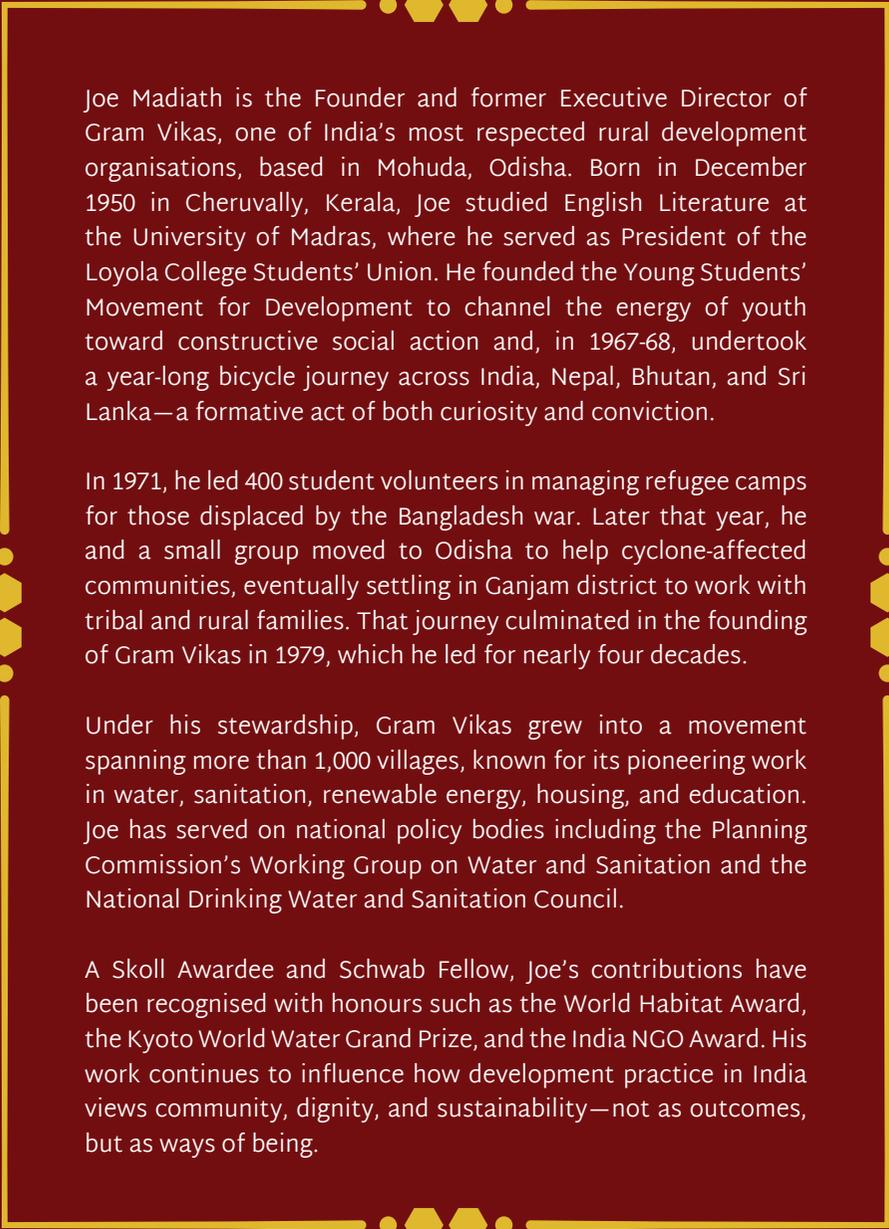


JOE@MOHUDA

A BOOK OF FRIENDS



JOURNEY ON THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED



Joe Madiath is the Founder and former Executive Director of Gram Vikas, one of India's most respected rural development organisations, based in Mohuda, Odisha. Born in December 1950 in Cheruvally, Kerala, Joe studied English Literature at the University of Madras, where he served as President of the Loyola College Students' Union. He founded the Young Students' Movement for Development to channel the energy of youth toward constructive social action and, in 1967-68, undertook a year-long bicycle journey across India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka—a formative act of both curiosity and conviction.

In 1971, he led 400 student volunteers in managing refugee camps for those displaced by the Bangladesh war. Later that year, he and a small group moved to Odisha to help cyclone-affected communities, eventually settling in Ganjam district to work with tribal and rural families. That journey culminated in the founding of Gram Vikas in 1979, which he led for nearly four decades.

Under his stewardship, Gram Vikas grew into a movement spanning more than 1,000 villages, known for its pioneering work in water, sanitation, renewable energy, housing, and education. Joe has served on national policy bodies including the Planning Commission's Working Group on Water and Sanitation and the National Drinking Water and Sanitation Council.

A Skoll Awardee and Schwab Fellow, Joe's contributions have been recognised with honours such as the World Habitat Award, the Kyoto World Water Grand Prize, and the India NGO Award. His work continues to influence how development practice in India views community, dignity, and sustainability—not as outcomes, but as ways of being.

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LESS TRAVELLED



December 2025

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A BOOK OF FRIENDS FOR JOE



It is impossible to forget Joe. The first time I met him, in 1996 at IRMA, he was among the legendary leaders of India's voluntary sector, and also sharp, warm, quietly amused by the world human. At a workshop in Anantapur in 1997, I saw his wit at work: quick to laugh, quicker to put others at ease, and in Mohuda in 1998, I saw the organisation he had built - its scale and spirit, both unmistakably his.

Joe's early morning phone calls to his colleagues were events in themselves - always starting with, "I am thinking we should..." and ending with everyone's plans overturned. He had a way of drawing people back into his orbit.

Through humour, provocation, and generosity, he shaped people as much as institutions. He made community development less about projects and more about humanity.

Joe's seventy-fifth birthday is a moment to mark with respect and gratitude - for the eventful, impactful life he has lived. The occasion is made even more special by another milestone: fifty years since he came to Mohuda, the place he calls home, where Gram Vikas began its journey, took root, and grew over five decades. Through this growth, Joe and Mohuda have remained the constants, bearing witness to change in their own ways.

One of the best ways to make memories is through the narratives of co-travellers and friends—people who walked alongside Joe and Gram Vikas, experienced Mohuda for long and short durations, contributed in different ways to Gram Vikas, and in turn, were influenced by Joe and by the work itself.

This Book of Friends for Joe came together through the generous contributions of friends, former staff, volunteers, and people who came as donors and became much more. The invitation to them was simple: *share your reflections in whatever form you choose*. Each chapter, therefore, is a unique voice, carrying the distinct style of its contributor. Like a bouquet of wildflowers, each different from the other, these memories and testimonies add varied richness to this collection of tributes to Joe and what he nurtured.

Jayapadma, former staff member and long-time friend of Gram Vikas, anchored the publication. She reached out to many people and followed up over the past two months to bring this together. A few whom we contacted were unable to write at this time but sent their fondest wishes to Joe. Many others, instrumental in the journey, we could not reach. And we remember, with quiet gratitude, those who played important roles but are no longer with us.

To all who have written for this compendium, our deepest thanks - for joining us through the written word to celebrate Joe, and a journey along the road less travelled, rooted in Mohuda.

Liby Johnson, Executive Director, Gram Vikas



JOE'S JOURNEY FROM MOHUDA TO THE WORLD

J A Y A P A D M A R V

Joe Madiath was twenty five years old when he came to Mohuda. With him came a band of young persons, fired by purpose and eager to live their dream of a better society, of making the world a better place, for everyone. The journey was arduous, the money scarce, and the dreams infinite - and often the only fuel to keep them going was the fire in their belly, with support coming from unexpected sources.

As Joe wrote some years later in “And what exactly is Gram Vikas (1981)¹ – “A small group of motivated, purposeful volunteers can effectively play this catalytic role. Necessarily, such efforts cannot be a part time job”. And so they stayed, from the early, tentative years, to a journey spanning five decades, working across Odisha, and neighbouring districts in Jharkhand, influencing the work of many individuals and organisations across the country, and getting recognised for their work across the world. Gram Vikas was one of India’s early generations of non-government organisations to which young people with professional education came,

1 [And What Exactly is Gram Vikas](#)

opting out of lucrative mainstream opportunities, and committing themselves to social development.

In the same essay, Joe writes, to communicate the purpose of Gram Vikas unequivocally “We are not a charitable organisation - mere charity we believe, causes dependency and retards self-reliance. We only aim for people to help themselves. We are not missionaries. Our group has members of different religions, castes and languages. We do not have any political affiliations. We believe only in two parties - the have and the have not. Our mission is to convert the ‘have not’ to ‘have’. Our goal is to secure the liberation of all people who are weak and powerless (in one way or another), from the increasing impact of grinding poverty.”

Journey and growth

The first essay in this compendium is an article from a newspaper in 1968, from the time when Joe cycled across the country, mostly solo. It gave him a first hand understanding of the country, its people, their practices, and the challenges they faced. It did more than any University education could ever do. The article ends by noting Joe’s plan to scale the Himalayas. That wish became metaphorical, as he scaled many mountains, through his work with Gram Vikas.

The second essay is by Jeanne Devos, a friend and mentor to Joe, who founded the Young Students Movement in 1966, and became instrumental in channeling the restless energy in Joe to constructive work. She supported the group in their initial days, even as they lived with meagre resources, in spartan living conditions, and dealt with frequent episodes of malaria. She helped raise funds from family, friends and well-wishers - an early effort of crowdfunding for social development work.

Anthya, one of the co-founders of Gram Vikas, writes the third essay chronicling how she joined the band, and the initial work and challenges of the Young Students Movement when they worked in Pattamundi, Cuttack district, and eventually moved to Ganjam. The essay she wrote in 1980 “When tribals awake”² is a powerful chronicle of the early experiments and learning, as the seeds of Gram Vikas were being sown in the Kerandimal hills around Mohuda. The essay recounts how the tribal community organised to get out of the clutches of money lenders and liquor merchants. Around this time, Joe wrote

2 [When Tribals Awake](#)

another essay “The tribal and the bureaucrats”³, a poignant rendering of state apathy, which eventually became a case study Vijay Mahajan introduced into his classes as Visiting Faculty at IIM Ahmedabad. In the early 1980s, Vijay Mahajan, Rajesh Tandon, and Joe became close acolytes, and spent many years plotting and shaping development interventions and action. They experimented, encouraged, critiqued and challenged each other and built some of the most enduring institutions in India’s social development landscape. They shared a bond which wove the professional and personal.

Rajesh shared a video note, which we have transcribed for this compendium. He recalls first meeting Joe outside a rasagulla shop, and goes on to share about his involvement with Gram Vikas through its journey and growth, and their nearly four decades long friendship. The time they both went to the US at the invitation of their common friend, Peggy Dulany, President of Synergos Foundation, and their accidental meeting with Henry Kissinger, is part of Joe-folklore. Peggy visited Mohuda when Gram Vikas celebrated 25 years, and stayed in touch with Joe. Joe straddled these worlds seamlessly and the circle of friends kept growing.

The next essays in this compendium are felicitations and reflections - notes from Anant Mahapatra, a long time friend and mentor to Joe, and a thespian in Odia theatre and cinema, followed by Meena Gupta (retd IAS) who writes about Joe’s contribution to shaping India’s policy on rural water supply and sanitation. Both Anant Mahapatra and Meena Gupta are part of Gram Vikas Society and the Governing Board. Sanjeev Nayak, from a younger generation, is also part of Gram Vikas Society and the Governing Board. Their friendship was born from Joe’s quest for technology solutions (Gram Vikas must have been among the early NGOs to have computers in the 80s). For Sanjeev, Joe has been a mentor and friend.

What is Gram Vikas like for people who work there? Urmila Senapati, shares her experience of working with Gram Vikas for nearly three decades from the mid 1980s. She was the first woman who grew from field staff to Programme Manager in Gram Vikas. Urmila recounts the challenging conditions of work in the early years, the difficulties in access and mobility, and of times when even food and water were difficult to get while traveling across villages, and electricity was rare. She celebrates the commitment and connection of the people who worked in the early years at Gram Vikas, as colleagues who became

3 [The Tribal and the Bureaucrats](#)

part of a large family, and how Joe led them, not just to dream, but also realise them.

There are a few more essays from former Gram Vikas staff, which come later in the compendium. Suvojit Chattopadhyay, Anusha Bharadwaj and Kabir Rana, came to Mohuda in the new millennium, as young people with professional training, choosing Gram Vikas as their *karmabhoomi*- place of work. Joe convinced them that their choice to pass over mainstream opportunities was right by saying “If you are in the rat race, you’ll still be a rat”. The challenges of working with rural communities have changed over time, but what remains constant are the values that the organisation has stood for – respect for the community, patience and trust in the process, dignity and respect as uncompromising values. Kabir echoes the friendship and camaraderie Gram Vikas fosters, sharing Urmila’s sentiment.

Along the way, Mohuda welcomed many volunteers – through the Australian Volunteers International (AVI), Volunteer Services Overseas UK, Kopion South Korea, and more recently SBI Youth for India Fellowships, among others. Jamila Padhee, who came through AVI, has written a personal essay with her partner Rajendra who she met at Gram Vikas. They met and married at Mohuda. Natasha Litchfield from AVI was thrown into the midst of the relief work after the super-cyclone in 1999. She shares her memories and learning from this time. Eshaan Patheria, who came through the SBI Youth for India Fellowship, took on the challenge of electrifying a remote village in Kalahandi, and writes about his experiences. Each of them were touched in ways that transformed their life and work.

Then there are those who made Mohuda home for short and long durations through their professional association. Suheil Tandon, who first came with his parents, lived and worked to anchor sports development initiatives within Gram Vikas schools. He continues to draw from the lessons he picked up here. Geeta and Ramani, who have been at Mohuda for over two decades, found the ground for learning and experimentation in community centred approaches for self-sufficiency. Geeta shares an intimate conversation with Joe in her essay.

Leadership, recognition and legacy

Critical in Gram Vikas’ journey are its funders. Some of them were associated for a long time, and witnessed the organization, its people, and the work they were able to do with communities. They were equally part of the successes, challenges and setbacks, and engaged with empathy. They were not just

funders, they became friends, and for many of them, the relationship continued long after the formal association ended. Bram van Leeuwen and Lennard Roubos from ICCO Netherlands, and Tom Palakudiyil, who's connect with Gram Vikas was through Christian Aid, share their notes and essays from these multi-dimensional vantage points.

Veena Joshi and VVN Kishore met Joe when they were at TERI, and had many discussions on technology adoption for development. Gram Vikas experimented with and piloted many technology options in renewable energy, relevant to the communities they worked with. Veena's association continued through the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation. Kishore, Veena, with their son Sandeep, were hosts to Joe, during his visits to Delhi, and shared a rare bond.

What probably worked in these relationships, was Joe's openness to feedback, his readiness to experiment, the courage to admit to failures and make course corrections, and to celebrate successes with communities at the centre. This was the only way Joe knew and practiced, and others in Gram Vikas emulated it. Unsurprisingly, all the essayists also write about how their understanding of development contexts and responses were shaped by their visits to Mohuda, to the villages, and conversations and arguments with Joe, peppered with his unique wit, and innate, earthy wisdom.

