

Amar Nani — Our Girl Child

¹P. B. Sajeev, & ²Ravi Pratap Singh

¹Regional Head,
Programme Development Support,
Aide et Action International - South Asia

²Regional Director
Aide et Action International - South Asia

Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijsressd.v6.i1.04

Abstract

Inexperienced women and youth can lead a community-based initiative with positive outcomes for children, parents, youth, teachers, community members, and other stakeholders, as evidenced by the team of 25 inexperienced women and girls from the community that steered the project to achieve its objectives. In the three years of the project, a total of 1,065 children who had never enrolled were enrolled in school. Of these, 67 percent were girls. This included 76 percent of tribal children, of whom 69 percent were girls, and 618 children who had dropped out of school. The rate of children's absenteeism was reduced from 40 percent to 3 percent. A collaborative approach amongst key stakeholders (children, parents, teachers, and community members) generated positive outcomes by promoting mutual respect, accountability, and responsibility, resulting in inclusion of the excluded. Community-based monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems strengthen solidarity, sharing of responsibility, accountability, and ownership within the community, which promotes sustainability.

Keywords: *Girl Child, Amar Nani*

Corresponding Author: P. B. Sajeev

First Published: [chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/
https://www.ungei.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Amar-nani-Our-girl-child-2016-eng.pdf](chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.ungei.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Amar-nani-Our-girl-child-2016-eng.pdf)

Background to the Study

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution, including its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties, and Directive Principles. The Constitution recognizes women's right to equality and empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. In 2001, India adopted a National Policy for Empowerment of Women. Educated women encourage the education of girl children, provide better guidance to their families, help reduce infant mortality, and slow population growth. Women's education is therefore crucial for the overall development of the country. The majority of Indian people live in villages, where most of the domestic roles are assumed by women. The patriarchal framework excludes women from taking economic decisions at the family and the village level, despite the fact that many women in lower socioeconomic groups contribute substantially to family income (Das 2007).

In many poor families, school-aged girls are engaged in essential household chores or subsistence wage labour, while boys may be allowed to attend school. Educating a daughter, especially in a poor family, is perceived as an unnecessary luxury and liability. Gender discrimination poses a threat to girls' education, nutrition, protection, and survival. Its effects extend well beyond childhood years, and often persist throughout the lifecycle (Köhler and Keane 2006). Barriers to girls' education are often compounded by caste, ethnicity, religion, poverty, and remoteness. Women and girls need to have their voices heard and their concerns reflected in policies, which requires becoming mobilized, organized, and intensifying their movement for social justice and equality in education (Chitrakar 2009).

There is no dearth of affirmative policy responses to the educational needs of diverse groups of girls, whether they are part of Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC), nomadic groups, or the urban poor. India implements Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a time-bound programme for universalizing elementary education. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE) makes India one of the 135 countries to make education a fundamental right of every child. Despite these efforts and the huge economic development India has achieved in recent years, barriers to girls' education persist. There is little noticeable progress in the level of female literacy and enrolment rates, including in the most challenging regions, and the problem of enrolling and retaining girls from disadvantaged groups in primary school persists. The gender parity in enrolment within SCs and STs is below that of all communities, in the primary stages and even more so at the middle stages (Nayer 2002).

Gender discrimination in schools is an extension of mindsets in the family, in society, and in the community. Lack of trained women teachers, separate schools for girls, and supportive facilities such as adequate and clean toilets in schools and transport to and from school, inhibit parents from enrolling their girl children. Within school itself, there are overt and covert forms of discrimination that inhibit girls, arising out of ignorance and deeply ingrained ways of thinking on the part of teachers, educational administrators, and peers. This manifest itself in language, gesture, posture, action, and even in the way girls and boys are seated in the classroom. Quite often more chances are given to boys than to girls (Ramachandran 2001).

