

TRANSFORMING
FUTURES:
**Gram Vikas's Role in
Intergenerational Development**



In 2022-23, Gram Vikas initiated the “Learning from the Past, Reading the Present, Planning for Future” (LPRPPF) initiative to reflect on its legacy and chart a roadmap for the future. This four-phase exercise began with workshops to frame hypotheses about how change happens, followed by in-depth reviews and community interactions. We commissioned three independent studies that evaluated the intergenerational outcomes of Gram Vikas’s education programme, the resilience of self-managed water and sanitation systems, and advancements in production systems in rural Odisha. The study findings document Gram Vikas’s programmes, highlighting evidence and narratives that illustrate its role in fostering long-term social change in Odisha.

Summary Report

Transforming Futures: Gram Vikas’s Role in Intergenerational Development

July 2024

Nous Consultants conducted the study and authored the report. Neelima Khetan and Chandan Sarma led the study team, supported by Arjun Shatrunjay, Rukmini Datta, and Jayapadma RV.

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Gram Vikas commissioned this study as part of its “Learning from the Past, Reading the Present, and Planning for the Future” (LP-RP-PF) exercise. This report, one of three in the Learning from the Past series, examines the role of Gram Vikas Residential Schools in driving intergenerational change and their impact on education, livelihoods, and health, particularly for women.

Gram Vikas is a rural development organisation partnering with Odisha’s marginalised communities since 1979, driving sustainable change and impacting the lives of over five million people in more than 8,000 villages.

www.gramvikas.org



FOREWORD



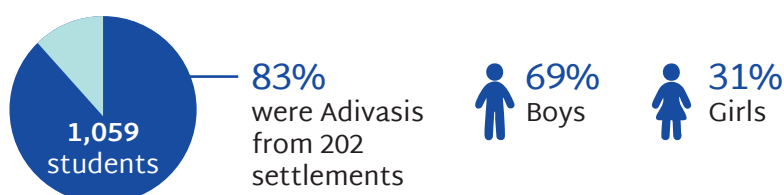
When one looks back over Gram Vikas's 40+ years of partnership with rural communities, one cannot but see the far-reaching changes that have taken place in society. One wonders, then, what the nature of this 'intergenerational change' has been. Gram Vikas was curious about this change. What does it tell us about the nature of intergenerational change, and what stances, including our own, have helped?

To examine these questions, Gram Vikas initiated Learning from the Past, Reading the Present, and Planning for the Future (LP-RP-PF) as an organisational learning exercise.

Gram Vikas believes it has been a friend to this process of change in communities; its legacy is one of development that lasts over a period of time: *deergsthayi vikas*, as it was referred to in our opening workshop on the LP-RP-PF exercise, with Gram Vikas colleagues and long-time associates.

To unpack this further, the exercise focused on the experiences of the Gram Vikas schools. Nous Consultants undertook this study.

The study covered three schools. The first-decade cohort comprised:



The team conducted 116 telephone interviews, 61 in-depth interviews (44 with Gram Vikas alumni and 17 with non-Gram Vikas alumni), and eight community meetings. It examined three generations:

- Gen-0: the parents of children reaching school-going age around the time the Gram Vikas schools were established;
- Gen-1: children who attended Gram Vikas schools or other schools during the same period; and
- Gen-2: children of Gram Vikas school alumni who are studying or have studied in Gram Vikas schools.

The study shows that changes in education have indeed been intergenerational. The educational attainment and consequent occupational profiles of the generation reaching school-going age in 1993–96 and 1986 in Koinpur and Konkia, respectively, appear to differ radically from those of the previous generation.

The element of 'parivesh' mentioned in the study refers to the programme's emphasis on building a child's personality. Besides reading and writing, it focuses on games, art, music, and expression. The Gram Vikas School graduate is distinctive in her or his behaviour from other children, and that itself has created more interest in and demand for a Gram Vikas education.

The study illustrates this through the reference to the first batch of Class 10 students to pass out of Kankia School. The Class of 1999 comprised 40 boys and girls, 17 of whom cleared the exam, and all of them have government jobs today. This was the class of Dasrathi Malik, with whom the study team met. It was a class that grew alongside Gram Vikas, with a new class added each year.

Gram Vikas responded with interventions in education, despite having limited expertise and skills in the field at the time. It required conviction in capacity building and a process of building on the positive results of the first few years, aided by a wider acceptance of formal education among the communities it worked with.

We examined the education programme to test our hypothesis that Gram Vikas initiatives are often ahead of their time. Was our education programme indeed ahead of its time when viewed in the context of the educational scenario prevailing in the country at that period? The study brings some aspects of this to our attention.