The same funders also supported Gram Vikas' growth as an organisation. Fons van der Velden (formerly with ICCO) led an evaluation of the organization in 2000, with Deep Joshi, Rukmini Rao and Nafisa D'Souza, and anchored the report aptly titled "Dare to Dream". The report celebrated the work of Gram Vikas and was also scathing in its critique. What followed was an intense forward-looking exercise titled ViMiStraGo (Vision-Mission-Strategy-Goal), led by Josef Imfeld and supported by N.R.Jagananth from SDC. Josef in his essay focuses on organizational learning, Human and Institutional Development processes, and partnerships sustaining Gram Vikas' growth. Jagannath explores the principles of empowerment, participation, and sustainability embedded in Gram Vikas' work and its impact on Odisha's tribal communities.

In his essay "Joe's Contribution to Development Theory and Praxis", towards the end of this compendium, Fons makes a persuasive argument of Joe Madiath as a pioneer of social entrepreneurship *avant la lettre*, before the term became widespread. His essay is a master class in the analysis of contemporary global NGO/INGO sector challenges through the lens of Gram Vikas' innovative community-driven change and social business model.

The concluding essay in this compendium “The Enduring Value of Civil Society Institutions: Lessons from Gram Vikas” is written by Neelima Khetan, a friend of Gram Vikas, who worked for three decades with a similarly embedded organisation, Seva Mandir, in Rajasthan. Neelima has seen Gram Vikas’ work closely since the early 2000s, serving in Gram Vikas Society and Governing Board and more recently leading a reflective exercise on ‘Looking Back - Reading the Present - Learning for the Future’. Neelima links the importance of civil society institutions to democracy, emphasizing that durable civic associations are foundational to effective democratic life and social change.

Joe is often asked why Gram Vikas has chosen to work in the same place for five decades. Neelima, in her essay, stresses the value of continuity, embeddedness, and patience in institution-building, contrasting it with short-term project-based development, and underscores the critical future role of institutions like Gram Vikas in bridging state, market, and community, especially amidst challenges like climate change and digital disruption. The essay celebrates Gram Vikas’ blend of social capital, trust, moral leadership, and enduring commitment as crucial for democratic and sustainable development.

Through all the essays, Joe comes across as a person who is uncompromising and has a clear sense of purpose. When he spoke, people listened, from villages across Odisha, to government officials and politicians, to the audience of corporate leaders at the World Economic Forum. To many, Mohuda became the school where they learnt from development in practice.

Joe, Mohuda and the School of Life

I often tell people, “What I couldn’t learn at IRMA, Gram Vikas taught me”. I learnt that, at the core, everyone is looking to improve their quality of life. In the context of rural communities, such improvement has tangible outcomes like safe water, disaster-resistant housing, schools, and healthcare, what Joe calls “a threshold quality of life”, but also intangible qualities such as critical consciousness, violence-free environment, self-reliance, and self-esteem. True success, I learnt, is measured not by infrastructure alone, but by transformed attitudes and dignity among women and men in communities. I learnt that lasting change happens when people come together as a ‘critical mass’ and work for ‘individual and collective good’. Joe told us often, and we realised through years of work that ‘inclusion’, ‘dignity’ and ‘self-worth’ are essential to spin out

of the 'orbit of poverty' and launch into a spiralling process of sustainable and self-perpetuating development.

"The poor don't need poor solutions - they need the right solutions" he maintained. His disdain was evident when low-cost and cost-effective technology solutions were often pitched in the context of work with economically weaker and less privileged communities. "If it's not good enough for you, why should it be alright for them?", he asked. "Water on tap, and toilets for every household are not a luxury" he argued. It distressed him that poor people had to pay much higher interest for loans (going up to 60% or more) and bore a higher burden of taxes, than their richer counterparts.

Lessons on the deliberate processes of 'inclusion', which made the work that much more complex and slow, was rooted in the belief that the creation of a level playing field was a necessary pre-condition for development processes to take off. I learnt about "intersectionality" and "intersectional approaches to development", and also the very real limits and roadblocks to such work. I learnt the hard way about holding on to these core values. Compromises for short term gains were usually recipes for failure in the long run.

For most who worked in the organisation, Joe's temper is legendary. Everyone knew to avoid his path when he was angry, but only till the storm passed, and then the banter began again. Joe has the unflinching ability of speaking truth to power, without taking the moral high ground, bravely holding up the mirror to show up the flaws. What many of the essays note, and what I have seen first hand is Joe's sense of humour. One of his oft repeated quips being "I graduated from bullshit to real shit", when sharing about Gram Vikas's work in sanitation and water supply stemming from the work on biogas promotion. Joe has the ability to ease a stiff conversation often through self-deprecating humour, he smiles easily and laughs openly. And that perhaps is key to a life dedicated to service, to bring a smile to another's face, to lead life with dignity and hope.

There's a poem "Ithaka" by C.P. Cavafy, which celebrates life as a journey of learning and experience gained on a long, purposeful path, over the destination itself. Much like Joe's odyssey, and what he has given shape to, through Gram Vikas. He has shown how the real treasure lies in encounters, growth, and wisdom collected through purposeful, tireless grassroots work with people and communities, on the journeys towards dignity.

Ithaka: by C.P.Cavafy⁴

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

4 C. P. Cavafy, "The City" from C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Translation Copyright © 1975, 1992 by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Reproduced with permission of Princeton University Press.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

Jayapadma worked at Gram Vikas from 1998 to 2005, and subsequently with other grassroots initiatives, knowledge networks, grant making initiatives, teaching and training, research and writing. In 2022, she co-edited the book "Anchoring Change - Seventy Five Years of Grassroots Interventions that Made a Difference".

THE GHOST WHO CYCLES

A N V A R A L I K H A N
(1 9 6 8)

In Panjim, Goa, there is a doctor who perhaps remembers a tough, thick-set young man whose acquaintance he made early in 1968. In bandages, the result of a recent fall, and running a high temperature, the young had insisted on continuing with his cycling tour of South India. The doctor tried his best to dissuade the stubborn youth but in vain, The sick boy cycled 50 miles the very next day, standing on the pedals since he was unable even to sit on the saddle.

Last year, the young man, Joseph Madiath, did one better - an all-India tour during which he pedalled over a gruelling 12,000 miles in a little over five months.

Joseph, a student of Loyola College and a colleague Mahapatra set out from Madras on March 1 last year. The two cycled through Central India up to Bhopal, and then headed for Calcutta, via Jabalpur. At Cuttack, after some 2,000 miles, Mahapatra was forced by circumstances to drop out. Joseph "felt awful" but was determined to carry on.

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Central India up to Bhopal, and then headed for Calcutta, via Jabalpur. At Cuttack, after some 2,000 miles, Mahapatra was forced by circumstances to drop out. Joseph "felt awful" but was determined to carry on.

Following a roughly counter-clockwise route that took him to almost every part of the country, and Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan, he travelled from Nagaland in the east to Srinagar in the north. (He was told that he was probably the first person to have cycled up the tortuous road from Jammu to Srinagar. Back again through Delhi and the States of Rajasthan and Gujarat, right down the west coast to Kerala; and finally, looping north, to Madras.

As for adventures and experiences, Joseph had many, apart from the "minor injuries" that

laid him up for upto two days at a time. He twice faced tigers, and thrice dacoits. (One of them clouted him in the face, but later apologized. "He probably felt sorry for me when he found I had no money", Joseph wryly observes. "He even offered to pay compensation.") On another occasion, when his trusty steed sank into the Gandhak while he was crossing the river, none dared (despite handsome offers of reward) to dive down and salvage it, for fear of quicksand and under currents.

"The Ghost who Cycles" says, Joseph "had to make a quick change into The Ghost who Dives." Rope around waist, he managed—after two dozen attempts—to drag the cycle out from the murky 20-foot-deep waters. (More interesting perhaps were the two proposals for marriage,

Joseph received during his tour.)

During his cyclation Joseph kept up an incredible pace—doing an average of nearly 100 miles every day, sometimes touching up to 60 kilometres per hour. (A friendly Sikh lorry driver clocked him in Assam.)

He spent very little money—less than Rs. 1,000—during the five months.

One of the main problems he had was finding accommodation for the night. Apart from a few addresses of friends he had with him, Joseph had no assurances of shelter. Although some Good Samaritans sometimes did invite him home (even if it was to sleep in the couch), he found that he often had to sleep under the sky, or in a police station, or—as on one occasion—even on a grave.

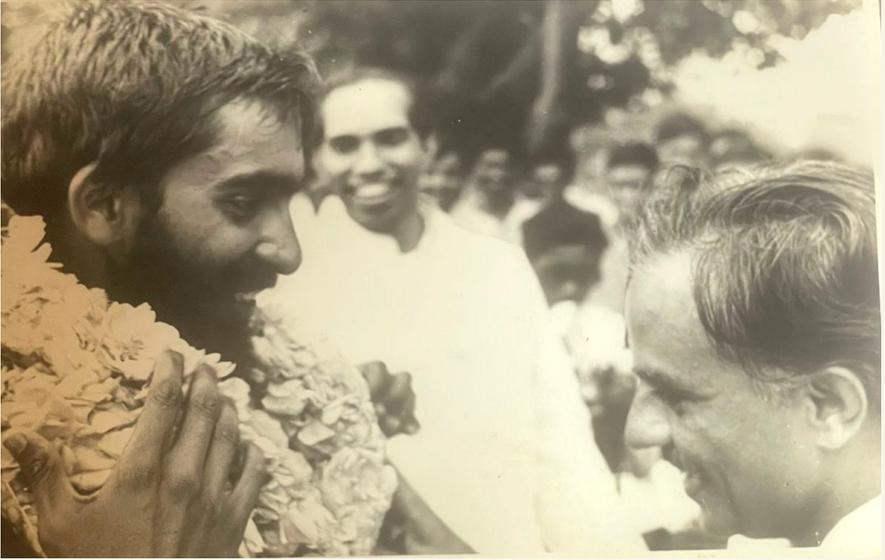
"Which was the toughest part of the trip?" Not the steep, car-screeving mountain roads of Nepal, but the run through Rajasthan—where the terrifying heat, the strong winds and shortage of water and food made Joseph doubt whether he could come out of the whole thing alive.

Joseph now has two ambitions: another cycle tour—this time of the whole of South-East Asia—after he completes his studies for a B.A. degree and to climb Mount Everest. The second is no idle dream. Joseph has already done a course at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute and intends to take up a special one this year.

ANVAR ALIKHAN

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE BY ANVAR ALI KHAN (1968) - FROM GRAM VIKAS ARCHIVES

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JOE ON HIS RETURN FROM THE CYCLING EXPEDITION

He spent very little money, less than Rs. 1,000-during the five months. One of the main problems he had was finding accommodation for the night. Apart from a few addresses of friends he had with him, Joseph had no assurances of shelter. Although some good samaritans sometimes did invite him home (even if it was to sleep in the cowshed), he found that he often had to sleep under the sky or in a police station, or - as on one occasion - even on a grave.

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Anvar Ali Khan was fellow student and friend of Joe.

DO NOT GIVE IN, DO NOT GIVE UP

J E A N N E D E V O S



I am Jeanne Devos, animator of the National Domestic Workers Movement, born in Belgium but living in India since 1965, and my heart has been shaped by the journeys we undertook with young people determined to serve. The 1970s were my formative years with the Young Students Movement for Development (YSMD), where youthful conviction met difficult realities and kept us moving forward no matter how rough the road felt. Joe Madiath was one of those strong, committed students—quietly stubborn, fiercely caring, and utterly determined to bring change where it mattered most.

Joe's path took him first to the Bangladesh refugee camps, where immediacy, dignity, and survival were daily lessons; then to Ayandur village after the fire accident, where rebuilding meant standing beside people as they rebuilt themselves; and later, after the Orissa cyclone, he and I left for the Pattamundi side to start relief efforts shoulder to shoulder. Those days and nights, with mud on our feet and salt in the wind, carried the first stirrings of what would later become Gram Vikas—a seed sown by urgency and watered by shared resolve. In time, Anthya, Varghese, and Augustin joined, adding strength, skills, and spirit to a growing circle of trust and

service. A very young Nata worked with them too—eager, fearless, and learning fast in the only school that mattered then: the field.

It was a fascinating time, full of risk, failure, and grace. The group's appetite for risk was astonishing; we rode over rivers on motorcycles, balanced on a single tree trunk laid down as a makeshift bridge. Joe would grin and say, "Close your eyes, nothing will happen," and somehow faith would hold while engines coughed and water hissed beneath. On late returns from distant villages, the jackals' howling stitched the darkness together, and the riverbanks became our compass. People would wait for Joe on the sandbars and call out "Sardardaaarjee," their affectionate hail for the young man with a towel tied around his head, who showed up when it mattered and stayed after others left.

Commitment held the centre—even when resources frayed. Funding agencies often didn't take the group seriously; they saw youth before they saw the work, and they mistook persistence for naïveté. Many withdrew after initial promises, and money was a real, stubborn problem. But families stepped in with a love that still humbles me: wedding gifts went to Orissa instead of bridal trunks, and letters home became appeals that were answered with sacrifice and solidarity. Our families in Belgium bore a real pain to make the work possible, and that bond still lives today—in every brick laid, every well deepened, every village meeting where women's voices rise a little louder.

The group stayed on, with love anchoring the labour. Joe and Anthya married, and soon Kuttan's laughter threaded through our field schedules and planning meetings. Anthya began working closely with women, and with her came a steady, patient widening of the work—listening circles, savings, health, and the slow, crucial shift from crisis response to community-led change. After some years, the group moved to Berhampur, and what had been a band of young risk-takers matured into a rooted institution. That is how the work grew into Gram Vikas: from rivers crossed on a felled tree to bridges built in the lives of people—sturdy, communal, and carried by the hands that first learned to hold fast to one another when nothing else was certain.

I have so much to say about Gram Vikas, because it has been a wellspring of inspiration from the very beginning and continues to be a living model even today. From the start, our strength lay in responding to what was visible and possible in the moment—never abstract, always grounded in the life of the village. Local people were involved from day one, and that made the work theirs as much as ours, with ownership that shaped every decision and every next step.

What Gram Vikas taught me is that a process approach truly delivers—patient, iterative, and faithful to context. The commitment of the leaders remains alive; they form a strong circle that challenges, supports, and, most of all, loves one another. Joe’s genius has always been to see the whole and the next small step at the same time, which made us bold without becoming reckless. The great change came by moving step by step, doing what was possible now, and trusting the compounding of small certainties.

What stands out for me is simple and profound: total inclusion of everyone; community-based working in spirit and structure; and the freshness and hope that the project constantly renews. These are strengths that breathe—lived daily, not just stated in plans. The challenge is to keep this spirit alive as popularity grows, to protect the heart as the circle widens. Another challenge is handling expansion and the institutional dimension without losing the intimacy of participation and the humility of service.

My most memorable moments were with people—the instant when new life, hope, and future became visible in a face, a meeting, a first tap of clean water. Evenings under the stars in front of “Joe’s House,” with jackals calling in the distance, felt like the world itself was listening to the villages teach us how to walk. The typical things were our strength and independence as a group: we held our ground, we embraced hardship, and we laughed often.

I remember the cyclone, when villages were unreachable and a team of photographers from Germany insisted on coming despite warnings. “Let them come and experience,” Joe said, and they did—hours through slashing mud, cameras caked and spirits tested. They finished their films in Pattamundi and cancelled the rest of their India plans; sometimes the road itself is the story. Malaria was already playing havoc then. I was once taken to Cuttack with malaria, nowhere to go, and ended up in a circus waiting for a Madras train delayed by six hours—under fever, the elephants and lions loomed larger, and the night felt stranger. Joe was admitted to a hospital in Madras with malaria, jaundice, and typhoid; it felt like this life demanded everything, and we kept offering what we had.