The State of Odisha

Odisha is among the poorest states of India, with rural poverty as high as 43 percent. As per the 2011 census, the population of Odisha is 41,947,358: 50.54 percent male and 49.46 percent female. The literacy rate is 73 percent (male literacy is 82 percent and female 64 percent), which reflects progress over the years. A large percentage of Odisha's population are from STs (17 percent) and SCs (23 percent). They mostly live in interior pockets and are among the poorest groups, facing distinct marginalization from mainstream development processes.

The under-development of the tribal areas further exacerbates issues in delivering quality education. Challenges include:

- i. Long commutes for teachers: The majority of teachers prefer to live in urban or semi-urban centres and therefore must commute for 4 to 5 hours per day to reach tribal area schools.
- ii. Lack of electricity and water, poor school infrastructure, and dismal sanitary conditions discourage children, especially the girl children, from attending school.
- iii. Long lead times for delivery of teaching materials, such as textbooks and training materials, discourages teachers and children alike.

An estimated 37 percent of girls aged 7 to 14 from the lowest castes and tribes do not attend school, compared with 26 percent of majority girls of the same age (Lewis and Lockheed 2007). Because of poverty and social and cultural limitations, several tribal communities give minimal importance to girls' education. Girls may be intermittently sent to school but families prefer them sheltered from the outside world and engaged in household chores and sibling care. The Dombs, Paraja, and Kondh tribes prefer to marry the girl child when she reaches puberty.

Odisha and Right to Education

In 2010, Odisha was the second state to enact the state Right to Education (RTE) rules but soon expressed an inability to implement it due to a lack of funds. According to the 2011 Annual Survey on Education Report and the District Information System for Education (DISE) Report for 2010- 2011, Odisha lags behind other states in compliance with RTE norms (OrissaDiary.com 2012).

Nabarangpur District

More than 50 percent of the population of Nabarangpur District are STs, nomadic and almost primitive. Some have changed their lifestyles because of the influence of the township mainstream population, but several tribal groups still lead primitive lifestyles dependent on agriculture and forest products. The district literacy rate is 33.93 percent (47 percent male literacy rate and 20.7 percent female literacy rate), which is considerably low compared to the state average. The literacy rate among the tribal population, comprising 55 percent of the total population of the district, is just 24 percent and tribal female literacy is as low as 11.12 percent in the district (Census 2001). There are 1,883 schools run by different state and centre departments in the district, of which 1,170 are primary schools, 508 are upper primary schools, and 205 are secondary schools. To address the accessibility issue, the government operates

residential schools: residential sevashrams (primary schools), KBK (referring to Koraput, Balangir, and Kalahandi districts) ST girls' hostels, as well as primary schools with hostel facilities in the district. As a result, there is some improvement in enrolment, access, quality of education, infrastructure, and functioning of schools where accessibility is not an issue, while panchayats (caste councils), villages, and hamlets located in interior pockets continue to lag behind.

Case Study Methodology

This case study was developed based on a three-tiered process:

- i. Field visits to understand and analyse impact and changes through observation and through the voices of village level stakeholders, including girl children, Amar Nani Committees (ANCs), parents, community members, teachers, school management committees (SMCs), parent-teacher associations (PTAs), and Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs);
- ii. Meetings with external stakeholders, including local government officials at the block and district level, to gain their perspectives and observations; and
- iii. Review of secondary information, including yearly plans and budgets, project and financial reports, case studies, field visit reports, and team meeting minutes.

A 17 minutes-long videos were also developed capturing the salient features of the project. It is expected that the combination of the video and the case study will be useful in replicating the Amar Nani model.

Amar Nani: The intervention

A pre-project rapid assessment across 3 remote villages of the Jharigaon block was the first step undertaken. Discussions with 72 children and parents in these 3 villages helped Aide et Action (AEA) design the project. The key observations were:

Out of the 72 children, 22 had dropped out of school and 81 percent of these were girls. Parents were unhappy with teachers' attitudes. In a focus group discussion, a tribal parent said, "The teachers are rude and consider us and our children uncivilized."

