this, the participatory group meeting with adolescents started in the village where discussions happened around the benefits of trees and consequences of land turning arid in absence of green cover. This also made them aware of the local ecosystem services. This led them taking out rallies, leading treks to expose others to the beauty of nature, discussion on the role and responsibilities in safeguarding the environment, and adding to their own wellbeing. Now, many individuals like Vijay Mundri (name changed) have planted fruit and other native trees, close to 500 in their own and otherwise fallow lands which over time would grow to a better environment. This also sets a good example of community-based restoration practices.



Bamboo basket making as a livelihood option for the community.



Trekking initiatives by adolescents in the village appreciated and participated by forest department officials and elders in the village.

3 Community Initiative For Safeguarding Forest

Like Sikandar and Bahalin, Nauru also lives in a village surrounded by forests on three sides. Like any other village amid a forest, people here are also dependent on the forest produce for their living. But they missed to understand their roles in safeguarding the surrounding. In spite of institutions like Van Suraksha Samiti and village headman trying several times to convey the message to people to save the forest around it, it failed to derive a strategy.

In 2017, when the intervention with adolescents started in the village, through the monthly meetings they discussed about the manmade fire that happens every year during summertime. During the collection of mahua fruits, the community sets the dry leaves on the ground on fire which if remains uncontrolled, could blaze the forest. During the monthly discussions, the community was open to listen on the lethal impacts of their act and committed to minimize any attempt that caused a large-scale destruction in the past. Now, such incidents have been minimized compared to the past. Added to that, they now act instantly to put off the fire and keep coordinating with the forest department from time to time to re-build the forest cover.



Youth facilitators taking initiatives in controlling forest fire and reviving forest cover.



Discussion on the nutrition and food groups during the monthly meeting held with adolescents.

4 Community's Effort On Developing Backyard Gardens

Sanjay Banra (name changed), an adolescent boy lived with six members of his family in Ambrai village of West Singhbhum district. When the facilitator held meetings with adolescents in his village, the parents and village leaders were also invited to the meeting. Sanjay was present in the meeting when a discussion on nutrition-related issues took place and on developing a nutrition garden in the school and home backyard. At the time there were only 4-5 families who had nutrition gardens in the village.

After the meeting, he discussed it with his family members who agreed to have the nutrition garden in their back yard. In the nutrition garden, they grew a variety of leafy and seasonal vegetables and used organic fertilizers that they not only consumed to improve their food diversity but his mother also sold the vegetables in the village market leading to an increase in their family income. The facilitator can see the result of that intervention with 120 families now having raised nutrition gardens using organic fertilizers.



Adolescents in the village practice kitchen gardening.



Support group meeting under the mental wellness initiative.

5 Community-Based Nutri-Garden Rehabilitation Support

Rakesh (Imaginary Name) lives with his family in Binz village of Khuntpani block in West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. Rakesh has studied till class 8th. Though having an interest, he had to stop his studies because of a shortage of money.

Once he fell down and was out of sense. Then the family rushed to the hospital but there was nothing improved despite having medicines.

His mother and sister-in-law had been attending the group meeting held for the adolescents in the village since 2017, where the facilitator narrates stories using picture cards to discuss mental health problems that can lead to emotional imbalance. One of Rajesh's uncles asked the facilitator about where to seek help for the problem and Rakesh visited the doctor available at the organization for a checkup. He received medical support and Rakesh has been part of support group meetings and getting benefits out of it and is on the way to his recovery. He regularly participates in support group meetings. Now he is able to help his family with household chores and even helping in the agricultural work. For the nutrition garden under rehabilitation, he has been supported with seeds, fencing materials, and sprinklers. Now he has raised a backyard nutrition garden from where he is getting green leafy vegetables every day. His family's support has brought about this change in Rakesh and everyone is happy.



Nutri-garden and household activities practiced under the rehabilitation program.



*Organic farming practices
by the villagers.*

6 Organic Farming Practices For Sustainable Farm-Based Livelihood

A farmer named Sidheswar Boipai (name changed) lives in Pandabir village of Khuntpani block. During the group meetings conducted by the livelihood team in the village, Sidheswar carefully listened to the discussions and discussed with family members especially about organic farming practices.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the family had exhausted all their saved paddy seeds as there was scarcity of wage labour. Sidheswar requested the facilitator to provide seeds for the paddy cultivation, but unfortunately, he died soon after that.

His daughter Nemonti obtained the paddy seeds for cultivation and learned about the process of farming. Due to COVID lockdown, no meetings were physically happening on livelihood, but she got the information on farming practices through the WhatsApp group that was created and she used organic fertilizers in the field. She was able to get a better yield which was almost double that of the previous year. Seeing the profit in paddy production, she was motivated to do organic paddy farming in 3 acres of land the next year. Other farmers in her village are now inspired and adopting organic farming practices.



*Process of organic manure preparation and sharing
knowledge/best practices in networking groups.*



Online classes supported by youth facilitators during the pandemic. (Bottom)
Seeds among the farmers and ration distribution to elders and the persons
suffering from psycho social disabilities.

7 Youth Facilitator's Efforts During COVID -19

23 years old Mohit (name changed) lives in Khuntpani block of West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand state. There are four members in his family and Mohit stays with two brothers in Gotai village with a population ~520. Mohit was very shy and quiet in his demeanor, but he was chosen as a facilitator to engage with adolescents through participatory group meetings in four villages. Gradually he became more vocal and effectively facilitated discussions with adolescents and their parents. He initiated re-enrollment in school of adolescents who were out of school after discussing with the school head.

He was engaged in several activities during the COVID days-when the schools were shut down, he facilitated the adolescents for studies through online mobile education in the dorm study circles. He reached out to the vulnerable, elderly, and those living with psycho-social disabilities by delivering rations and medicine support at their doorstep. In the vaccination drives, he helped the front-line health workers, and mobilized elderly persons aged 40-60 and discussed about the benefits of vaccination to prevent vaccination hesitancy and after an orientation used the pulse oximeter to identify those in need of referrals.

He contacted and linked with the forest and agriculture departments to provide seeds and plant saplings. The above activities has brought about a great change in Mohit's life and he is happy with his effort.



As these stories of change from tribal grassroots by the youths, there are such 34 Yuvasathis (Adolescent Facilitators) working with adolescents in Khuntpani Block of West Singhbhum District. Some of their greatest efforts for their fellow Young People and the community have been echoed and set an example for the Youths.

These Youths are part of the Adolescent Health Initiative with Ekjut organization for the last five years. As a peer facilitator, the yuvasathis discuss through structured monthly Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) group meetings on Education, Nutrition, Health, and Mental health-related issues for their wellbeing.

Yuvasathis conduct not only meetings but also engages the adolescents in creative learning, co-curricular adventurous activities such as nature walks, sports, art and crafts, plantation, reducing forest fire, and sustainable farming practices to build resilience and problem-solving skills.

This initiative has helped these youths to enhance their skills and has developed youth leadership skills at the grassroots level and also ensured the participation of the most marginalized and focussed on locally available food to ensure dietary diversity, promoted nutrition garden, reached out to the vulnerable people with mental health problems through community-based rehabilitation, and efforts to protect the environment to bring culturally valued transformative changes in the community through small actions.





Ekjut, Plot no.-556B, Potka, Chakradharpur,
West Singhbhum, Jharkhand-833102 (India)



www.ekjutindia.org



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