When the Orissa group passed through Madras, anything could happen. We lived in an open house that always welcomed traveling teams. One morning we cooked a full spread for a special birthday, stocked the fridge, and went to the students’ office. By evening, not a crumb remained—“The group from Orissa

had passed.” We laughed, we scolded, and then we cooked again. That was us: hungry, hurried, giving, and somehow always arriving on time where it mattered.



JOE, JEANNE DEVOS AND OTHER VOLUNTEERS AT DAMARPUR, ORISSA

What impact has Gram Vikas left on me personally and professionally? It has deepened my faith that when we work together and believe change is possible, it comes—quietly at first, then unmistakably. It has given profound meaning to commitment and the community approach, showing me patience is not delay but devotion. Professionally, Gram Vikas makes me say, without hesitation, “It is possible.” It is a joy and a source of hope. Being part of Gram Vikas gives life its meaning for me. It strengthens my resolve: do not give in, do not give up, do not grow tired. It is, quite simply, great.

Sr. Jeanne Devos came to India from Belgium in 1965. She founded the Young Students Movement in 1966 to link students to the less privileged. She went on to establish the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM) in 1985, to empower one of the most marginalized groups—domestic workers. She focused on organizing these workers, supporting them in their fight for their dignity and rights. The movement has spread across several states, advocating for legal protections and social recognition.

JOE MADIATH AND THE EARLY YEARS IN ORISSA

A N T H Y A M A D I A T H

Joe is from a small village in Kottayam district of Kerala. The family owned a rubber estate. The eldest of five children, Joe left home at an early age to attend a school in Kolkata following which he joined Loyola College in Madras (now Chennai) from which he graduated in English Literature against many odds.

As President of the student union of Loyola College, and simultaneously of Madras University Students Senate, Joe distinguished himself. He is remembered for a historic strike he organized of Loyola's hostel workers; an act which not only earned him the wrath of the management but also saw him thrown out of the hostel. This was not his only distinction. While still at Loyola, he journeyed solo on a bicycle across India, Sri Lanka and Nepal (ask him for stories of this trip; he has many to tell).

During Joe's time in Loyola College, the Bangladesh war of independence happened. True to his socially charged and restless soul, Joe led a

group of student volunteers from Loyola College and Madras University to help in immediate relief operations.

Not much later, coastal Orissa was struck by one of its deadliest cyclones and tidal waves. Once again Joe put together a band of student volunteers from Loyola College to undertake relief work in Pattamundi *tahsil* of Cuttack district, an area that was particularly ravaged by the cyclone. In addition to the loss of many lives, fisherfolk and other disadvantaged communities had lost everything they owned- houses, boats, nets. Communication, in all forms, were another major causality. The road connecting Pattamundi to the hinterland was completely washed away making the transportation of relief material a daily challenge.

During this phase of engagement, Joe took a life-changing decision. He decided to return to Pattamundi after completing his graduation to work long-term to rebuild and develop an area that was chronically prone to cyclones. True to his word, Joe returned to Orissa with a small team of young idealists like himself committed to helping coastal folk in far-flung villages of Pattamundi *tashil* rebuild their lives.

I first met Joe in the summer of 1972 of all places in a hospital in Madras where he was being treated for a particularly severe bout of malaria. Jeanne Devos, our common mentor, deputed me to visit him and vouch if he was fit for discharge. He was a sight for sore eyes –long hair wrapped in a gamcha (a cotton towel popular in Orissa), eyes sunk-in and emaciated. He said he had to return to Orissa immediately as he had important work to attend to. Try as I did, I could not convince him to stay on in the hospital to complete his treatment. He discharged himself against medical advice and returned to Orissa.

The next time I met Joe was in Orissa. Both Joe and I were independently associated with an organization called YSM (Young Students Movement) that was headquartered in Madras. On the invitation of the President of the YSM, I accompanied her on a short visit to Joe and his group in Orissa in the summer of the year 1972.

Being a city girl, I was taken aback by many things: the remoteness of Damarpur, the village where the group was based, the humbleness of their dwelling and living conditions and the passion that Joe and his co-workers (Murugesan, Scaria, Raymond and a few others whose names I no longer recall) displayed as they explained to us the work they were doing. I was invited to join the group

on completion of my nursing studies. Everyone in the group made a strong case for adding a nurse to the team.

The seventies was a special time. Many young people of that time were seriously questioning structural inequality that was so glaring in India, were strongly attracted to Marxism, were acolytes of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher whose work revolutionized global thought on education, and were inclined to actively participate in building a better, fairer world. We were privileged to be associated with out-of-the-ordinary, selfless and truly inspiring women and men such as Jeanne Devos, Fathers Cyriac, John, Volken, Sebastian Kappen and many other such luminaries. I was a creature of those times, as was Joe and all those who worked with and supported him. Little wonder that I went to work with Joe and his team in Damarpur soon after I graduated as a nurse.

But back to Joe, to that period and the work that was done. The group used multiple strategies to help the affected rebuild their lives. 'Food for Work' from Christian Charities such as Caritas India and Christian Relief Services (CRS) was used to rebuild houses, village roads and schools. Fisherfolk who were mostly from the Scheduled Caste were supported to claim their right to relief measures which otherwise were siphoned off by village elites and corrupt local officials. Access to basic health care through medical camps was another necessary intervention.

The work we did was hard and physically demanding. We lived in a godown that stored the bulgur (broken wheat) we used in the 'Food for Work' intervention. Money was in short supply. We depended on the largesse of the people we served for vegetables and sometimes fish that could not be sold. Nobody in the team drew a salary. The small kitty we had was common and managed by one of the team members. Jeanne Devos, a committed well-wisher, got her family to give us the equivalent of Rs.150 per month for our personal survival. None of us resented our shared poverty that was reflected in our very basic living conditions, our simple meals, worn out clothes and physical exhaustion at the end of each day. What however started to worry us was the growing opposition to our work from local elites led by a small-time local journalist. We were being branded as Christian Missionaries and Communists. We were constantly threatened with physical violence, and an attempt was even made to set fire to the godown in which we stayed.

Despite these travails, Joe with the backing of his team, refused to give in. We carried on for a few more years until we reckoned that the political harassment

was counterproductive. It was a sad day for ‘Sardar’ Joe (as he came to be called by the local people because of his signature gamcha turban) and the team when we left Damarpur village, bag and baggage.

In a manner of speaking, we had “failed” and we felt beaten. Joe, the indefatigable, none the less, lost no time in beginning to recce where the next chapter should begin.

In hindsight, speaking for myself, at a personal level, the exposure to life in a remote village, to living hand to mouth and adjusting to shared and communal living (every important decision was taken as a group) shaped the rest of my life.

I believe that the biggest lesson that Joe perhaps took from this phase of his life (work equals life, to Joe, in my understanding) is the importance of running neutral programmes on a large scale that would keep the powers that be (the State, local authorities) happy and out of his hair.

This phase of work was carried out under the banner of Young Students Movement for Development (YSMD), registered in Madras under the Societies Registration Act. YSMD was an offshoot of Young Students Movement the original springboard that catapulted us into a world of disadvantaged and impoverished communities in faraway Orissa and the dynamics of trying to ‘do good’ in a small but complex part of India.

Anthya Madiath, a trained nurse, was part of the founding team of Gram Vikas. She helped build grassroots health and social initiatives, contributing significantly to awakening community self-reliance and dignity. From the mid 90s, Anthya continued her engagement in rural development and social empowerment, working independently as a consultant and advisor with various NGOs. Her work consistently emphasizes health, education, community organization, and sustainable development strategies that foster inclusive social change.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

R A J E S H T A N D O N

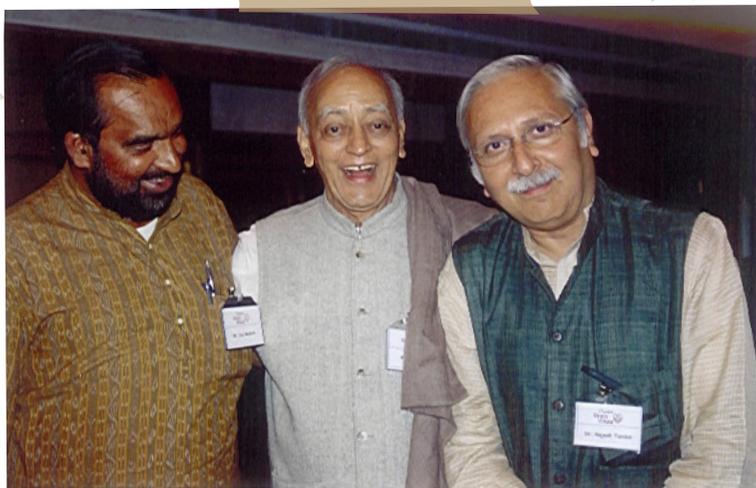


I bumped into a fellow in a rasogolla shop outside Xavier Institute of Social Service in Ranchi towards the middle of March 1981, and I offered him rasogollas. That helped in our future conversation. Joe invited me to visit Mohuda, near Berhampur in Orissa. And in 1983-84, we started working on an exercise called Participatory Evaluation of Gram Vikas.

That exercise led to the emergence of an office of the organization on Mohuda campus and separation of home which used to serve multi-purpose. After a while, Joe started attending PRIA's meetings, and in one exercise in February 1986, he made a wonderful comment. He said, PRIA is like a pickle. It enhances the taste and flavour of *bhata*, rice, which organizations like Gram Vikas produce, implying that it adds value to their work at the grassroots. A little later, I joined Gram Vikas' board and served for many years in different capacities.

The interesting debate in Gram Vikas was depth of work in a few villages

versus breadth of outreach across, and the biogas program in late 1980s began to create the opportunity of state-wide expansion of the very unique programme. Joe made a very telling point by saying that while small is beautiful, large can also be impactful. I recall fondly celebrating Joe's birthday on the stone rock on Mohuda campus on the night of December 3, 1984. When we got up in the morning, we heard about the Bhopal gas disaster. I also recall being in Gram Vikas field area on the morning of October 31, 1984, when late Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi was assassinated. These were not mere coincidences. These were occasions of friendship, to be together in moments of national emergencies and crisis.



(L TO R) JOE, L.C.JAIN AND RAJESH TANDON AT GRAM VIKAS 25 YEARS CELEBRATIONS (2004)

I have seen the pioneering work of Gram Vikas under Joe's leadership, but most importantly I have seen his style of commenting on the work of Gram Vikas as well as of others with a punchline. So in one of our board meetings that Joe had begun to serve, along with colleagues like Sheela Patel, the phrase Joe-Sheela (spirited) emerged as a metaphor for how governing boards of civil society organizations function.

There are many stories one can say about my relationship with Joe, PRIA, and Gram Vikas, as well as friendships across our families over the last 44 years. But

a person is known also by the company he keeps, and Joe's friends are many around the world. I am hoping that he might retire after turning 75 on December 3 this year, but then he is going to turn around and ask me, when am I going to retire? So I better not ask that question.

Stay well Joe, we can go up to 100. Inshallah!

Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President of PRIA, is an internationally acclaimed leader in participatory research and development. He is also Co-Chair of UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. His pioneering work has advanced grassroots empowerment, adult education, and community-based approaches to social transformation in India and globally. He was a member of Gram Vikas Society from 1984 to 2015.

A LIFE DEVOTED TO DIGNITY AND DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

A N A N T M A H A P A T R A

I met Joe Madiath in the late '80s when he used to come often to the Travel Wings office in Janpath, Bhubaneswar, as he seemed to be travelling frequently for Gram Vikas not only to different parts of India but also abroad. Though he was mostly in contact with my son Asim for his travel transactions, I used to meet him occasionally and wondered at what took a non-government organisation, committed to development of people in remote villages, mostly tribal areas, to so many different places? Joe came to meet me one day at home and suggested that I visit Gram Vikas to see for myself. He told me about the work of the organisation and invited me to join the Governing Body of Gram Vikas in the mid 90s.

I recollect attending my first meeting at Mohuda village near Berhampur in Ganjam District and was amazed at the institution he had been able to build, from what had essentially started with him and four friends from Kerala coming to Orissa as volunteers to Kendrapada in Cuttack District for relief and rehabilitation work in cyclone affected areas in 1971.

History was written with the formation of Gram Vikas as a registered Society on 22nd January 1979, which soon set to work on health, hygiene,

safe drinking water and education of boys and girls with adivasi and other marginalised communities across Orissa. Through over four decades that I have been associated with Gram Vikas, I have seen it grow from strength to strength, drawing many young people to work with rural communities. The work is not easy, and the commitment I have seen is remarkable, a culture that was fostered under Joe's leadership, which sustains till today. It has given me immense pride to stand by the organisation as its work was recognized by several organisations at the state, national and international level.

Joe has nurtured an institution with devotion and dedication, one that has stood the test of time, and one which today serves as an inspiration for many to emulate in eradicating inadequacies in society and make the world a better place.

God Bless Joe, and God Bless Gram Vikas.



(L TO R) ANANTA MAHAPATRA, D.THANKAPPAN, JOE MADIATH DURING GRAM VIKAS DAY CELEBRATIONS IN MOHUDA IN 2014

Ananta Mahapatra is a renowned theatre and film personality and cultural ambassador from Odisha, celebrated as the Renaissance Man of Odia Theatre. He has written, directed, and acted in over 100 plays and is the founder of the Utkal Rangmancha Trust, contributing significantly to Odisha's performing arts. He has been a member of Gram Vikas Society since 1998.

FIVE DECADES OF VIM AND VIGOUR

M E E N A G U P T A ,
I A S (R E T D .)

When Joe first came to Mohuda, in Berhampur sub division, of the (then) district of Ganjam, I had already departed from my very first posting in Odisha (then Orissa), as Sub-Collector, Berhampur. I had also left Orissa for a government of India posting in Delhi. So it was not until several years later that I heard of Joe and Anthya, who had made their home in Mohuda and were attempting to improve the lives of the rural population in and around the area.

When I did get to see Joe's work, the focus was on biogas plants, at that time a fairly novel concept. The benefit to the people was not only from the gas and resultant lighting up of their homes, but also from learning the basics of masonry, which could become a source of future livelihood. It was sometime later that Joe took up the most important activity of Gram Vikas, i.e. providing water to every household for their daily needs in their houses - an activity so modern in concept that decades later, the government of India in its programme to provide drinking water to the people adopted almost all the features of Joe's initiative.

Gram Vikas's concept, however, remained unique in many ways: the whole village had to agree to provide water to all the village households for their drinking, bathing and cleaning needs; they had to identify the perennial source from which water could be drawn, and they had to create a fund for future needs. This self-dependence was a unique contribution, as was the willingness to include every single household in the village in the effort. Gram Vikas's efforts have spread to many other fields, from setting up schools to protecting migrant labour, but it remains a story of inspiration and determination and success.

It is a wonderful thing that even 50 years later Gram Vikas remains an organisation with as much vim and vigour as it possessed originally. My best wishes to Joe on his 75th birthday. Long may he and Gram Vikas continue to bring hope and succour to people in need.