- i. Teachers were quite irregular and insensitive, leading to a non-conducive environment in the classrooms. Corporal punishment was rampant.
- ii. Access to schools for children was a huge challenge because of distance and lack of proper infrastructure such as all-weather roads, bridges, and culverts. This made safety a key issue for parents.
- iii. Language was a barrier for both teachers and school-going children. The teachers were conversant in Odiya, the state language and the medium of instruction in schools, but not conversant in the local language. Odiya was an alien language for the children.
- iv. Lack of livelihood opportunities during lean seasons forced parents to migrate with their families, resulting in girls and boys dropping out and often engaging in child labour.
- v. Social preference for education was towards boys, who were considered future bread-

winners and support for parents, while daughters were to marry and move out of the family. The Dombs, Paraja, and Kondh tribes preferred to marry off girls as soon as they attain puberty, between 11 and 14 years old.

- vi. Poverty and lack of awareness turned schooling into an additional cost and thus a barrier for girl children. “As daily wage labourers we depend on petty jobs to earn our three meals a day. With three children, we felt Bhavani can take care of her sisters and do household chores when we go for work,” explained 35-year-old Khem Singh Majhi, father of 14-year-old Bhavani Majhi.
- vii. A lack of female teachers, insensitive or indifferent attitudes of male teachers towards girls, and lack of essential infrastructure in school (especially toilets) were barriers to girl's education.

The “Amar Nani – Our Girl Child” project was implemented in 10 remotely-located Gram Panchayats (GPs) comprising 48 revenue villages in Jharigaon block, Nabarangpur district, Odisha state. The project duration was 4 years (2011 – 2014). The fourth year focused on consolidation and withdrawal. These GPs were purposefully selected for three key reasons:

- i. Poor rate of girl child education;
- ii. Remoteness of the GPs and challenge of accessibility because of inadequate infrastructure; and
- iii. Language posed a big barrier for the teaching and learning process.

The project was an effort to demonstrate a sustainable and replicable model for remote, poverty-ridden communities. It also sought to demonstrate how collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders (parents, teachers, children, youth, SMCs, PTAs, and PRIs) can ensure girls' education.

The project was based on the theory that “access to local governance systems/institutions¹ and capability to influence these systems would enable access and quality education for the girl child and promote gender equality.” The overall objective was to “promote gender equality through education.”

Specific Objectives

- i. Improving access, assimilation, and retention of tribal girl children in primary education;
- ii. Strengthening the capacity of local institutions² to effectively operate schools, access rights and entitlements and influence the larger education governance mechanism in favour of the underprivileged; and
- iii. Creating access to better livelihood opportunities for adolescent girls and young women through livelihood and life skills education.

The project engaged with a range of stakeholders which included girl children, adolescents and youth, young women, parents, the larger community, teachers, various community-level institutions and organisations, local government departments (including the SSA³, Department of Health Department of Women and Child Welfare, and the local Department

of Tribal Welfare), district level governance systems, local political leaders, and the media as part of its advocacy strategy.

The project reached out to 102 schools, engaged with 240 teachers, 17,000 primary school students, and a population of more than 62,000 across 215 hamlets in 48 revenue villages.

Key Strategies

A community-based project implementing team: A core team of 25 women and youths (girls) were selected from each community in consultation with the PRI and SMC. Participatory analysis of ground realities: Intensive and extensive participatory rural analysis (PRA) was conducted in project villages to identify existing gender-based inequalities, barriers to girl child education, and other issues affecting the community. Action plans to address these were prepared with community participation. Developing strong community-based organisations: Children, adolescents, and youth in project villages were encouraged to form groups and then trained to become pressure groups and voices of the community. These groups addressed various issues affecting the community, especially girl child education. This also developed awareness, leadership skills, a sense of collaboration, ownership, and accountability within the community.

Developing strong community-based organisations

Children, adolescents, and youth in project villages were encouraged to form groups and then trained to become pressure groups and voices of the community. These groups addressed various issues affecting the community, especially girl child education. This also developed awareness, leadership skills, a sense of collaboration, ownership, and accountability within the community.

