

## ARATI SAHU : A BEACON OF CHANGE IN GOLABANDHA EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AND SHAPING A CHILD-FRIENDLY PANCHAYAT

Arati Sahu, aged about 16, is currently in the 12th grade, specializing in science at Sri Sai Educational Institution in Gopalpur, from Golabandha village. She has two siblings: a brother, Ayush, aged about 7, currently in class 2, and a sister, Elishree Sahu, aged 10, currently in class 5th. Her father, Sibasankar Sahu (40 years), is an auto driver, and her mother, Golapi Sahu (35 years), is a homemaker.

Arati and her family live in a joint family where her mother is subjected to torture by her husband and elder brothers. Her father regularly consumes alcohol, creating a challenging environment. Arati observes all these distressing situations but feels helpless as a child. Unfortunately, her maternal grandfather and uncle are unable to intervene due to their own financial struggles. Arati's mother, despite being in a difficult situation, feels helpless with no alternative options to escape the abuse. She prioritizes her children's education, emphasizing the importance of self-reliance and independence.

Arati and her siblings, although academically strong, lack awareness of helpline numbers, government schemes, child rights, child protection, and the existence of child-friendly spaces.



They are unaware of how to overcome emotional and physical neglect and abuse. By the grace of God, Arati's mother endures the situation. Arati secures a Bruti scholarship for qualifying in the Bruti exam, showcasing her academic prowess. However, she remains oblivious to addressing the broader issues children face in their school, community, and village.

Arati doesn't know about child protection, children's participation in decision-making processes at the Gram Panchayat (GP), and school levels.

## CHILD RIGHTS - CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Despite observing problems at school, such as the lack of separate toilets, insufficient play space, and inadequate infrastructure, Arati hesitates to voice her concerns. She believes that these issues should be resolved by the elders in her village but is unaware of how and by whom these solutions will be implemented.

Our field staff visited the village and, with the help of the Anganwadi Worker (AWW), called the children together. Initially, Arati hesitated to participate in Sisu Sabha meetings and would be part of the meeting when our field staff, along with the Anganwadi worker, informed her mother and discussed. Her mother allowed her to participate in every meeting organized in her village. However, gradually, she informed her brother and sister to participate in Bal Sabha meetings and be members of Bal Panchayat. Subsequently, along with children, they actively participated in every training program and meeting.

Arati enjoyed the meetings and consistently attended every program. Furthermore, she took the initiative to mobilize her friends, encouraging their participation in Bal Sabha activities. Arati actively utilized Participatory Rural Appraisal tools, including mapping and focus group discussions, to engage the community in the decision-making process. Her significant contribution extended to playing a crucial role in preparing the Children Action Plan for Golabandha Gram Panchayat.

Arati and her friends spearheaded a commendable initiative that successfully prevented a child marriage in their village. While engaged in preparing a vulnerability map, they discovered the engagement of a 17-year-old child with close relatives. Through positive intervention and repeated counseling, led by Arati, Sisu Sabha children, field staff, Anganwadi worker, Sarpanch, and ICDS supervisor, they managed to halt the early marriage. As a result of their collective efforts, the girl is now pursuing studies in ITI in a private college at Berhampur. This positive intervention by Arati and her friends had a ripple effect, creating awareness among other girls in the village about the dangers of child marriage. A sense of fear developed, inspiring others to take a stand against such practices. It stands as a shining example and an inspiration for the entire community.

Arati continued her active involvement by attending Adolescent Training, Disaster Reduction Training, and Validation Meetings aimed at finalizing the Children Action Plan. As a Bal Sabha member representing Golabandha village, she also participated in Gram Sabha discussions. These experiences contributed significantly to Arati's knowledge, enabling her to advocate for the creation of a child-friendly Panchayat, address child-related issues, establish child-friendly spaces, and promote positive children's participation in school, Panchayat, and village-level decision-making processes.

## CHILD RIGHTS - CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Furthermore, Arati is a member of the Adwika group at the village Anganwadi center. Every Saturday, she, along with her siblings and other children, actively participates in the group's activities, furthering her commitment to community engagement and child welfare.

Now, Arati has become the leader of Bal Sabha and Bal Panchayat. She actively participates in various forums, and her efforts have garnered recognition from the Sarpanch and frontline workers who acknowledge her as the child representative of the Panchayat. Arati now participates in every forum at the village level, showcasing her growing leadership role in the community. Initially unaware of Child Rights and various issues affecting children, Arati faced challenges in her village without identifying or sharing these problems with others. However, as she actively participated in Bal Sabha and the mapping process, her enthusiasm grew. Arati became hopeful that through this mapping process, the Panchayat could address and resolve the issues faced by the community. She gained awareness of child rights and realized that she could now bring these problems to the attention of Panchayat members.

During the Bal Sabha meetings and mapping process, Arati and other members identified several issues in their village.

These included drainage problems, open defecation in the village, issues with dustbins, inadequate street lighting, the absence of separate toilets for boys and girls in the upper primary school, a water tank inside the school causing problems for play, as the operator doesn't timely manage overflow water gathering at the school campus, lack of utensils for children's mid-day meals at school, and the need for ramps and railing facilities for special children at school.

In addition to these infrastructure concerns, they also identified specific challenges such as dropout students, Children with Special Needs (CWSN), single-parent orphans, orphans, child labor, and child marriage. This newfound awareness empowered Arati and the Bal Sabha members to actively advocate for their rights and work towards resolving these pressing concerns in their community.

On August 15, Arati, along with other Bal Sabha members, attended the Gram Sabha and presented the identified issues using different resource maps, hazardous maps, and focus group discussions. The Sarpanch and other Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members appreciated her for actively participating in the process and contributing to the efforts aimed at bringing positive changes to her village.

## CHILD RIGHTS - CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

The Sarpanch and officials of the Panchayat acknowledged the presented plan and assured the successful implementation of solutions to address the identified issues in the coming days. They also committed to strengthening child-related committees, eliminating child dropouts, child labor, and child marriages in the village or Gram Panchayat. Together, they took an oath to declare the Panchayat as a child-friendly Panchayat, emphasizing their collective commitment to the well-being and rights of children in the community.

Currently, toilet construction is underway at the school, the operator of village water tank is timely running and infrastructure-related work will be included in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), set to be completed within 2 years, as the Sarpanch mentioned.

*Arati expresses her heartfelt thanks to everyone for raising awareness about child protection and making small efforts to change the community, addressing issues to create a child-friendly Gram Panchayat. Her aspiration is to become a Superintendent of Police to work towards reducing violence against women and children at every level. Arati has now become an inspiration for other children, leading the way to make the Gram Panchayat a violence-free, child-friendly community.*

