

SIBA'S JOURNEY: TRANSFORMING HIS VILLAGE INTO A CHILD-FRIENDLY PANCHAYAT

Meet B. Siba, a 13-year-old student from Bhaliagada village, currently in 8th standard at GUG High School. His father, B. Somesh (43 years old), runs a tea stall in Bhaliagada, which is the sole source of income for their family of three children and their parents. In addition to this, they receive rationed items from the PDS shop and received Rs. 10,000 under the 'Kalia Yojana,' a state government livelihood scheme during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since childhood, Siba has been living with a constant fear of natural disasters, particularly cyclones, due to their coastal village location. He, along with his siblings and peers, regularly faces challenges such as school closures, power outages, loss of family income and property, interruptions in their education, and a multitude of other issues during disaster periods. Although they enjoy the occasional school closure, the fear of losing their lives, family members, and friends looms large. They never thought of these problems as something they could address, and they were unsure whose responsibility it was to protect and help them.



Apart from attending school, engaging in recreational activities, and assisting his father, Siba has limited knowledge of their entitlements, government benefits, and their role as children within their family, school, and village. They are familiar with a few institutions like the school, anganwadi center, gram panchayat (led by the sarpanch), post office, and other government offices, but they lack information about the gram panchayat's functioning, the roles and responsibilities of its members, and how to stay safe during disasters.

CHILD RIGHTS - CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

One day, Siba's younger sister, B. Bhanu (11 years old), had the opportunity to attend a meeting of adolescent girls at the anganwadi center, where she learned about the 'advika' scheme, which addresses issues like menstrual hygiene, the consequences of child marriage, and gender equity. She shared this information with Siba, explaining that boys could also participate in these meetings. Both of them attended the 'advika' meeting the following Saturday, where Siba actively engaged and discovered that he could voice his concerns at school, the anganwadi center, and even at the gram panchayat.

Siba began to identify various problems, such as the absence of separate toilets for boys and girls, unsanitary facilities, and the lack of a boundary wall at their school. Before this, he had no idea where to report these issues. He also learned about vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities, orphans, and those living in severe poverty, along with the government benefits and schemes available to support them.

Siba, his sister, and their peers started participating regularly in 'advika' meetings. Siba took on the role of mobilizing other children to join these meetings and become informed about child rights, issues concerning children, government schemes for children, the institutions responsible for children's services, and the roles and responsibilities of various officials.

They also gained knowledge about local governance, the role of the sarpanch, and participated in Bal Sabha meetings at the gram panchayat level.

Through active involvement, Siba assumed a leadership role in mobilizing his peers, identifying issues, engaging with officials, and gradually understanding the entire process of their participation in planning, influencing decision-making in their favor. Siba is now a member of the School Management Committee and raises children's issues.

On August 15th (Independence Day), he participated in the gram sabha meeting and presented the 'children action plan' prepared by the children and adolescents of Kotharasingi gram panchayat. Fearlessly, he addressed the sarpanch and members of the PRIs, highlighting issues such as streetlights, sanitation, school dropout rates, orphaned children, disabled children, child labor, and child marriage in the gram panchayat.



CHILD RIGHTS - CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

“Before this initiative, we were unable to voice our problems to anyone, and we never imagined participating in the gram sabha or speaking in front of our Sarpancha at such a young age. We now have the opportunity to engage in the planning process, understand child rights, protection laws, and the various government schemes and services available for children. We have gained the confidence to present our problems to our elected officials and advocate for the protection of our rights”

B. Siba