Sensitising teachers and developing teaching and learning materials: Systematic efforts were made to bridge relations between the teachers, children, and parents. The teachers were made aware and sensitised about local customs and culture, how girl children were being denied education, and ways to effectively manage the functioning of schools. Teachers were trained to develop appropriate teaching and learning materials that helped them and their students (especially girls) in the teaching and learning processes, respectively.

Strengthening stakeholder capacities and capabilities: Concerted efforts were made to enhance awareness, skills and attitudinal change in different stakeholders, especially at the local level among girl children, ANCs, par-ents, PTAs, SMCs, teachers, and PRIs. This led to developing collaborative action plans and addressing key issues and advocating for access to rights and entitlements.

Promoting multi-stakeholder, collaborative actions: The children, parents, teachers, SMCs, PTAs, PRIs, CBOs, and the broader community were encouraged to undertake collaborative actions to address issues related to gender-based inequalities, girl child education, functioning of schools, pedagogy, access to rights and entitlements, and others. This developed a great sense of solidarity and ownership amongst them.

Networking and Policy Advocacy: To gain external support, relevant influential stakeholders in government departments, civil society organisations, politics, and the media were identified and made aware of community needs.

Promoting and institutionalising a community plan-ning, implementing, and monitoring mechanism: A “Core Committee” was formed with representatives from the ANC, PRI, and SMC to monitor school functioning, assess quality and regularity of midday-meals, and physically check attendance registers to keep track of absenteeism and drop-outs amongst children. This institutionalised transparency and accountability and developed trust amongst community members, parents, SMC, PRI, PTA, CBOs, teachers, and other stakeholders.

Impact Access and Quality Education for girl Children

Amar Nani is the only education initiative working in the area. Based on close engagement with the community and regular monitoring of the program at the community and school levels, data show enhanced awareness within the community and community-based institutions resulting in 1,065 out-of-school children who had never been enrolled in school, 67 percent of whom were girls and 76 percent of whom were tribal children, being enrolled in school and 618 children who had dropped out of school re-enrolled. Absenteeism was reduced from 40 percent in 2011 to 3 percent in 2014, while the retention rate grew from 6 percent to 80 percent.

Appropriate low-cost and no-cost teaching and learning materials improved teacher and student relationships and helped build a conducive environment within the classroom. Learning became simpler for girl children who enrolled back and competencies, enrolment, and retention rates, especially amongst girl children, improved. “Earlier we taught in Odiya and children were unable to comprehend. This project provided TLMs [teaching and learning materials] in local language and we find improvement in competencies of children,” observed a teacher. Networking and advocacy efforts garnered support from external stakeholders, including relocation of 60 teachers by the Department of Education.

Promoting Community Participation and Institutions

The PRA conducted in the beginning of the project was the stepping stone for village level multi-stakeholder collaborative initiatives. This gradually developed mutual respect, empathy, and trust. The collaborative engagement of PRI and SMC resulted in school infrastructure development, access to entitlements, and better management of schools. “The ANC advised us to develop 'Shiksha Yojana – Education Plan,’” counseled us on our responsibilities and the need to ensure good nutritious food for the children,” recalled Suresh Chatriya, President of the SMC in Chaklapadar village.

The community became aware and vocal about their rights and entitlements and participated actively in various networking and advocacy initiatives. The women, adolescents, and youth (girls) developed positive attitudes, confidence, courage, and conviction and also took the lead. Active after school hours, the 200 children's clubs with 9,104 members became spaces for learning, improving competencies, and developing life skills and soft skills. This reduced fear

of school and homework amongst children, enhanced girl child enrolment and retention, and developed a sense of caring, sharing, and empathy within the children. They were no longer shy or hesitant and actively participated in studies and extra-curricular activities. These clubs proactively supported the ANCs in their campaigns. “Her talking style and grooming aspects have changed a lot,” remarked parent Kem Singh.