(L TO R) D.THANKAPPAN, MEENA GUPTA, NAMRATA CHADHA, ANUP MAHAPTRA AT GRAM VIKAS' 40TH FOUNDATION DAY CELEBRATION (2019)

Meena Gupta is a retired 1971 batch IAS officer of the Odisha cadre who served as Secretary in both the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India. She played a key role in legislating the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and has led pioneering reforms in health, child labour, and policy on tribal and environmental issues. She has been a member of Gram Vikas Society since 2016.

GRAM VIKAS AND ITS FOUNDER, JOE: MEMORIES THAT CANNOT BE FORGOTTEN

U R M I L A S E N A P A T I

Speaking and listening about Gram Vikas's history at many formal gatherings is always a pleasure. Talking about the great success story fills one with assurance. However, the immense effort to bring development to the neglected, tribal, dalit, and other backward communities living away from the mainstream in remote areas required dedication and sacrifice.

Only the field staff of Gram Vikas from those early days can truly express how hard it was to move forward amidst service and sacrifice. Today, looking back, it seems incredible how, without vehicles, roads, lights, or networks, Gram Vikas's workers managed to do so much in such remote places.

Those who took up this hard challenge were few, but their efforts were remarkable. Joe, Anthya, Nata Bhai, Verghese Babu, and Sojan Babu—these names are etched in the organization's history. Joe and Anthya came from far-off Kerala and Tamil Nadu to Odisha in the 1970s. Enduring many difficulties, Joe overcame all the hardships and, after 50 years, has led

the organization to great heights. Many who started the journey are no longer with us, but countless others, drawing on their own experiences, undertook creative development work in various corners, and some have left us forever.

Recollections come flooding in, like those from 1986: our small family, coming together during every festival, organizing cultural nights in Mohuda, sharing meals, and returning the next day to different corners for work. These were among our happiest times. I remember when I visited a remote tribal village with fellow colleagues. Crossing hills and valleys, the last stretch into the village felt endless because, except for small mud houses, nothing was there—no electricity, no drinking water, and no food for us.



(L TO R) JOE MADIATH, URMILA SENAPATI AND AJAY SATPATHY AT GRAM VIKAS, MOHUDA
(2001)

The villagers survived on wild roots, stream water, and wherever they could find to sleep at night. Some even wandered the village drunk — liquor was everywhere. Five days I spent there, drinking only water, eating whatever little was available.

Nata Bhai, who had gone earlier to the village, later rushed to Berhampur following a call from Gram Vikas, despite almost no transportation facilities. Anthya and other colleagues worked hard, through many meetings with the planning team in Mohuda and Gopalpur and often visiting villages, supporting

and guiding field teams. For me, thirty years passed like a flash, sometimes filled with ups and downs, but always with a commitment to continue.

Even after stepping away from formal duties, I still maintain a relationship with the people and will continue to do so in the future. The main attraction of working in such places was the simple and trusting nature of the tribal people. They listened attentively, acted honestly, and Gram Vikas's efforts organized unorganized tribal populations, ran anti-liquor movements, reclaimed bonded lands from moneylenders, and started addressing issues of education, health, livelihoods, social forestry, agriculture, and more.

From here, community-driven development models spread to Kankia, Thuamul Rampur, Rudhapadar, Tumudibandha, and other tribal-dominated areas. With the successful implementation of these programmes, the Odisha Government also discussed with and learnt from, Joe and provided financial support to carry these models across the districts. Later, Gram Vikas's potable water program benefited over a hundred thousand families in 15 districts, earning widespread acclaim for quality implementation.

Gram Vikas has received several national and international awards for its work. The key to these successes is leadership—leadership that, even after fifty years, remains dynamic. This leader never just spoke of challenges; he turned difficulties into opportunities and worked hands-on. Today, many government programmes echo what Gram Vikas began decades ago, and some models have been included as government policies. For that, the credit goes to Joe. Even now, he spends time visiting villages, understanding issues, guiding field staff, and suggesting solutions. He continues to value fieldwork, relationships, and the well-being of tribal families above all else.

Things have changed today. In 1986, bringing children to balwadis, running residential schools, ensuring access to education, and securing safe drinking water were huge challenges. Now, all of Gram Vikas's residential schools are producing excellent results, with students passing out with distinction and going on to good colleges. Those who once wandered the villages are today's teachers and students, serving in government and private offices. This is the fulfillment of our dreams. Today, I feel a deep sense of satisfaction.

On the occasion of Joe's 75th birthday, the entire Gram Vikas family offers its deepest respect and prayers to God for his long, healthy life.

Urmila Senapati served at Gram Vikas for over three decades. She started as field staff and grew in the organisation to retire as Senior Manager in 2019. She played a key role in the integrated tribal development programme of Gram Vikas, and worked closely with the health, education and women's empowerment programmes. She has been instrumental in strengthening communities and driving sustainable development in remote areas. She currently works on her farm, and is also an advisor to the residential schools of Gram Vikas.

A LETTER TO JOE, THE COLLABORATOR AND INFLUENCER



V E E N A J O S H I

I am glad that I get to write about my association with Joe on his 75th Birthday because he gave a scare, a couple of years ago, about quitting life. Your 75th is special, Joe.

My first memory of Joe is from a workshop on Biogas is his quip - "We work, you shop". I was at TERI then and we had built five plus biogas plants while Gram Vikas (GV) was well into a few thousands. We were measuring and optimizing the design whereas GV was into scale... well before scale became a norm.

My first visit to Mohuda was many new experiences in rural Orissa (it had not yet been renamed Odisha). Mohuda then was indeed a remote place. I was there to evaluate the biogas maintenance system of GV funded by CAPART. What impressed me most during that visit was Joe's hospitality and the clean toilets on

the campus. No wonder Joe introduced himself as the chief *bawarchi* (chef) of GV to my unsuspecting SDC team leading to confusion and a big laugh. Talk of icebreakers - Joe, you are the master of that art.

Over the years, our home in an LIG DDA flat in Delhi had many visits from Joe and our son, Sandeep, looked forward to meeting him. On one occasion I was reminded that he is the GV chief executive and it is ok if he arrives late for dinner. Even today Sandeep recounts Joe's unique influence on him in not hesitating to try new approaches to solve problems. Dare to question and resolve. Thank you Joe for that.

At SDC, we were looking for an organization to construct Vertical Shaft Brick Kilns (VSBK) and approached GV, as GV was into constructing houses and houses needed bricks. Open to new technologies and new ways of doing, GV was part of a diverse partner network. Many a planning and learning workshops happened in Mohuda. Joe, you provided a place to experiment and to learn. Professionals got an opportunity to learn from social organizations and a new term was coined - "Techno-social integration".



(L TO R) U.S. MISHRA, JOE MADIATH AND VEENA JOSHI DURING A VISIT TO THE VSBK (2002)

The 1999 super cyclone changed my perspectives in many ways. Tasked with developing a relief and rehabilitation programme for SDC my first stop was Mohuda.... to learn from you on how to approach rehabilitation. You were very generous with your time and also with dos and don'ts.

SDC found it meaningful to establish a partnership with GV under your leadership. Many of my colleagues admired in disbelief what they saw in GV's work. I recollect one particular meeting in a tribal village. The meeting ran well into midnight till the village decided to take collective oath in front of a senior police official to make the village alcohol free. The patience and the

perseverance to arrive at such decisions was uncommon. Paths less tried...a never give up attitude.

When Joe asked me to join the GV board, I couldn't say no. I wasn't sure what I could contribute. Joe, you asked us to make field trips. There were many with Biren, Liby and other GV team members. Each trip revealed the rich legacy of your leadership rooted in reality and aiming to achieve GV's vision. A big thank you for this learning experience.

Once again wishing you a glorious 75th birthday and a fulfilling life ahead.

Dr. Veena Joshi is an expert in rural energy, renewable energy and environment. Veena spent more than 30 years of her career with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and TERI, where she developed, managed and guided programmes in the energy sector. She has been on the technical and research Advisory Groups for the UNDP, Shell Foundation, World Bank and Prayas Energy Group. She has been a member of Gram Vikas Society since 2019.

JOE, A FRIEND AND CO- TRAVELLER



V V N K I S H O R E

I met Joe for the first time when he came to our home in Delhi, with Veena. After that first visit, he kept coming to our place often, whenever he visited Delhi. On every visit, he would regale us with his jokes, stories and experiences.

Eventually I started working with Joe, and my colleagues Sanjay Mande and Lal Babu started visiting Gram Vikas to set up a biomass gasifier at the Gram Vikas residential school for tribal children in Kankia, Odisha. Food was prepared each day at the school for 300 children, and the traditional wood hearths consumed 300–400 kg of fuel daily and produced heavy smoke. In 1999, TERI installed an updraft gasifier-based oven that reduced fuelwood use to under 100 kg per day, eliminated smoke, and cut cooking time by half. The oven, working on natural draft or a small blower, made cooking faster, cleaner, and far more efficient. The experiment was a great learning experience for all of us.

Joe comes out as a natural leader, organizer and doer. He is younger to me, so I think I can bless him on the occasion of his 75th birthday. This is also the 50th anniversary of Joe's coming to Mohuda, from where the seeds of Gram Vikas were sown. I congratulate everyone who has worked with Gram Vikas, for their contributions and the remarkable work with rural communities. There are so few who are actually working on problems of people, and trying to solve them.

All the best for your endeavours, Joe and Gram Vikas.

Prof. Dr. V. V. N. Kishore, a leading renewable energy expert, has served at TERI and TERI University and as a visiting fellow at Harvard and the UK Open University. His work covers solar, biomass, and biogas technologies, with notable contributions through research, publications, patents, and academic program development.

MILESTONES OF GOLD AND PILLARS OF COMMITMENT, COURAGE AND CREATIVITY

B R A M V A N L E E U W E N



Musings of a “donor boy” about “Joe Vikas”

Jaya’s invitation to share the fondest memories of Gram Vikas and Joe felt as a privilege initially only. When sitting back to write down a few fine memories, this privilege gradually turned into a complicated challenge. Where to start? How to select? Too many warm memories popped up. Fortunately, a clear deadline was given and not responding was not an option.

My acquaintance with Joe and Gram Vikas goes back to the 80’s, when ICCO Netherlands started supporting Gram Vikas’ biogas programme. As the ICCO representative I visited the organisation several times. In my first travel report I wrote enthusiastically about the close, intensive, multi-faceted cooperation of Gram Vikas workers with tribal communities in Kerandimal Hills, the ‘forest campus’ in Mohuda and the seemingly unstoppable range of innovative ideas for new pilot projects.

ICCO has cooperated with Gram Vikas over nearly 25 years. Right from the beginning it was obvious that neither Gram Vikas nor its founder-director were

a “thirteen in a dozen” in the NGO world. My reflections will illustrate that the view at that time was very correct and will argue that the role of 50 year old Gram Vikas today is probably even more important.

Tribal communities are leading: a few lines about the formative years

The journey of Gram Vikas started in 1976 when Joe and some friends arrived in Mohuda to take up village development work. While studying at Madras University they decided to go to West Bengal in 1971 to assist in relief camps established for refugees from Bangladesh. Soon after a cyclone in Odisha brought some of them to work on relief activities there. Several ex-students stayed back in the region and involved themselves in development activities. In 1976 they received the invitation to come to Ganjam District to start community development work in tribal villages. They accepted the offer, eagerly motivated to apply lessons learned during the past few years.

Right from their arrival Joe, a visionary even then, understood that in order to be able to work effectively, they should operate through an organisation and from a base very close to the communities where they wanted to work. Given his background - at young age he had already organised workers, gone on an adventurous ‘cycle-yatra’ after high school and started a students’ union in his university - Joe did not waste time: a suitable place in Mohuda was found soon to serve as operational base and initial organisational rules & regulations were agreed upon among the pioneers.

As newcomers the pioneers were aware of their limited knowledge of, and insights in the dynamics of the local tribal communities. Being convinced of the strength, wisdom and potential of the tribal people, initial project activities were taken in close cooperation with the people in the communities. Step by step new initiatives were taken based upon previous experiences. Very soon results of this solid, community based approach became evident and convinced friends from within and from outside India. Diplomatic and organisational talents of the founder Joe, helped to generate financial support and made it possible for the new organisation Gram Vikas to grow smoothly and fast.

Gram Vikas

Although Gram Vikas succeeded in generating substantial support already during its first decade, the organisation has never compromised its close cooperation with the local communities and the open learning attitude. Till today policies and strategies are rooted in the villages where Gram Vikas is working (and not in the offices of donor agencies and / or guidelines of consultants and outside development experts).

I believe this culture is the heart and soul of Gram Vikas and its founder. Let me underline this important observation through a few illustrations.

- Gram Vikas staff represent a prestigious and powerful NGO. However, when one visits the residential schools or villages, staff operate low profile, easily accessible for village people or students. An informal, “rural” culture seems to be one of the specific characteristics of Gram Vikas.
- Gram Vikas has formulated a few simple and highly pertinent operational principles: (1) All or none; (2) share costs; (3) take responsibility; (4) participation of all; (5) inbuilt financial sustainability. These principles are leading. An illustration of how these principles are leading Gram Vikas’ policies is the courageous decision in the 90’s to replace the financially successful Biogas programme by the rather experimental Water and Sanitation programme; evaluation had shown that the former programme did “not include all”, while the new programme could do so (include all, rich and poor, men and women, low and high caste) .
- While working with local communities Gram Vikas concluded that lack of access to quality education in the poor tribal regions of Odisha causes a tremendous obstacle to overcome poverty and dominance from outside and a hindrance to gain self-confidence. In the course of the years the organisation has filled this gap to some extent by establishing residential schools. Not ordinary residential schools. The Gram Vikas schools are perfectly in balance with the local culture and economy and create opportunities for thousands of so called underprivileged boys and girls to access excellent education. When visiting the schools I am always impressed and moved to witness friendship, respect for tradition and local culture, openness towards modern cultural expressions, drive to achieve high level standards in regular subjects, enthusiasm to stimulate students to discover their talents in technique, arts and science.

Joe and Gram Vikas

No doubt the leadership of Joe is an important part of the successful journey of Gram Vikas.

When meeting Joe he likes to give the impression of being a witty person who takes life easily, works in a relaxed manner, likes to crack jokes, has no hurry, etc. However, in his case it is not “what you see is what you get”. Under the skin of the first impression, however, one will meet a different person. Let me name a few aspects of this rare personality: a) a strong drive to fight poverty in rural Odisha (especially searching for ways and means to facilitate promising initiatives leading to self-reliance of tribal communities), b) big ambition to fight injustice (especially opportunities to promote the position of girls and women), c) great love for villagers (especially searching for possibilities for children to discover and develop their talents). These qualities made him work hard and take risks, while generally preferring a low profile presence at official occasions.

Joe, often acting as the spokesman and representative of Gram Vikas, is gifted with a talent of speaking with mild irony in get-togethers of the NGO family in India and when meeting friends and supporters. While doing so, he creates opportunities to explain and promote Gram Vikas’ way of working. For example, once I asked about his opinion regarding the quality of NGO movement in India. He qualified a number of NGOs as “astroturf NGOs” . He explained that quite a few NGOs are inclined to follow donor hypes and wisdoms and therefore have not much impact; listening and learning from local people is, as Joe emphasized, a necessary condition for being able to play a relevant role in the communities one claims to support.