Firstly, all the students interviewed were first-generation learners. The study covered 15 per cent of the cohort from the first decade of each school. Gram Vikas built trust in children, encouraging them to come to school and stay in school, at a time when enrolment was low and dropout rates were high. In the first decade, Gram Vikas schools had less than 10 per cent dropouts.

The schools provided a foothold, an opportunity to diversify students' dreams, and an entry to explore other possible trajectories. The journey of Madan Mohan Nayak illustrates this; he studied at a Gram Vikas school for only two years, from classes 5 to 7, but it set him on the path to continue his education.

While this study is rooted in the experience of the educational interventions of Gram Vikas, it is as much about a long view of social change. It shows that this process of change is about values and behaviour change. It is about dignity—being able to think about the future with a greater sense of agency in one's life. The cases show that, in the process of this change, a little support at a time of vulnerability goes a long way in bringing about change.

Intergenerational development seems to be a process that is not a one-time fix. Development outcomes are not the delivery of something but rather somewhat unknown trajectories on which individuals and groups travel. These trajectories develop through the interplay of various factors. Lakshmikant Malik's journey illustrates this: he studied, dropped out, got appointed as shiksha sahayak, and is now a teacher.

The outcomes also seem to be complex, changing, and sometimes contradictory. Nivedita Majhi illustrates this: "The school has enabled me to be an independent person. My schooling inspired my sister to work hard in her academics. Many small Adivasi girls became serious about their studies." Nivedita herself went on to the nationals in weightlifting and now works as an Anganwadi worker in her village.

Perhaps Gram Vikas's role in intergenerational change could be understood as timely and adequate support at a time of vulnerability—like a hand supporting a candle when faced with a strong wind—important in helping to tide over difficult times. Gram Vikas can continue to see itself as an ever-standing, all-weather friend whom communities can count on.



SUMMARY



Gram Vikas completed four decades of work in 2019 and has since undertaken a wide and deep internal exercise to reorient its work, based on changes in context and by taking stock of its achievements, experiences, and lessons learnt over the previous four decades.

This report presents our findings from the study on the outcomes of Gram Vikas's efforts in bringing intergenerational change, viewed through the lens of its education programme.

The study examines Gram Vikas's perspective of the education programme being 'ahead of its time' within the context of the geography of Gram Vikas's work. The 'ask' under the study, therefore, translated into two parts:



Chronicling: A detailed chronicling of Gram Vikas's education initiatives from their inception to the present day.



Contextualisation: Locating these chronicles within the educational context prevalent in the feeder areas of the three schools in the first decade after their establishment.

The study also delved into Gram Vikas's belief that a generational leap took place for those born in the 1980s and 1990s in the villages where Gram Vikas worked (Gen-1). The circumstances of Gen-1 changed due to choices made by the previous generation with respect to their education. Consequently, the life choices for Gen-1 broadened, and their networks expanded, resulting in far-reaching changes in these villages.

This part of the study relied on the collection of primary data, especially qualitative insights gathered through deep listening and conversations at the individual and community levels. The individuals we interviewed and the communities we visited were ultimately a purposive and feasible sample.

The studies of Gram Vikas High School, Kankia, Ganjam; Mahendra Tanaya Ashram School, Koinpur, Gajapati; and Gram Vikas Shikshya Niketan, Kumudabahal, Kalahandi, were undertaken in 2023 to assess the trajectories, relevance, contributions, and impact of the schools.



The need and the response

The education intervention of Gram Vikas was part of an integrated approach to address the educational and developmental needs of Adivasi communities in rural Odisha. Through community engagement and adaptive strategies, Gram Vikas enabled access to quality education and holistic development, thereby laying the foundation for better life outcomes for children from these communities.

The need for literacy came to the fore in the late 1970s, when Gram Vikas volunteers were mobilising Adivasi communities against exploitative moneylenders and liquor merchants in the Kerandimal region of Ganjam, Odisha. It became clear that without education, such social movements were impossible to sustain. Gram Vikas started adult literacy classes in many villages, but there were no schools for children. The remote locations of Adivasi habitations and the largely dysfunctional status of government schools pushed Gram Vikas to reconsider its approach.

According to the 1981 census reports, literacy among Odisha's Adivasi population as a whole was around 14%, and a mere 4.8% among Adivasi women.



In Digapahandi Block, where Gram Vikas worked, the rates were 11% and 3%, respectively. The work on education was a necessity, not an option.