The village level ANC's developed a positive mindset within the community towards girl child education, which increased girl child enrolment and improved retention rates. The community actively participated in the effective functioning of schools. When federated at the block level, the 51 ANCs emerged as a stronger voice of the community at the block level. Led by a 25-member executive team, the federation engaged with various government departments, the political fraternity, and media, resulting in repair of schools, construction of new schools, infrastructure development in schools (including classrooms and toilets), and building of bridges, culverts and a health centre which was beneficial for more than 30 villages.

Empowering through Livelihood Education

As an initiative to develop economic self-sufficiency amongst youth (girls), and to set an example within the community on how alternative livelihood opportunities could be beneficial, training programmes in electrical wiring, computers, and tailoring were initiated. Thirty youth (girls) were trained in household wiring, computers and tailoring. Five of these trainees were employed by DTP and Cyber Café, while 20 took up tailoring as their livelihood.

Access to Entitlements through Networking and policy Advocacy

Approximately 58 advocacy actions by the ANC resulted in 69 varied infrastructure gains under 21 different categories of work. In addition, girl children gained access to social security schemes like the Scheduled Tribe Stipend, free bicycles, school uniforms and books.

Emergence of proactive community-based monitoring system

A “Core Committee” that included members from the ANC, PRI, and SMC monitored the inclusion of girls in education, the functioning of schools, and the implementation of RTE provisions, resulting in better functioning schools, increased enrolment, and retention rates, improved regularity of teachers, and better-quality mid-day meals. The children's clubs also kept a close eye on attendance and enrolment of girl children and proactively pursued cases of out-of-school children and dropouts. They engaged with parents and were quite successful in bringing girls back to school. Overall, the community developed a sense of confidence, proactiveness, participation, ownership, and accountability and gradually realized the need to be self-reliant, alert, and observant.

Cost-effectiveness

The project was able to sustain itself within a budget of Rs.66,42,000 (\$117,340.70 USD)⁴ during the formal project period of 2011-2013, while some additional funds had to be invested in 2014 to consolidate the efforts. Thus, with a direct and indirect investment of Rs.30,893/\$545.77 USD per hamlet in the period of 2011 – 2014, or Rs.7723/\$136.43 USD per year, and the fact that the project reached out to a population of 62,000 across 10 GPs (48

villages, 215 hamlets), the project has been cost-effective. This has been possible due to the strategy adopted. Further, if a comparative analysis is made between the total budget of the project and the cost of the assets gained during the project period, including roads, bridges, culverts, schools, school rooms, and additional toilets, the overall budget is much lower than the cost of these assets.

Key sustainability aspects

- i. Emergence of aware, experienced, and proactive community-based collectives, project implementing team, ANCs, and children's clubs. The emergence of adolescent girls as “change makers” was instrumental in ensuring that individuals with the right attitude took up positions in important institutions like the PRI and SMCs, which fostered progressive actions in favour of girl child education and quality education.
- ii. Awareness, conviction, and experience within the community and community-level institutions of the need for unbiased access and quality education for girl children, and the ability to steer them on the path to access rights and entitlements.
- iii. The intrinsic value of collaborative actions that developed within the community during the project years kept the efforts moving ahead.

Lessons learned

- i. **Putting the community in the lead** helps influence restrictive mindsets, cultural norms and practices in a constructive manner.
- ii. **Strengthening the capacities of the community** through training helps them become proactive and collaborative in analysing the nuances of issues affecting them, in voicing their concerns, and addressing their problems in a self-reliant way.
- iii. **Promoting girl youth as “change makers”** is an important approach to women's empowerment as it propels both women and young girls into leadership and influential positions. It gives them the opportunity to break existing socio-cultural barriers. Youth hold an influential position within any community, hence if guided and trained aptly, they can take up any challenge and bring positive change for the community.
- iv. **Networking and connecting the dots between re-source holders** helps derive maximum impact through convergence of resources and strengthening sustainability. Connecting the dots between resource holders enables the confluence of resources such as knowledge, expertise, and funds that help maximize impact.
- v. **Breaking physical barriers**, along with socio-cultural barriers, is particularly important for including remote communities and girl children in mainstream education. This also helps promote the need for higher education.
- vi. **Mother tongue-based learning and breaking language barriers** are crucial for communities who are not conversant in the state language (the medium of instruction in schools), otherwise it is a major impediment to teaching and learning. Appropriate