Usually preferring a modest role in network meetings and never boasting about Gram Vikas’ achievements, Joe is not afraid to take a stand if he feels necessary. For example, when Gram Vikas was criticized by friends about its cooperation with government and big companies in and outside India, he argued strongly in favour of Corporate Social Responsibility, explaining to prefer Indian resources rather than uncertain foreign resources. Another example: when ICCO presented its new approach of shifting decision making power from Dutch ICCO to councils in Southern Countries several partners expressed their doubts, while Joe argued in favour of this new direction as policies and strategies should always be context specific.

His self-confidence and leadership qualities have played a major role in creating the Gram Vikas organisation as a professional and unique development organisation reaching out to over a 1000 villages and known for its commitment, courage and creativity - in the past, today and certainly in the future as well.

I am sure that Gram Vikas has not only inspired and empowered numerous people in Odisha to overcome poverty and grow in self-confidence, but also many other civil society organisations across the country as well as friends, well-wishers, representatives of agencies, politicians, business persons, participants of World Economic Forum, etc. Perhaps today the role of civil society organisation Gram Vikas has become even more important. Across the globe one can observe the shrinking space for civil society. Therefore the voice from citizens to check and guide governments, politicians, leaders of big companies seems to get less weight in decision-making affecting the life of the people, directly or indirectly. Allow me to share one of my favourite and motivating quotes, taken from Arundhati Roy in Azadi. Civil society organizations and networks have “Work to do. And a world to win”, (p.202, Azadi, 2020). Hopefully Gram Vikas will continue as a steadfast, dedicated and professional civil society actor.



**BRAM VAN LEEUWEN WITH JOE MADIATH DURING HIS VISIT TO GRAM VIKAS IN 2024.
HE CAME THIS TIME WITH HIS GRAND DAUGHTER ANNA PARI**

Joe Vikas : a concluding note

My relationship with Joe and Gram Vikas did not end with my retirement as a “donor boy” from ICCO. I felt welcome, whenever I announced my intention to visit India. Similarly my partner and my family (the “Afghan boy”, as Joe called my son in law, and my granddaughter). We all always felt welcome in Joe’s and Sherly’s home. We all enjoyed incredible Indian Gram Vikas hospitality and left enriched by the experiences thanks to the visits to villages, meeting with colleagues and going around in beautiful colourful Odisha.

For me Joe and Gram Vikas are inseparable. Hence, I re-name my friend as: “Joe Vikas”. I wish both of them many, many more years in good health and happiness, and with lots of energy to inspire and support poor people in Odisha and civil society in and outside India.

Thank you Joe Vikas for sharing your experiences, wisdom and friendship.

Bram van Leeuwen served at ICCO from 1976 to 2011. He was project officer and teamleader of the India desk until 1989. Then he was appointed as Head of Policy and Evaluation, and Deputy Director in 1996. From 2004 till 2011 he was responsible for the transformation project that changed ICCO into a decentralised organisation of responsible Southern based regional offices. He visited Gram Vikas several times when he was with ICCO and after retirement, and more recently with his granddaughter in 2024.

FROM THE SOIL OF ODISHA – MOHUDA AT 50 – OUR SHARED REFLECTION



R A J E N D R A A N D
J A M I L A P A D H E E

Gram Vikas will always remain one of the most meaningful chapters of our lives - a time and place that shaped who we are, what we value and how we see the world. It was here that we truly learned what it means to live and work in community. It was also here that we met, fell in love and began our family - surrounded by the blessings, generosity and affection of the Gram Vikas community.

I (Rajendra) arrived in 1992, drawn by the opportunity to work in my own community. As part of the Rural Health and Environment Program (RHEP) team with Bipin Das, Surendra Naik, Bighna Panda, and Kamala Mohanty, I helped pilot the first five RHEP villages - a model that became a cornerstone of Gram Vikas' approach. It was community development in its truest sense: built on trust, inclusion and the belief that every family, regardless of status or income, should have equal access to dignity, health and opportunity through safe water and sanitation.



RAJENDRA WITH VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF

For me, one of the greatest privileges was serving the people of my own state. Gram Vikas brought together people from across India and beyond, creating a rich blend of perspectives. But what meant most was being part of something that began and belonged in Odisha - working side by side with local communities whose knowledge and determination for a better future drove the work forward. Those years affirmed my belief that true development happens when people take charge of their own future - supported but never overshadowed by professional expertise.

I (Jamila) arrived two years later, in 1994, as an Australian Volunteer Abroad. Over the next four years, others joined - Linda, Amelia, Sally, Ashwina, Daniel, Sean and Bill. We were young, and in truth, we didn't have much to offer beyond enthusiasm and goodwill. But the generosity with which people welcomed us and shared their lives was deeply humbling. We learned far more than we could ever give - about resilience, community and the quiet dignity of living each day in pursuit of a better world.

For both of us, Gram Vikas was where the professional and the personal intertwined. We built some of our most treasured friendships during those years - friendships that have endured across decades and continents. These relationships were born from shared work and shared ideals, but also from countless simple, joyful moments that continue to live warmly in our memories:



JAMILA WITH GV STAFF

Savitri's chai, always delivered with a smile; Nanaa's egg curry; Bhikari's hot chips; Hari turning 'wine into water'; accompanying Ramani, Ravi or Kutty on late-night visits to check on patients in the dispensary; Tomato singing at the top of his voice; the bears eating the cashews; Om, Sweetie, Sumi and Suman playing on the streets; Varghese chasing after drivers and cars; the bus trips from Mohuda to Giri Market; the villages and villagers; Nata Bhai's wise presence - and so many more moments that remain with us still.

At the centre of it all was Joe Madiath - a leader with vision and extraordinary tenacity. Joe was not a soft leader; his expectations were high because he believed the people of Odisha deserved the same opportunities as anywhere else. He had a rare ability to mobilise resources and persuade institutions to invest in places long overlooked. Joe saw possibilities where others saw limitations. He challenged the idea that rural Odisha should accept less - insisting that dignity, equity and opportunity were not privileges but rights.

As Gram Vikas celebrates its 50th anniversary, and Joe his 75th birthday, we look back with deep gratitude - for the people, the learning, the love and the enduring spirit of community that continues to connect and bind us.

For us, Gram Vikas will always be more than a place where we once worked. It is the soil in which some of our deepest values were planted and where our life together began. It remains a constant reminder that the most transformative development - whether in communities or in hearts - begins with trust, inclusion and love.

Happy 50th, of the journey from Mohuda. Happy 75th, Joe.
Thank you for shaping not only villages, but lives - including ours.

Rajendra Padhee works with Brisbane City Council, in the Access & Inclusion Team. He specializes in access consultancy, community development, inclusion strategies, and promoting accessible public services. He worked with Gram Vikas, Odisha from 1992 to 1997

Jamila Padhee has been working with people from refugee backgrounds, people seeking asylum and migrants in Queensland for more than 25 years in a variety of casework, community development and leadership roles. She is passionate about the potential for settlement and trauma recovery sectors to work together in collaboration to enable thriving, belonging, healing and justice for people from refugee backgrounds. She volunteered at Gram Vikas through Australian Volunteers International from 1994 to 1997.

SAY IT'S ALRIGHT, JOE



L E N N A R D R O U B O S

Whenever I play this pop song by 'Genesis', it reminds me of the only Joe in my life: Joe Madiath. A person once met, you won't easily forget. We met several times during field visits, consultations, meetings in The Netherlands, SISIN workshops, but foremost on trips to the communities, Gram Vikas worked with. Either in the direct surroundings of Mohuda Village, or in very remote, far-flung villages in tribal districts. One such village being Sambalpur.

Sambal is known to me as a very hot and spicy Indonesian sauce. And indeed, Sambalpur has every reason to be called by that name, as it probably was the hottest place in India that I ever visited. But most likely I recall Gram Vikas especially for that visit that never took place.

While my colleague, Yvonne, and I were staying in New Delhi, a super cyclone hit the South-Western belt of Orissa, also the campus of Gram Vikas. Huge trees had been uprooted and roads got blocked. And torrential rains then accompanied the super cyclone. It must have been in the latter part of October 1999. Somehow, we could

reach Joe by phone and informed him of our decision to cancel our visit. Either via Bhubaneswar, or via Visakhapatnam it would be quite a challenge to reach Mohuda, and in case we could reach the Gram Vikas compound, we would rather be a burden than an asset, at least according to our assessment. But Joe clearly showed his dismay with our decision to cancel our trip. We could be in a position to collect first-hand information about the impact of the cyclone, which could be so useful during the process of fundraising for relief and rehabilitation efforts that would soon have to start.

It was not the only occasion that our opinions would clash, or at least not fully match. Half a year later we would make up for this 'no show' case and we had elaborate talks with volunteers, staff as well as board members. During our meeting with the board my colleague posed the question, what would happen to the organization in case Joe, the leader of the gang, would have a fatal accident - for instance by bullock cart. The board was flabbergasted about such a question, but Joe could hardly hide a sarcastic smile. He heard many unexpected questions during his career from donor representatives, but this was one of a kind. No doubt that her concern was valid, as Joe was the leader of the organization ever since it got established. And it would not be unique to the NGO sector, that the issue of second line leadership let alone that of succession was not secured.



**LENNARD AND JOE VISITING A HOUSING PROJECT
DURING A FIELD VISIT (SOMETIME IN THE 1990S)**

So many years later Gram Vikas still plays its unique role in the field of water management, livelihoods generation, biogas promotion, education and health care services. It stands out as an organization that has grown from innovation, to replication, sustainability and further growth. Although Joe bhai has reached the age of retirement, his association with Gram Vikas continues. It has set good examples for government institutions and fellow NGOs to replicate, as it has done in the context of the nationwide program with such institutional

allies as Accion Fraterna, PRADAN, Seva Mandir and ADATS. For me it was a rich learning ground as a relatively young development practitioner. Now, so many years later, it still is a source of inspiration, not the least Gram Vikas, also because of Joe.

The impressive photo book “INDIA Orissa – Before Monsoon – to the people of Kalinga” will always be a reminder of the work of Gram Vikas with manifold Adivasi communities. It shows the endowment of these communities, that Gram Vikas has only tried to support and consolidate.

In the vision of Gram Vikas these communities should be in the lead role and define the future course of their society. In that sense it comes to my mind that after the super cyclone had hit, there was no attempt to clear the rural roads from trees by using chainsaws, as for the Adivasi communities they reflected the power and spirits of the divine world. Culturally more appropriate means were used to remove the trees, even though this would be more time-consuming and would demand much more effort. It is just one example of the vision of this NGO in working along with tribal communities.

It's alright, Joe

Lennard Roubos, formerly with ICCO in the Netherlands, is currently the Executive Director of DISHARI Consult, a development consultancy based in Amsterdam. He has been involved in peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue, and community development initiatives. He visited Gram Vikas several times during his tenure at ICCO, and hosted a team from Gram Vikas that visited the Netherlands in 2000.

VAZHI KATTI: THE ONE WHO SHOWS THE WAY

T O M P A L A K U D I Y I L

Dear Joe

75 years in our midst! Imagine the lives you have touched!! the families and villages you brought hope and dignity to!!! Witnessing how you through Gram Vikas and through focussing on water, sanitation and hygiene transformed the lives of some of the most marginalised communities in Odisha has been a huge inspiration in my own journey as a development worker and an important determinant of the years I spent in WaterAid and the WASH sector.

You have remained my 'North Star', and will continue to be my "Vazhi Katti" all through my own yatra.

I join your many friends and admirers to recall how fortunate we are that our paths met, and blessed to have walked with you.

In Kahil Gibran's The Prophet, there is a line that fits you well: "You walk among us a spirit, and your shadow is a light upon our faces". Yours is a life affirming presence, Joe, and I wish you will continue to "walk among us" for many more years.



TOM AT A WORKSHOP ORGANISED BY CHRISTIAN AID IN 2000, FOLLOWING THE SUPERCYCLONE OF 1999. GRAM VIKAS AND OTHER PARTNERS OF CHRISTIAN AID PARTICIPATED IN AND FACILITATED THE WORKSHOP

Tom Palakudiyil is an executive coach and leadership mentor with over 30 years of experience in international development. He is the former Country Director of Christian Aid in India, during which time he visited Gram Vikas often. He was also Regional Director for Asia at WaterAid, and served as a faculty member at the Institute of Rural Management, Anand, where he contributed to leadership and management development.

LOOKING BACK : GRAM VIKAS AND JOE MADIATH - 1999 TO 2005

J O S E F I M F E L D



ARE YOU FEELING CURIOUS ABOUT THESE TWO PICTURES? YOU WILL FIND THE CLUE IN THESE REFLECTIONS, WHICH ARE MORE INCLINED TOWARDS THE PAST THAN THE PRESENT OR FUTURE OF GRAM VIKAS.

2004. 25th anniversary of Gram Vikas

21 Years ago, Gram Vikas for its 25th anniversary asked me to respond to some questions. The first question was: “Who are you? What is/was your involvement with Gram Vikas? For how long have you been associated with the organisation?”.

At that time, I gave the following answer:

“Josef Imfeld is my name. I have been working in various fields of development for more than thirty years, I am motivated and experienced in supporting committed people and organisations for their and others’ empowerment.

My organisation is the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), (a partner organisation of Gram Vikas), where I have the function of a Regional HID (Human and Institutional Development) Coordinator for South Asia. Gram Vikas asked SDC and myself to support and facilitate the organisational learning and OD process within GV during the last couple of years.”

Today. 21 years down the line, we mark two important milestones: 50 years of the Mohuda journey, and Joe turning 75. Once again, I have been invited to share my thoughts. I am now 80 years old, having stepped away from my professional work in the development sector over 15 years ago.

What is it that still stays with me — in my heart, in my mind, and in my hands? Allow me to share a few stories — some professional, some personal. SDC collaboration with Gram Vikas was initiated in 1997 with the setting up and testing of vertical shaft brick kilns as an empowerment intervention for improving livelihoods in addition to benefits related to enhanced energy efficiency. In 1999 the collaboration was extended, with Gram Vikas becoming a partner in the SDC supported Building Material Project. In the aftermath of the cyclone that struck Orissa in 1999, SDC provided funds to support Gram Vikas interventions in restoration of livelihoods in Adivasi villages of Ganjam and Gajapati districts.

1999. A text for the 20 years of Gram Vikas.

Rudolf Dannecker visited Gram Vikas from 25 – 28.9.1999 and wrote his main impressions on a document for his colleagues. Here are some points:

- “open, transparent and direct development discussions and dialogue are possible and a part of their organisation culture.

- they do what they say and they have, over/time, adapted their interventions and support towards changing needs.
- their interaction with the rural population is based on a continuous dialogue and an approach which combines strong bottom-up elements (listening, serious consideration, approach, exchange etc.) and top-down elements (financial participation requested, clear conditions and requests, etc.).
- the organisation has a core group of people in the important key functions and a dynamic leader/ motivator as a strong leader of the organisation.
- the organisation has a clear and ambitious vision of what they want in the future – but what seems to be the weaker point is funding by donors (risks involved with too few donors).
- Gram Vikas is strong through the results achieved, but much less through the experience documented, distributed to and shared with others.
- the relationship with the State is good, but obviously not always free of tensions
- good monitoring and evaluation instruments; process orientated – good professionals for that work.
- Gram Vikas makes a more demanding request to be accompanied by SDC in their development into a State wide network thus expanding their activities through other NGOs. This means a major shift in the organisation towards facilitation, training, accompanying, exchange, diffusion of experiences, etc.

Rudolf Dannecker thinks that as SDC we should take up the challenge as Gram Vikas is an organisation open for dialogue and learning and probably can well make use of an HID partner.”