At the time, education in rural Odisha, like much of the rest of the country, was plagued by limited access and poor infrastructure.

As late as 1990,  60% government schools lacked drinking water facilities

 90% did not have toilet facilities

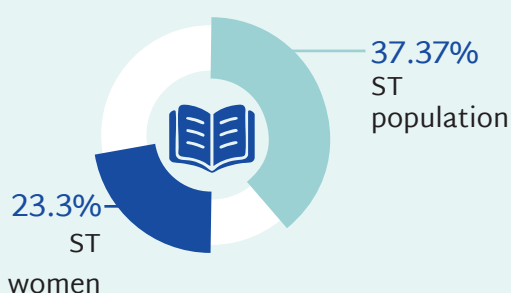
Gram Vikas persuaded the local community to understand the importance of education and helped set up a community institution, the Kerandimal Education Trust (KET), in 1982. The community decided to start a school in Kankia village. Children from their own village and nearby villages began attending this school. Each village took responsibility for feeding the school's children for a day. Teachers were selected from their own villages, trained by Gram Vikas, and a staff member was appointed to look after the school. Initially, these makeshift arrangements worked well, although the process of regular feeding and providing accommodation was challenging.

Thus, KET bought a small plot of land and set up the Kerandimal Middle Education School. Simultaneously, Gram Vikas started schools in all the villages they worked in as non-formal education (NFE) centres. Local facilitators were selected, trained, and paid a monthly salary of ₹50.

This worked up to Class 3, but after that, given the local resources, it was difficult to run village-level schools.

KET purchased more land and started classes up to Class 7 in the newly conceived residential school. Gram Vikas appointed staff and received permission from the government to run a middle school in 1986. This then became a formal school, with the NFE schools in the villages becoming feeder schools. Following government permission in 2002 to run high-school classes, the school came to be known as the Gram Vikas High School (GVHS), Kankia.

In 2001, the literacy rate among the ST population of Odisha was 37.37%, with 23.3% among the ST females.



With focused interventions through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, literacy efforts received a boost, and by 2011, the literacy rate of STs in Odisha rose to 72.9% (compared to 52.2% at the national level), with the ST female literacy rate at 60.9% (against 41.2% nationally).

However, according to the 2005 Annual Status of Education Report, more than 67% of rural students in the 7–14 age group were unable to read a 'story' text with some long sentences of standard 2-level difficulty or divide a 3-digit number by a 1-digit number (Level 2). The overall Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) levels of students in schools presented a rather discouraging picture.

Teacher attendance was about **74%** in primary schools; when middle schools were included, it fell to **64.5%**.

The shortage of teachers was another factor: the percentage of schools with all teachers present for Classes 1–5 was 45%, and for Classes 1–8 was 26%.

Even as government interventions in education grew in Odisha, access to good quality and holistic education remained out of reach for large parts of the rural population, especially Adivasis.

In the course of working with other Adivasi communities across the state, Gram Vikas recognised similar challenges in education and set up three more residential schools: Mahendra Tanaya Ashram School (MTAS) in Koinpur village of Rayagada block in Gajapati district in 1992, Gram Vikas Shiksha Niketan School (GVSN) in Kumudabahal village of Thuamul Rampur block in Kalahandi in 1998, and Gram Vikas Vidya Vihar in Rudhapadar village, Jagannath Prasad block, Ganjam in 2001. These schools went up to Class 7, after which children had the option of either moving to the school at Kankia or enrolling in a government school¹.

¹ From 2023, MTAS Koinpur and GVSN Kalahandi have also extended classes to high school.

How were Gram Vikas schools different?

Gram Vikas's residential schools provided immersive educational experiences that incorporated both academic and life skills. The dropout rates in Gram Vikas's schools, after the first few years, were less than 5 per cent by the end of the first-decade journey in each of the schools, which was much lower than those of students in other schools who came from similar socio-cultural backgrounds during that period.

Gram Vikas schools did not just wait for students to enrol; they took education to the children. The Balwadi centres and non-formal education programme, operating in villages where Gram Vikas worked, showed a clear departure from conventional schooling. Special efforts were made to enrol children who had lost either one or both parents at an early age. The focus on sports, art, music, dance, and skills, including agriculture and carpentry, helped students evolve as better, well-rounded individuals.

The flexibility and adaptability to cater to the unique circumstances of communities, and the emphasis on holistic learning, were ahead of their time in many ways.