textbooks provided by the state and teaching and learning materials should appeal to children, lack gender bias, and be progressive in terms of breaking gender stereotypes. Teachers should be recruited from the community or trained and sensitised to appreciate the community's way of life and their value system, and skilled in developing apt teaching and learning materials if required.

- vii. **Breaking discriminatory social norms that act as barriers to girls' education** should be done in a manner that avoids creating conflict. The best way to do this is by including the community in the process and making them witnesses to positive transformation, especially within their own children.

Key Challenges

Promoting alternative livelihoods, especially for girl youth living in remote locations in a biased society, is a huge challenge. The Amar Nani project did not achieve much success in this. Lack of local opportunities, distance from the mainstream population, lack of proper infrastructure, and safety issues were the key deterrents that held girl youth back from venturing far from home in search of better livelihood options. In such situations there is a need for an alternative strategy such as enabling home-based livelihoods through resurrection of the local environment and convergence of government programmes and schemes; helping girl youth break in to male-dominated livelihoods such as motor mechanic, mobile repairperson, and electrician; and digitising the last mile to develop opportunities in the information and communication technology sector. To make a breakthrough, it is essential to have a special module of intervention focusing on the need, space, and opportunities to develop existing resources and specific networking to build linkages through innovative ideas and approaches. This requires intensive and extensive skill-building programmes for girl youth; developing networks with different stakeholders such as corporations, local markets, and government programmes; and having potential and resources to promote alternative livelihoods. There is no doubt that livelihoods and access to and control over earnings play a key role in women's empowerment, thus promoting alternative livelihoods for girl youth and young women is a crucial area for attention and concerted effort.

References

- Amar Nani Project. (2011) *Annual report*. 2012.
- Amar Nani Project. (2012) *Annual report*. 2013.
- Amar Nani Project. (2013) *Annual report*. 2014.
- Amar Nani Project. (2014). *Annual report*. 2015.
- Attendance registers of Primary schools Census of India Report (2001 & 2011)
Available at: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2007/06/lewis.htm>.
- Chitrakar, R. (2009). *Overcoming barriers to girl child education in South Asia – Deepening the analysis*. Kathmandu, Nepal: UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA).
Available at: http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/whole_book_b.pdf
- Das, Prodeepta. *Self-service.* *Developments*, 38 (2007): 31-33. Available at:
http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/Developments_38.pdf.
- District Report Cards. Available at: <http://www.dise.in/drc.htm>.
- Govinda, R. ed. (2002). *India education report: A profile of basic education*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 35-36.
- Köhler, G. & Jennifer, K. (2006). *Social policy in South Asia: Towards Universal Coverage and Transformation for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals.*, Analytical Report based on the workshop on transformative social policy in South Asia, Kathmandu, Nepal, May 24-25, 2006. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/rosa/Social_Policy_Workshop_Report.pdf
- Lewis, M. A. & Marlaine, E. L. (2007). Getting all girls into school, *Finance and Development*, 44 (2007).
- National University of Educational Planning and Administration. 2011.
- Nayer, U. (2002). *Education of girls in India: an assessment.* In R. Gov-inda (Ed.), *India Education Report: A Profile of Basic Education*, 35-46. New Delhi: Oxford.
- Orissa Diary bureau, (2012). *Bhubaneswar. "Odisha needs to accelerate efforts on RTE Counts*, OrissaDiary.com. September 27, Available at:
<http://www.orissadiary.com/CurrentNews.asp?id>
- Ramachandran, Padma. (2001). *Gender discrimination in school system*, The Hindu, December 18.