2002. A proposal for “Mantra” for a participation of SDC to Gram Vikas

In SDC internal documents, we can read that Gram Vikas is an interesting partner for SDC who shares, to a large extent, its goals, values and strategies and the basic orientation towards empowerment and fighting poverty.

It is also mentioned that recently in 2001, at the conference of the Global Development Network (theme “Blending Local & Global Knowledge”) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Gram Vikas received recognition winning the award for the

most innovative development project in the area of Health and Environment combining local and global perspectives for development.

Given the strategic importance attributed by SDC to fighting poverty and empowering disadvantaged segments of the population, SDC wanted to enter into a collaborative arrangement with Gram Vikas in order to provide a space for Gram Vikas to test out and implement the strategy spelt out in its “millennium mission” i.e. of shifting gradually from being an initiator and implementer of development initiatives to a role characterized by facilitation and support.

The Movement and Action Network for Transformation of Rural Areas (MANTRA), as conceived by Gram Vikas, was a step-wise approach to empower the village communities and their institutions to initiate processes towards improving their quality of life.

Specific objectives, among others, were to explore innovative approaches for enhancing local self-governance and support Gram Vikas for developing appropriate mechanisms for human and institutional development.

The Project adopted an inclusive approach for targeting and selecting villages in which the most disadvantaged constitute at least 70% of the population and where most households are below the poverty line. Tribal and non-tribal households were included. The Project adopted a ‘development-ladder’ approach, providing for a number of sequential steps in the process of empowerment and capacity building.

The total cost of the project over the 5-year period April 2002 to March 2007 was estimated at CHF 4.5 million.

2003. “Millennium” vision-mission-strategy

Coming back to another question asked by Gram Vikas for its 25th anniversary: “What are the stories worth remembering? Please share with us ‘typical’ or ‘memorable’ moments from your time with Gram Vikas.”

My answer was: “A memorable event was when Joe visited my office asking SDC and me to accompany GV on their chosen path towards revisiting and defining together with their management team the millennium vision-mission-strategies. This was a crucial decision taken after the external evaluation report “Dare to

Dream". I felt this request coming so clearly and deeply from the heart, that I was happy to participate together with N. R. Jagannath in their learning events to support GV in its endeavour. I am grateful for this opportunity, it helped me to understand GV from within and to establish other than just donor-like linkages with the members of the management team."

19th March is the feast day of all those named Joseph

In 2003, we were attending our Vision-Mission-Strategy workshop at a training centre in Gopalpur. On the previous day, the two Josephs were wondering what special thing could be done to mark this memorable occasion.

One of us suggested, "Why not narrate the story of Joseph — the one who was sold into slavery by his brothers and later rose to become second-in-command to the Pharaoh of Egypt? He served as a wise governor and saved the land from a terrible famine. The story ends with Joseph reuniting with his brothers, forgiving them, and bringing the whole family together again in Egypt."

That night, Joe took the effort to memorise the entire story of Joseph from the Bible (Genesis chapters 37 to 50). The next morning, he began the session by narrating the tale in vivid detail, blending fact and imagination with great rhetorical skill. His storytelling completely captivated the audience, making those few hours truly unforgettable.

2003. Tadakasahi and Puriasahi

"Another event, which I will never forget, was when I had the opportunity to become aware of the "reality" of the people in different villages between Tadakasahi and Puriasahi. It was a memorable, interesting and rewarding walk where my wife and myself were accompanied permanently by Liby and Lakshmidar and by the different GV employees in their respective villages. This walk helped me to sense the commitment of the village-based colleagues of GV, to understand the activities of the villagers and the support given by GV to the villagers. It helped also through a debriefing to show my empathy towards the life and work done by all. The mix of interventions in visible and invisible domains is impressive, taking up social change in order to reach the vision statement".

A gift: a wooden bell offered by Joe

When I was ten years old, while on summer holidays at my uncle's farm, I had to look after eight heifers alone on a small, steep, isolated mountainside around a small stable. In the evening, I had to put the bells on them, similar to the bell in the picture on the left, let them out of the stable, and clean the place. They grazed the whole night; I could hear the bells and locate and identify the cattle. In the morning, they awaited my coming, harassed by insects. I opened the stable and they came in and went to their assigned places according to their height. I cleaned the bells and put them aside. I became interested in the relationship with the animals and started to make some experiences: put them on the "false" bell, ordered them to take another place in the stable... and realised that they resisted most attempts of change. I was fascinated by these interactions. Later on, I learned that in Switzerland cow bells are also a status symbol for both cows and their owners, indicating prosperity, tradition, and community values.

During our walk through the different villages between Tadakasahi and Puriasahi, I saw some wonderful small cows with wooden bells (like the bell in the picture on the right), and I felt transported back to the 1950s to "my stable" in Switzerland. After our visit, during a long debriefing, I was narrating the impressions and observations we had, also mentioning my fascination for the wooden bells. Here I learned that these bells crafted by Adivasi communities could also symbolise protection and good fortune; their sound and the regular tinkling of the bell is said to purify the land as animals move through it. Handmade objects such as these also serve as tokens of craftsmanship and cultural identity, reflecting communal pride and indigenous artistry. I was so impressed.

A few months later, Joe sent two of these bells to my office in Delhi. They are now in our home in Geneva, serving as a reminder to my wife and me of this memorable experience in the hinterland of Odisha.

2011. Nestle prize, a letter

“Dear Responsible of the Secretariat of the Nestle Prize,

For 10 years I have known Joe Madiath and his team at Gram Vikas, in Odisha. I was Regional Coordinator of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) in Delhi, and so had the pleasure of collaborating with Gram Vikas.

In fact, in 2004 I acted as the facilitator for the restatement of their vision, mission and strategy. They have achieved so much in their time there, and through their water and sanitation programme in particular they have helped change many, many lives. It has not been easy, but the team has worked consistently to address the incredible hardship and drudgery experienced by their constituents.

They have set the standard for rural water and sanitation projects, and by insisting on inclusion of all, regardless of caste or gender; they have empowered community equity that few others imagined possible. Gram Vikas have been constant and courageous in their commitment to 100% inclusion, and in doing so have confronted age-old customs and traditions, and they do all this in some of the most remote and in terms of infrastructure poorly served areas of the state.

This outstanding organisation serves those often forgotten; the scheduled tribes, castes and women of rural Odisha and have been doing so for over 30 years. Their reach and impact are remarkable, and villages they work with gain not only toilets and bathing rooms, but also a confident and united community. They continue to challenge their limits to achieve the very best for their constituents, and so I am very happy to recommend them for the Nestlé Prize in Creating Shared Value.

I would like to congratulate Gram Vikas for their success.

Sincerely
Josef Imfeld »

Congratulations and thanks

I would like to congratulate Gram Vikas and Joe to have reached the two milestones: 50 years of the Mohuda journey and Joe turning 75. The organisation and the founder have innumerable merits.

Gram Vikas inclusive approach - with its path-breaking and unconventional initiatives that opened new avenues - and Joe Madiath's leadership and commitment and communication skills helped SDC to reorient its Country Programme bring the hyphen to the middle of 2003 - 2010 with the emphasis on empowerment: fighting discrimination, promoting decentralisation and enhancing productivity.

SDC has gained relevant experience and developed scope for meaningful and highly effective collaboration with Gram Vikas according to shared values and vision. Therefore, the goal of the Country Programme was defined as follows: "to support processes that render rural development in India sustainable and equitable. These processes are people initiated, people owned and people controlled." Among the different objectives, at least two are most relevant in relation to the learnings from Gram Vikas:

- to promote equity, social justice and human rights by creating conditions under which poor people fully can participate in, and influence community life
- to enhance cultural identity as one core dimension of empowerment.

I would like to thank Gram Vikas and Joe Madiath for their effectiveness, patience and transparency in the partnership relation with SDC and me. Personally, I liked very much to collaborate with Gram Vikas and Joe. Even today Joe and some of his colleagues and people of some villages come to my mind and heart, committed women and men struggling in the hinterland of Odisha for an equitable and sustainable society where people can live in peace and dignity.

Josef Imfeld is a seasoned development professional who spent a significant part of his career with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). During his time with SDC in India he facilitated Human and Institutional Development processes at Gram Vikas. His work has focused on sustainable development, international cooperation, and policy advisory roles, contributing to environmentally and socially impactful development projects.

THE ATLAS OF OUR SHARED JOURNEYS: FINDING A MENTOR IN A FRIEND

S A N J E E V N A Y A K

To most people, the social sector and technology sector would seem to be worlds apart till the unexpected connections emerge. What began as a professional relationship grew to become an enduring friendship with years of trust, mutual admiration, collaboration and a shared vision for driving sustainable change in society.

As young graduates from BITS Pilani, Laxman and I, along with G. P. Das, a hardware engineer, worked to realise our dream of contributing to the IT sector of Odisha through Oricom Systems Private Ltd. in 1987. It started with a focus on IT services, marketing and solutions in Odisha and slowly became a leader in non-formal computer education in the state.

My earliest encounter with Joe was in 1988 when he visited our Bhubaneswar office, seeking SCO Xenix, a multi-user operating system for desktop models for automating his work in Gram Vikas at Mohuda, Ganjam.



What had caught my attention was his appreciation for technological trends at a time when it was still fresh in the market and had not garnered enough public attention. Over the years, the Oricom office became a logistics hub for Gram Vikas and a convenient location for Joe in Bhubaneswar, during his trips in and out of the city. His humour, zest for life and thought-provoking ideas heightened my respect and admiration for him.

Another common place of interaction was at the Odisha Renewable Energy Development Agency (OREDA). Joe was collaborating to establish biogas plants for OREDA across the state, while I was associated as a consultant there, working closely with Dr. Satish B. Agnihotri, IAS (retd.) the then (founder) Chief Executive of the agency.

Joe's presence in our life at that point could be likened to a friend, philosopher and guide, with an interest in steering our work in the right direction, advising my associates on their strengths and gaps and shaping our minds and hearts. He had a marvellous flair for identifying missing links, and as bachelors aboard a journey to drive change in our respective fields, these interactions with Joe are fond memories that greatly impacted our lives, both professionally and personally.

Born far from the eastern landscape to a family owning a rubber plantation in Kerala, he was a rebel against comfort, rallying for the right of the plantation labourers to fair wages that eventually earned him the fury of his father. His act was not one of youthful idealism but an instinct that would go on to define his entire life - the refusal to stay silent before inequity. When I met him decades later, his fire to drive change had already led him and other young minds to bring alive the vision of grassroots empowerment in 'Gram Vikas' (a name that literally meant 'village development') through their work in Mohuda, Ganjam. Shirking material comfort for the single-minded project to restore dignity through empowerment and not dependency, they created a model that works from bottom to top instead of the trickle-down approach of development.

He has always been a true feminist at heart, believing in women as true engineers of change in homes, villages and society. He understood that where women are empowered, entire communities rise. His philosophy has always felt Gandhian to me, through his moral courage, resistance to inequality and inequity and his decentralised approach, even though he never used the word for himself. Working with Adivasi communities, he led the establishment of four residential schools under Gram Vikas - one in Koinpur, near Mahendragiri hills in Gajapati

district, two in Ganjan district - in Konkia and Rudhapadar and one in Thuamul Rampur in Kalahandi district, which became oases of opportunity and a journey towards dignity for generations of learners from tribal and other marginalised communities.

While our paths first converged in providing digital infrastructure for Gram Vikas, through our interactions in the subsequent years of friendship, we began to ideate and discuss the ideal of 'care' and 'commerce' coexisting and informing our realities. In 1998, my interest and passion to improve the quality of formal education had taken root and at this time the residential schools of Gram Vikas were already operational. While Joe was involved in school education, I was beginning to foray into technical education with the establishment of Silicon School of Information Technology in one of Oricom's premises in Acharya Vihar, Bhubaneswar, with just sixty seats in Masters in Computer Application. Joe continued to be a mentor and advisor in my plans as we applied to set up an engineering college in 2001. We invited Joe to join, but he remained at bay, perhaps initially gauging whether this was a purely profit-making venture or aligned with his vision for social transformation. It was only after 2005, when the first batch had passed out, that Joe's faith in the project was cemented. This was his first formal stint with us as Chairman of the governing body and later as a Trustee.

To him, livelihood, quality education, health and hygiene are important parameters of sustainable development and it was his idea to go into underserved areas, away from the state capital, which is already saturated with options. The second campus of Silicon Engineering College in Sambalpur also came up with this understanding in 2009. As I now venture into affordable healthcare projects in Sambalpur in Western Odisha, Angul and Barbil, the idea remains to make healthcare accessible to all. Under the Public-Private Partnership with Government of India and Government of Odisha, the hospitals coming up in Angul and Barbil are rooted in the vision of providing affordable and accessible healthcare on a cross-subsidy model, entitled for CSR grants as Section 8 companies. While I still have a footing in the infrastructure, solar energy and private enterprises as a promoter, my primary calling became not-for-profit through my involvement in Silicon, which recently got upgraded in status as a university in 2024.

Sparking the passion for developmental work and social sector, Joe's influence also enabled me to set up the Future Bhubaneswar School in 2008. Here, we seemed to approach the idea from different horizons, where Joe hoped for

the school to be meant for tribal children but eventually agreed through our deliberations that villages should not become old-age homes and tribal children must receive educational opportunities closer to home. We decided to work to integrate a hub and spoke model with Gram Vikas schools as the spokes, a vision we are still working on to realise. As someone who dislikes stagnation as an idea, after Joe's involvement in Silicon since 2005, the school in Bhubaneswar and the campus in Sambalpur came up as two valuable missions for social progress, while Gram Vikas was setting up residential schools in rural Odisha.



JOE MADIATH, SANJEEV NAYAK AND SURYANARAYAN PATRA (MLA) AT GRAM VIKAS 40TH FOUNDATION DAY CELEBRATION IN 2019

It is undoubtedly a fact, written in stone, that Joe's vision, charisma and leadership and moral conviction have taken progress to the grassroots of Odisha. However, as he enters a more quiet phase in life, the challenge is to ensure that even without his active presence, his vision must not erode. The mantle must pass on, as a living transfer of knowledge, conviction and purpose to a capable cadre of young leaders and change-makers who can breathe the same fire and passion into their work.

The reality of the development sector has also changed, with employees demanding visibility and a professional presence over the former austere lifestyle of donning the 'jhola and chappals'. Joe was aware of this reality and thus set up the Bhubaneswar office after 2014. Gram Vikas too needs to rework their strategy and look at funding channels beyond government grants with the

tightened FCRA norms and the need for driven leadership in the future. In many ways, this is a time for reckoning and renewal. In celebrating Joe and the work of Gram Vikas in shaping futures, I end with the faith that the true measure of progress lies not in the systems we automate but the lives we awaken, a reflection driven into me through my friendship with Joe.

Sanjeev Nayak is an entrepreneur with significant contributions to information technology, technical and primary education, hospitality, and renewable energy sectors. He is a Trustee of the Silicon Institute of Technology, Bhubaneswar, Vice Chairman of Silicon University, and has been a member of Gram Vikas Society since 2016. He is actively involved in fostering innovation and entrepreneurship in Odisha.