By involving the local community, particularly in and around the residential school periphery, in decision-making processes—from the construction of school infrastructure to teacher recruitment—Gram Vikas fostered a sense of ownership and commitment. Additionally, its emphasis on basic infrastructure created a safe environment for children, particularly girls. This critical investment in infrastructure—from drinking water (through gravity-flow systems), toilets, and school libraries—stands out at a time when most schools in the country, particularly in rural areas, were grappling with infrastructure issues.

Most importantly, however, what sets the Gram Vikas schools apart is the familial atmosphere created within the schools, thanks to the efforts of the teachers. From caring for the children's medical needs to building close relationships through activities such as gardening, singing, dance, and art, and, on occasion, protecting the children from abusive families, the teachers ensure that the children feel safe and protected within the confines of the school.

Access to uninterrupted learning and good-quality education resulted in consistently high pass rates. The low dropout rates underscored the efficacy of the schools, given the context of the area and the low literacy levels of the community. In receiving government scholarships, children from Gram Vikas schools consistently outperformed their peers in other schools. While in the initial years, Gram Vikas workers had to motivate parents to send their children to school, the demand for Gram Vikas schools has grown year-on-year, despite improvements in government schools in these areas.

	Est.	Enrolment at the Start			Current Enrolment (2022-23)		
		Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Gram Vikas High School, Kankia, Ganjam	1982	8	2	10	348	209	557
Mahendra Tanaya Ashram School, Koinpur, Gajapati	1992	55	14	69	329	196	525
Gram Vikas Shiksha Niketan, Kumudabahal, Kalahandi	1998	38	13	51	187	162	349

What changes did the schools trigger?



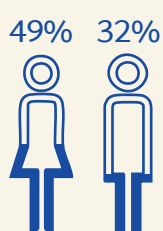
EDUCATION AND LIVELIHOODS TRAJECTORIES

The longitudinal and telephonic interviews, covering 15 per cent of the first-decade cohorts of the three schools, shed light on the enhanced academic achievement. All of them were first-generation learners who came to the Gram Vikas school because there was no school near their village, and their parents, though they themselves had not gone to school or, at most, studied at the primary level, knew and trusted Gram Vikas and were willing to send their children to a residential school. Many villages did not have road access or electricity until well into the 2000s.

Gram Vikas's close connections with the community ensured highly effective targeting in terms of bringing the most vulnerable children to the school, thus at least opening a new pathway for them.

Almost all the alumni spoke highly of the 'padhai ka mahaul' in the Gram Vikas schools, where teachers took the trouble to ensure that children used the after-school hours to catch up on their homework or solve difficulties. Given that most of these children came from homes where the parents had barely studied, this kind of environment and support made a huge difference to their learning outcomes and, more importantly, to the children staying on and not dropping out.

The addition of Class 10 in GVHS, Kankia, in 1999 was a game changer; 40 children sat for the board exam in the first year, of whom 17 cleared it. The truly incredible part of the story is that each one of the 17 children went on to secure a government job.

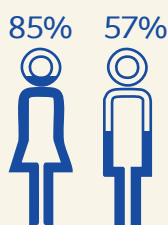


From our interviews, 49 per cent of the female respondents had gone on to complete their graduation or even post-graduation, while 32 per cent of the male respondents had completed their graduation, post-graduation, or other specialised degrees, such as engineering and law.

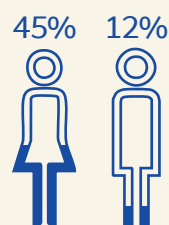
The firm academic foundation of their early years has helped an entire generation from marginalised groups move beyond traditional livelihoods like agriculture and labour to diverse livelihoods, including government service, private jobs, and micro-enterprises.

Among the women, 85 per cent are in some kind of non-traditional occupation or job, and 57 per cent of the men are too; 45 per cent of the female respondents are now teachers, compared to 12 per cent of the male respondents.

Non-traditional occupation or job



Teachers



The education interventions of Gram Vikas, while certainly significant in terms of a generational shift for men, led to a far more remarkable generational leap among women.

At the village level, the occupational profile over the last 30–40 years has shifted from forest dependence, agriculture, labour, and jobs (in descending order) to labour, agriculture, forest dependence, and jobs (in descending order).



BEYOND ACADEMICS AND DEVELOPING LIFE-SKILLS

Gram Vikas forged partnerships with diverse organisations based on shared values and complementary expertise, which enabled it to address a range of issues impacting children's well-being, from sports to computer literacy. Regular training camps in badminton, cricket, football, volleyball, and weightlifting enabled students to excel in sports and participate in district, state, and national events.

The Gram Vikas schools, while providing a 'padhai ka mahaul', also introduced the children to several other extra-curricular opportunities, such as painting, music, dance, vegetable cultivation, carpentry, etc. We met alumni from the first decade whose fondest memories of the school revolve around the extra-curricular initiatives. Several alumni reminisced about how the values of hard work and integrity became instilled in them during their years at school.

In the words of Nivedita Majhi of Kalahandi, "Weightlifting taught me how to live." It became, for her, a symbol of empowerment and a pathway to honour and self-confidence.

At the Gram Vikas schools, all castes eat together, which is an effort by GV to instil acceptance among children of different norms. The practices are, however, slower to shift in homes, though eating together in public, such as in the marketplace, has now become relatively acceptable.



NETWORK EFFECTS

Two kinds of networks have emerged through the sustained connection of the schools with the communities. First, upward/vertical spiral networks, through role models for professional and economic development—graduates from schools becoming teachers, government officials, representatives of local government, etc.—help first-generation school graduates navigate the relatively unknown world outside.

The second kind of networks are lateral/horizontal, for social support and solidarity, which provide an identity core. As happens with many mobile communities, one gradually begins to see these two networks overlap. For now, however, the rootedness of the lateral networks is indeed a source of immense strength for these communities.



Conclusions

This report presents the details of what we found, but if we were to summarise it, we can say with a high degree of confidence that, on the parameters of educational outcomes and occupational profiles, we heard and saw strong narratives of a more-than-generational leap having occurred among the first-decade cohorts who had entered one of three residential Gram Vikas schools (in the districts of Ganjam, Gajapati, and Kalahandi). While the leap occurred for both male and female alumni, it was far more pronounced among the women (some exceptions notwithstanding).

On health and social outcomes, some shifts have occurred—more visible in the health space and less so in the social space. However, health conditions have improved due to changes largely extraneous to the school interventions. The social shifts (such as caste boundaries), as would be expected, have been the slowest to move, but, happily, some of the changes we encountered appeared, at least in part, to have been triggered by what has been happening in the schools.

Finally, we would like to note that, in the trends we have observed, it is somewhat difficult to separate the influence of Gram Vikas from the influence of the Gram Vikas schools. Given the shifts in Gram Vikas's work over the decades, this influence may not be as strong for subsequent or future cohorts, but that remains to be seen.

We also felt a pressing need for the schools to engage in a visioning exercise (just as Gram Vikas is envisioning its fifth decade): the education context has changed, community and individual aspirations have changed, and the existing and emerging opportunities have changed. Gram Vikas schools should proactively position themselves to enable their students to make the most of these shifts, in order to continue building on this generational leap pathway.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This has been a very different assignment for all of us who were part of this study. It is not often that external consultants are invited to come in and listen to what communities and individuals have to say, without any lens of assessment or evaluation, and then to examine something as long-term and comprehensive as intergenerational change.

Most of us involved in development work know that real, deep-seated change takes a long time. But not often do we come across programmes that have continued in more or less the same form, in the same location, and over several decades. Gram Vikas's residential schools offer just such a space for learning about long-term change processes.

We spent the hottest part of the summer of 2023 visiting villages in Ganjam, Gajapati, and Kalahandi. Looking back, however, the memories that endure are not of the sweat and heat but of the people who opened their hearts to us, sharing their stories of success and, at times, struggle. Our deepest gratitude goes to each of those remarkable people we met.

Two of the study team members knew no Oriya, and one could just about get by. The three schools and their teachers were our guides through this unfamiliar territory—not just of language, but in multiple ways. They knew almost every student and their families, and any village we wanted to visit. They could instantly navigate through their network of current students to help us reach the alumni we were looking for.

Quite apart from all the help they provided in conducting this study, every meeting with the school alumni was a testament to the transformational power of good education. The dedication and respect that Gram Vikas teachers command among the villagers was uplifting to see.

Finally, we owe a very big thank you to the Gram Vikas Board for commissioning such a pioneering study, to the entire executive team led by Liby Johnson (especially Sarat Mohanty, Debendra Nath Dash, Arabinda Swain, Prakash Jena, Rama Chandra Nayak, Sharbani Chattoraj, Apurva Ghugey, and Sangita Patra) for their trust, transparency, and support; and, of course, to Vartika Jaini for constantly helping us interpret the intent and stay on course.

While everyone at Nous was partially involved in this study, it was front-ended by Arjun Shatrunjay, Chandan Sarma, and Neelima Khetan, with Rukmini Datta and Jayapadma providing much-needed backend support.

Thanks once again from all of us for entrusting us with this unique exploration.

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