THE JOE CHRONICLES - PART ONE OF NONE. AN ODE TO A LIVING LEGEND



GEETA VAIDYANATHAN, WITH
INSIGHTS FROM RAMANI
SANKARANARAYANAN

**Phailin struck at night
And cleared away the trees
Rain had earlier poured
Softening the earth
easing the uprooting
Wiping out all semblance
35 years of what Joe had
scored**

*(Modified excerpt from my
poem on Phailin)*

Ramani and I were living on the Mohuda campus of Gram Vikas near Berhampur in Odisha on 13th of October 2013, when Phailin made landfall. We were woken up by the sound of the wind raging at 250 kmph, and trees falling in the darkness, happy for the solid roof over our heads, and the walls around us, remembering the story of The Three-Little-Pigs. In the morning, when there was a lull in the storm, we stepped out of the house. We could see clearly the distant horizon as the few standing trees were bereft of foliage but we could not move a foot without having to step over fallen trees, branches and leaves. The world seemed upside down and even as we considered our next move we turned to see Joe, stepping over the trees, with a small band of Gram Vikas staff that kept growing, heaving and moving tree trunks and making

his way slowly around the campus to assess the damage: 35 years of his hard labor levelled overnight. This was Joe Madiath, at the center of action, leading from the front. Seasoned by one storm after another...

Over the years we had heard about Joe and the YSMD band that had arrived in Odisha in the aftermath of the 1971 cyclone, had seen him bounce back after the 1999 super cyclone and watched him first-hand after Phailin in 2013, building-back as he headed into his retirement. As the Chairman of the Gram Vikas Board, he relaxed (at least outwardly) his hold on the parent organization while tightening his hold on the Schools that emerged from the Gram Vikas Family. Weathering each storm with a quiet determination and an inner strength, each dream more ambitious than the previous, Joe single-mindedly went on to realize his dream. Through our encounters, accidental, planned and contrived, there have been lessons, sometimes received just as one-liners, that have stuck to the mind and influenced us, ever so subtly.

My first-encounter with Joe was in a village called Azadpura in Madhya Pradesh, where we were building homes with compressed earth blocks. This was the time when Joe was advocating for brick and RCC building and had put in a proposal to CAPART for a grant for Gram Vikas' housing program. So convinced was he about his ideas that when the grant dried out, he took a loan from a commercial bank, HDFC, and having fully understood the risks, went ahead with onward lending to the potential homeowners in villages, with the prime focus being on building dignified and secure homes in rural areas. It was to learn more about his rural housing program that I began my first conversation with him in Mohuda, when I had come in 1999 under the garb of preparing guidelines for cyclone shelters. He told me that the loan would unleash an autocatalytic process that would catapult people out of their circle of poverty. It did not take long for him to convince me to document the Rural Health and Environment Program (RHEP) that was just taking root, instead, and before I knew it, in 1999, I was visiting villages all over Odisha, trying to understand Gram Vikas' "new Avataar." The documentation of the RHEP, which I completed in the summer of 2000, was titled "Roots of change – a changing paradigm." I had also moved to Canada in 2000 but maintained strong bonds with Joe and Gram Vikas. Ramani and I rewrote the document with more facts and figures and nominated Gram Vikas for the World Habitat Awards (WHA) in 2002, our first document as the as yet unregistered CTx GREEN, and no surprise, Gram Vikas was awarded first place. In the meantime, Gram Vikas also received the inaugural Most Innovative Development Project Award in 2001, for RHEP, from the World Bank's Global Development Network.



GEETA, RAMANI, JOE AND LIBY WITH THE TEAM FROM BSHF AT THE WORLD HABITAT AWARDS CEREMONY IN RIO DE JANEIRO, IN 2002

We visited Joe and Gram Vikas in the winter of 2002 and accompanied him on his then routine visit on New Year's day to Thuamul Rampur in Kalahandi. Yellow fields of niger flowers, the Indravati dam, and lack of power supply to the villages close to the dam, brought to mind the Hindi saying "*chirag taley andhera*," darkness under the lighted-lamp. Power outages were rampant and a solar power bank provided electricity to the building in Gram Vikas' field office. Back in Canada we were intrigued to see niger seeds that we had seen in Kalahandi used as bird feed for Goldfinches and being sold in Canadian supermarkets at 3-10 times the price in Odisha. It primed us to develop a proposal for a Carbon-neutral Biodiesel-Fueled-Energy-System for remote villages in Odisha, a dream of sustained local-production-for-local-use, and with local resources. Submitted to the World Bank Development Marketplace Awards, we were invited to Washington DC to present/defend our proposal on 3rd December 2003, which incidentally turned out to be Joe's birthday. Riding perhaps on Joe's winning streak, we were awarded the project to demonstrate 100% biodiesel-fueled piped water supply in two villages and chart the way-forward based on lessons learned. As one of the judges told us, "Our work is over, now yours begins." The rest is history as they say as we made our way back to India and to Gram Vikas in Odisha. That was February 2004, over 21 years ago. And we continue to anchor here, waiting for the right wind, believing that if our idea of local-production-for-local-use has to take root as an ode to self-reliance and equitable sharing of

community resources it will have to depend on the human values espoused by Joe.

We have learnt along the way, as Ursula Le Guin puts it succinctly, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, “The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.”

I had barely begun putting down roots in Canada, having completed a master’s program from the University of Waterloo and we were debating about a move to Australia, where Ramani was being offered a posting by his employer, one of Canada’s top Engineering Consultancy firms, as part of their acquisitions down-under. But after meeting Joe in Rio in October 2003 during the WHA ceremonies, we were convinced that “Maktub - it is written” and that the universe was conspiring to bring us back to India. One of the first of the many haiku-like advice we were going to be receiving from Joe, it had left its mark and without hesitation we packed up and landed in India in February 2004. For a year-long project we thought. It eventually became 18 months, and then 18 years.... And, in 2025, as in the 50th year of starting operations in Mohuda, we are still here two decades and one year later!

Through these 21 years we can recount several lessons imbibed from Joe, mostly 2-3 liners and with limited syllables, haiku-like. Some delivered to me directly speaking to my profession and preferred way of working:

Participation is a holy cow!
Taj Mahal was not built by an architect!

Others that he shared when we spoke about understanding development
Anyone in development knows
if 200 people can be affected,
why not scale up to 2 crores?

Fight is long and hard
It is a shame – we cannot think of a safety net for the farmers
We will send women to the moon because in India they are the most dispensable

The yardstick is equity, inclusion...
if we leave 75 % of Scheduled-Tribes, marginalized-farmers untouched,
then I thought I had failed

And I could go on. But I will pause here. I would like to conclude my Joe-Chronicles with excerpts of an unfinished interview that I began with Joe soon after he retired as Executive Director of Gram Vikas and was working full-steam for the Gram Vikas Schools. My interviews began on 21st of December 2014, and we did a few rounds but never finished it. Words he used like epiphany, the oracle of Memphis, still ring in my ears, and although I have an unfinished transcript there are passages in it that are stand-alone pieces and worth sharing. Paragraphs that ring in the visionary, not-your-ordinary-Joe, and make us reflect on the privilege of having known him for over 25 years (1999 to 2025) and celebrate the never-say-die-spirit that saw him rise like a phoenix amidst emotional and physical travails in his Gram Vikas Journey. My question below sets the context for the interview. I have included only excerpts from his response, those pieces that make sense as stand-alone pieces.

21-Dec-2014, Joe Madiath's office

Geeta: You seem to have come full circle: started singly – bicycle riding across the country, the cyclone in Odisha in 1971 brought you here, Young Students Movement for Development arrived in Ganjam and then Gram Vikas was born. Now with you retiring as ED of Gram Vikas, you have initiated your idea of a centre of excellence for tribal children focusing on education in Mohuda. You have also registered the Joe Madiath Foundation. How does each of these outer manifestations of “development” have a relationship with the evolution of your inner self?

Joe: Cannot say the other side is bad but I could not be 43 years in this (kind of work) without the conviction that we should be an egalitarian society – it is worth giving my life – this is a personal belief. If I had found something more enamoring I would have left this. Since 1971 more than 80 offers have come to me to do something else – high profile, big living, high perks, but I did not bother about the offers because I did not believe in them. I am not sacrificing – what I have been doing has given me more satisfaction and psychological fulfillment than what those other jobs could have given me.

The Foundation is entirely based on my retirement benefits, and has the consent of my children, who are the trustees. The generosity of people/public/tolerance of people of Odisha- gave me the opportunity to do the work I have done here. This is my token of appreciation for all my colleagues and to the people of Odisha. It is a gesture towards letting go of my security – a poor man does not have this. I thought about it and did not know if I had the courage to do it -

there is uncertainty in life. To say I would give up my security required a lot of courage. I asked each of my three children individually and together. They all agreed with the idea. I remember 1971, the travails I underwent when I wanted to start work. I used money that I had saved up amounting to Rs. 75,000 – a lot of money in those days. Lots of friends gave money: Rs 200 - Rs 300, which was also a lot in those days, and it was enough to survive and continue. Mine now, is a gesture (of reciprocation) which would hurt me, where I would feel the pinch (it has to hurt to give, only then is it meaningful). The foundation has been registered – I wanted to register it before I retired but to summon the courage to do something like that was not easy. You could call me a coward. Now I have done it courageously or cowardlily. (My) children supported the idea without a whimper – the youngest (who is not yet settled) was the most supportive of the idea. I should be able to help 4-10 people who are starting out that need support to survive, like I was back then.

When we planned to exit from the biogas programme, we received requests from villages to continue – do not leave they said. We then did a small study to find out what is the most pressing problem covering 100 villages. Everyone wanted doctors and dispensaries – lack of health was the biggest problem. We found that 80% of reported illnesses were water borne diseases – shit all over defiled everyone. I later had an epiphany – hey presto – with water and sanitation you can get quality water (avoid defiling water sources). Toilets are a solution. A wise woman asked me to add a bathroom with running water. Strange Maya (illusion). We (now) argue for full inclusion first (100% participation) and then (to the physical infrastructure of) water and sanitation

I started thinking about social inclusion during the days of biogas in Gram Vikas. Then we could cater to a few tribals. I was troubled by the inequity. I believe that all will benefit – through inclusion, they are not losing but gaining. That is how I dreamt up RHEP which became MANTRA (Movement and Action Network for Transformation of Rural Areas) – every family in a village gets the same facility/benefit, as the best or worst-off in the village. I am still taken-in by the concept. I agree there may be several aberrations.

I had the good fortune to have come up with the gravity induced flow concept for remote tribal villages in the hills – it did not come through a cerebral part of Joe Madiath – it was intuitive, an epiphany (like the magi had about the birth of Christ).

As a guardian of values, living the values you believe in is necessary, I think. I played a role in selecting my successor and have handed over (Gram Vikas) to him and to the governing board and have moved on. I have chosen my calling and path – the last burst of a dying flame. I believe that Adivasis should get the same opportunity as our own children. With education people can take destiny in their own hands and will not need a Joe Madiath from outside telling them. My aim is to give tools to the same people through sustainable education, not just for one generation but that which can be sustained through several generations. Equity in education – this is the last burst of the candle.

Not so we think. Ramani and I can recount so many travel tales in Odisha's trails, where as soon as we say we are associated with Gram Vikas, people ask us "How is Joe? I know him very well. Please pass my regards to him, he will remember me." And then go on to recount their stories of how he touched their lives as cooperative bank managers, electrical vendors, development workers, village residents. All this, told to us as co-passengers, in express and MEMU trains, fellow-bicyclists racing us on the roads, or slipper-clad people trudging along with us on arduous hill trails of the Eastern Ghats. So with due apologies to Sir Elton John, here is an ode to Joe, a living legend, that we can sing to the tune of the original score:

And it seems to us he lives his life
Like a Candle in the Wind
Never fading with the sunset
When the rain or storms set in
And his footsteps will always fall here
Along Kerandimal's fast-disappearing hills
And the candle will shine forever
As his legend will.

Geeta and Ramani live amidst simul and gambhari trees with musically-raucous Himalayan hornbills and golden orioles. They bicycle or walk unless they need to go the extra mile on Ramani's 1967-Bullet, ensuring that they are always handy-with-tools, something that is the essence of their work-and-life: 'convivial tools for a convivial producer-oriented society.' Ramani, an IISc, Bangalore alumnus came to India for their biodiesel-based project after eighteen years and a Ph.D in Metallurgy from McGill University in Canada, while Geeta, an architect with Master's in Environmental Studies, got her Ph.D and Post-Doc from Canada, while anchoring their work in Mohuda.

THE BEST YEARS OF LEARNING, DOING, GROWING

N A T A S H A L I T C H F I E L D

My name is Tash Litchfield and I worked with Gram Vikas from 1999 till 2001 as a member of the Programme Monitoring Evaluation and Documentation team. What an incredible experience it was, and notably the best years of my life. On reflection Gram Vikas has by far been the most exceptional organisation I have ever worked with.

Gram Vikas has given so many people from all walks of life, unique opportunities to work for them and to share their knowledge and experiences. It has always maintained its vision about people working together and making a difference in the lives of communities less privileged. And everyone who works for Gram Vikas has these same goals and drive to make a difference.

Gram Vikas has always learnt to grow with the times. Having started through humble beginnings with Joe's incredible vision, it has become an entity of significance, but has still remained true to its goals and

vision and has not let ego get in the way. The people that work at Gram Vikas connect and bond and become one large family. Gram Vikas' accountability is also a major attribute.

The impact and magnitude of working in the villages post Super Cyclone 1999 is one of my lasting memories. When I saw the extent of support that Gram Vikas was able to leverage and bring to the ground to serve in the cyclone affected areas, it gave me an understanding of the significance of the organisation. The contributions were a testament to the credibility of the organisation and what it stood for.



NATASHA AT THE INAUGURATION OF OF A TUBEWELL IN A CYCLONE AFFECTED VILLAGE (2000)

I was subsequently involved with documenting the tribal residential schools and setting up fund raising alliances with families and schools back in Australia.

I also had the utmost privilege of living with the communities in the tribal villages for one month in the Tumba region, to research and write a report on the people's food security situation. This led to first hand experience of the adivassis way of life, an appreciation and understanding of their diversity and

nutritional richness of their food practices, based on cultivation and gathering from forests. I hope that with changing climate and technology advances, some of these traditions can still be maintained.

I will always feel extremely privileged to have been given the opportunity to be a part of Gram Vikas, that continues to grow stronger whilst maintaining its values and roots strong. Thank you Joe and everyone at Gram Vikas for giving the drive to so many and for upholding the vision. Wishing you all the very best for the years ahead.

Natasha Litchfield is a trained health worker, based in Australia. She volunteered through the Australian Volunteers International, with Gram Vikas Odisha from 1999 to 2001. In the aftermath of the supercyclone which hit Odisha in October 1999, she was actively involved in relief and rehabilitation efforts and was part of the Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Documentation team at Gram Vikas and contributed to various projects and reports.

ON THE MAGIC OF MOHUDA

S U V O J I T
C H A T T O P A D H Y A Y

It was 2005 when I first arrived in Mohuda at twenty two, straight out of IRMA, into my first real job. I have always enjoyed plunging into places I did not have priors for – when I say ‘always’, I think it really started with Mohuda... what might an NGO campus look like? how far could it really be from the city?

Precise memories from twenty years ago tend to be vague. What I do remember is first thinking that the Mohuda campus was a very elegantly constructed oasis – the Baker model buildings were (and continue to be) charming, and the main office building itself was really impressive but intimate. The campus was a mix of staff and volunteers, visitors and those staying, long-timers and upstarts – there seemingly was room for all kinds.

I was initially distressed to find the forest and the foliage, and my new friends there did a fine job of putting the scare of snakes and scorpions (especially when it rained). “if you are cycling, keep your feet up”, “when walking, always keep a torch”,

“wear boots”, etc. I was (and am) a city boy. This wasn’t ideal. But there was no way out.

It very quickly started to feel like home. The early weeks are a blur – but I must have done all the standard orientation visits one does when they are new. The model village of Tamana, the Rudhapadar school and the legendary Bolangir and Thuamul Rampur – all fairly early I think and had to be so, since I remember Liby driving Dipti babu and I back in what must have been one of his last field trips because he was closing out his first innings at Gram Vikas very shortly after having recruited me from IRMA.

Anyway...we must now talk about the main character. Joe Madiath was a development sector superstar. That can feel a bit abstract if one only saw that stardom at work in meeting rooms and conference halls in Bhubaneswar and Delhi. His aura was built in Mohuda, at the foothills of the Kerandimals. I arrived fairly late on the scene. By then, Joe babu’s legend had been firmly established. We felt Joe’s presence everywhere on campus. Many were intimidated by him. I was too. I suppose that is how big men come across to the rest of us. He was a heavyweight in the sector, yet what struck me most was his ability to make people laugh. He was not unserious, but he knew how to make light of the work he did. At meetings and workshops outside Mohuda, you could always count on his witty takes to crack up a room full of serious development wallahs.

Over the course of the next few months, I worked fairly closely with Joe. My first job could have gone many different ways. Romantically, I aspired to be in the field and do important things there. Joe indulged me. About five months and three fevers later, he called me back to Mohuda and gave me work that he thought I would be good at, and what he knew would add value to Gram Vikas. That set me on a track that I stayed with for about twelve years – measurement, learning, writing and the occasional speaking.

Mohuda, meanwhile, had become home. The engineers on campus turned out to be tennis fans and we watched some of the best Roger – Rafa matches when there. There was the occasional trip to Gopalpur with the boys, and the movies I would go watch on my own in Berhampur. The shuttle bus could sometimes feel like a lifeline. Volunteers and visitors came and went – for fleeting friendships made, some of which endured.

I found myself often wondering if I could ever be like Joe – I didn’t know then that I didn’t need to be like him, or anyone. I suppose looking up to someone in

that way is how the young pay tribute to their heroes. But Joe was a window to a larger world and a worldview and in hindsight, I am grateful for his immense kindness for teaching me what he did, knowing full well that people like me are likely to be footloose and restless.

I don't remember my time in Mohuda being busy in the current-day sense of the word. But it was at Gram Vikas that I learnt how work got done – how individuals and the organisation engaged with individuals and communities and governments. It taught me core values – of inclusion, dignity, equity and fairness. I saw what it meant to allow frontline staff to experiment with approaches on the ground, instead of clinging to blueprints. It was there that I understood the discipline of stepping back, of observing how development unfolded, as it was shaped by the choices people made for their lives. Above all, Mohuda taught me the humility of learning from experience and from the wisdom of people who had already done this work before me. In Odisha these lessons were rooted in that context. And when I later worked elsewhere in India and overseas, I realised these lessons and values were universal. Respect people as capable actors and build trust. Dignity and compassion are not tools but values one lives by.



SUVOJIT (L) IN A GRAM VIKAS MANAGEMENT TEAM MEETING

Years later, when I write about the development sector and the role of NGOs – these are the lessons that I reach back into. Because even after I moved on, I have tried to stay in touch. My time there was formative, and I must give back. As the Mohuda campus turns fifty, the challenges are different but then I am confident that the campus will continue to inspire Gram Vikas to adapt and thrive. The spirit of Mohuda, the insistence on working with people, on building institutions that endure, on holding dignity at the centre – these will make sure Gram Vikas lives up to Joe’s legacy, and to its own promise.

Suvojit Chattopadhyay is the Head of Adam Smith International Africa, based in Nairobi, Kenya, where he leads strategic planning, partnership building, and programme delivery across the continent. With extensive experience in governance and development, he has worked in South Asia and Africa, blending programme implementation and research to inform policy and practice in international development. He worked at Gram Vikas from 2005 to 2007.

MOHUDA MUSINGS

A N U S H A B H A R A D W A J



Though my time at Gram Vikas was short, it left a deep and lasting mark. Joe was central to that experience; not just as the founder but as someone who led from the front and was not afraid to roll up his 'kurta' and get his hands dirty.

I often think back to the simplicity of life in Mohuda; the rhythm of the campus, the strength and wisdom of the people, and the deep belief in the mission of Gram Vikas and Joe Babu. One of my most vivid memories, not surprisingly, is the numerous red pen corrections on every single email. I remember wondering why Joe was so particular about red pens and correcting every single email. I'll never forget what he said when I finally asked him: "Because it is Gram Vikas that is speaking, not an individual."

Those words have stayed with me. In the years that followed, as I spent over a decade as Executive Director, I found

myself returning to that line often; a reminder that leadership is not about self, but about holding space for a collective purpose and integrity that's larger than any one person.

It's hard to think of Gram Vikas without thinking of Joe Babu; his exacting standards, his dry humour, his curiosity, and the way he expected the same commitment from others that he held himself to. His legacy, I believe, lies not just in the work done but in the spirit of possibility he's instilled in everyone who has walked through Mohuda.

As I reflect on this milestone of 50 years of the Mohuda journey and Joe turning 75; a few memories and thoughts come to mind:

- **Fondest memories:** The 'Ithaca' project with Skoll, where I got to see Joe and Gram Vikas' work through the eyes of other incredible social entrepreneurs like Ann Cotton from CAMFED and Mathis Wakernagel from GFN. It was such a proud moment to witness GV's story resonated beyond Odisha, across continents.
- **Evolution of Gram Vikas:** From its roots in rural Odisha to becoming a reference point for community-led development across India, Gram Vikas has always reminded the sector that inclusion and dignity must sit at the heart of any real change.
- **Learnings along the way:** Change is slow but deeply transformative when people own it. Being an ED is often a thankless job, where all scrutiny eventually lands on your desk. Through my own journey leading VOICE, I've often thought of Joe and his calm, almost uncanny wisdom in the most difficult and sticky moments.
- **Looking ahead:** As we navigate shifting climate realities, migration, and digital divides, I see Gram Vikas poised to reimagine its role as an organisation that continues to innovate while staying firmly rooted in decades of community wisdom and grassroots practice.
- **Personal reflection:** What I cherish most from my time at Gram Vikas is witnessing firsthand that leading a grassroots organisation is messy — gloriously, necessarily messy. What helped GV not just survive but thrive through that messiness was Joe's leadership and his unwavering belief in the power of collective action.

I'm deeply humbled to have witnessed the giant in action. Happy 75 Joe Babu!

Anusha Bharadwaj is a development professional and social entrepreneur, with over two decades of experience in child education, adolescent health, and gender equality. She is the founder of Voice4Girls, which works to empower marginalized girls and eliminate gender inequality through innovative programs and leadership development. She worked at Gram Vikas during 2011-12.

JOE@75 – A MEMORABLE CONNECTION

S U H E I L T A N D O N

What a momentous occasion for Joe uncle and the Gram Vikas family – celebrating 50 years of the Mohuda journey and a very special 75th birthday! I am so delighted to be able to contribute my reflections on this occasion.

I got to know Joe uncle, as I have always affectionately called him, from a young age. Given my parents' long-standing friendship with Joe uncle and the camaraderie and partnership with the Gram Vikas family, he often visited our home in New Delhi during his frequent trips to the city. Usually, he would come over in the evening for dinner and conversation with my parents, and this is when we would interact with him. Even as a kid, I could tell that Joe uncle was different from the other adults we would meet – he was funny, with an infectious smile, passionate in his conversations and always spoke his mind. Reflecting back, it is now obvious that he was a unique individual on a mission to make the world a better place. Joe uncle continued to visit



us often as we grew up, and our interactions were always fun and easy. These memories have always stayed with me.

Fast forward to my time as a young adult, having just completed my undergraduate degree. My parents were always keen for me to spend some time in Mohuda as a teenager or young adult during my breaks from school and college. However, I resisted this, choosing instead to spend time with my friends in Delhi. It was once I had decided to pursue a Master's in Sport Management, and was taking a year out to get some experience between my two degrees in Delhi, that Joe uncle mentioned I could do some voluntary work with sports in the Gram Vikas residential schools. This suggestion piqued my interest, and I was keen to see how sport could evolve in rural India. And so, I made my first journey (as an adult and one that I remember!) to Mohuda to spend a few weeks working with the Gram Vikas schools.



SUHEIL AND JOE AT THE MOHUDA OFFICE IN 2010

My first visit to Mohuda and Gram Vikas was a memorable one. It was the first time I had the chance to learn firsthand about Gram Vikas' work, and to see Joe uncle in his 'natural habitat'. What struck me the most was the grounded

work that Gram Vikas had done over so many years, keeping the communities at the center of its approach. I also saw a different side of Joe uncle – the social entrepreneur, changemaker and committed development professional who had given his life to the rural and tribal communities of Odisha. During a visit to a nearby community with Joe uncle, I saw the affection that people had for him, and the genuine appreciation of his efforts to improve their lives. I was in awe of Joe uncle!

The affection that I developed for Gram Vikas' work and the Mohuda campus during this visit led to a collaboration on the Khel Vikas project a few years later. By this point, I had completed my Master's degree and had decided to follow in the footsteps of Joe uncle and start my own social enterprise, Pro Sport Development. My second innings at Mohuda and Gram Vikas was as a young social entrepreneur, looking to enhance young people's lives through the medium of sport.

I spent two and a half years living in Mohuda and working with Gram Vikas through the Khel Vikas project. During this time, I interacted with Joe uncle in a completely different capacity – as a partner and work colleague. I believe that in these two and a half years, Joe uncle and Mohuda's influence on my development as an entrepreneur, work professional and human being were absolutely critical. Joe uncle was very patient with me. He trusted me to do what was right for the young people and the communities we were working in, and he gave us the freedom to explore the best ways to engage them through sport. He mentored me and encouraged me, while occasionally reigning in my grandiose ideas for change, which was rooted in the lived realities of the communities he had helped for so many decades. My respect and admiration for Joe uncle increased manifold during this time, especially as a social entrepreneur following a similar path as him, one that I came to understand was much more challenging than I had ever imagined.

Living and working in the Mohuda campus was a privilege, and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there, meeting and working with people from all across the country and the world. Mohuda was a safe space where we could freely interact, share our ideas and speak our minds. Joe uncle and Sherly aunty were always welcoming and often invited us home for meals and get-togethers, which were very memorable. Mohuda is also the place where I (very randomly) met my wife, so I am always grateful to Joe uncle for landing in Mohuda 50 years back and playing a role in making this connection!

During my time in Mohuda, I also witnessed the transition of Gram Vikas to a new-age social enterprise, with a 'corporate office' (I know Joe uncle would hate this term!) in Bhubaneswar and a new CEO taking charge. These were challenging times for the organization, as it was evolving to create its niche within the new India taking shape, while keeping intact the grounded ethos and ways of working that had been built over several decades from the soil of Mohuda. Needless to say, Joe uncle and Gram Vikas found a way forward, and I believe that Gram Vikas 2.0 has adapted very well to the context of modern India while continuing to serve and meet the current challenges of the people of Odisha.

I will forever be grateful to Joe uncle and the Gram Vikas family for all the opportunities and learnings that I amassed during my time in Mohuda. I can confidently say that this period in my life fundamentally shaped me as the individual that I am today.

Lots of love to Joe uncle, Sherly aunty and the entire team at Gram Vikas. My best wishes always, and I am confident that you will take your impactful work to greater heights in the future.

An admirer, well-wisher and companion

Suheil F. Tandon is a social entrepreneur who has worked in partnership with Gram Vikas, using sport as a tool for social change. He is the Founder and Director of Pro Sport Development, an award-winning social enterprise dedicated to leveraging sport, physical activity, and play to empower children and youth, especially in underserved communities across India. He lived and worked in Mohuda for two and a half years, and has known Joe since he was a toddler.

"BHULIJIBA" KATHA "FORGETTABLE" STORIES

ESHAAN PATHERIA

Gram Vikas' and Joe Sir's story has continually inspired me ever since I first watched Joe Sir's 2015 TED Talk as a college student. In this talk, Joe Sir highlighted that, unfortunately, the view that "poor people deserve 'poor' solutions" too often influences decision making in development work. I was drawn to Joe Sir's abundantly clear, core foundation: that of deep relationships, cultivated over decades, and now lifetimes, with communities in rural Odisha. These relationships weave together the fabric of empathy and commitment that enables meaningful progress over time.

Three years later, in 2018, I was set to graduate from college and then start doctoral research in electrochemical energy storage. I chose this work, fundamental scientific merits aside, for its potential to advance renewable energy technology that could reconcile mitigating climate change with tackling energy poverty. However, I felt a lacuna in my own understanding of how, in reality, such technology exists as a solution at the intersection of these two major societal challenges.

I saw a posting for an “Energy Management intern” on the Gram Vikas website and sent an inquiry over email—Liby Sir replied in less than 10 minutes and connected me with Ashutosh. Many emails and phone calls later we settled on a goal statement: “An in-depth and extended firsthand account and understanding of the effectiveness and sustainability of Gram Vikas’ renewable energy projects.” Ashutosh, who spent nearly 10 years with Gram Vikas, remains my mentor, role model, and dear friend.

A piece of advice that Liby Sir offered me in these first exchanges: “...to keep an open mind, and while you would want to be clear about WHAT you want to achieve from the time you spend in Odisha, be much more agnostic and liberal about the HOW of it. I have learnt from my own experience, and from the scores of youngsters I have mentored over the past many years, that the surprises that meet us on our route are far more enriching than our own certainty about situations.”

I managed to slowly internalise and practice this advice over my year at Gram Vikas, and it has since held me in good stead in facets of my life far beyond that year—one of many core lessons!

A few months after that initial exchange, I met Joe Sir for the first time at the orientation for the State Bank of India Youth for India Fellowship at the BAIF Development Research Foundation in Pune in early August 2018. He shared reflections about a journey he took across India on a bicycle when he was about our age—I can’t recall his exact words, but he encouraged each of us to embrace the path ahead with the same openness and eagerness to learn about the lives of the rural poor as he did during his cycle journey.

In the year that followed, I lived in Thuamul Rampur block of Kalahandi district, where I worked with the people of a village called Maligaon, located near the Indravati Reservoir, to renew a solar-battery microgrid that had gone defunct about 5 years prior—circa 2013.

We succeeded with the technical aspects of our renewal effort. The harder task to support socioeconomic change with the microgrid is ongoing and ever-evolving. Notably, technologically, I want to point out here that as far as we know, our microgrid is the first in India to use lithium-ion batteries for energy storage, which is now rapidly becoming the global standard.

It's difficult to articulate how profoundly Maligaon has shaped me. Liby Sir's and Joe Sir's advice became central to making progress—conveyed easily by them but in practice harder to follow. My relationships with people in Maligaon, built on decades of trust pre-established by Gram Vikas, gave me the firsthand understanding I sought, and gifted me a deeper sense of purpose that guides me and will guide me for the rest of my life.

There are countless small moments I cherish that nurtured my relationships with people in Maligaon. I will share one such story here.

I had recently started living in Maligaon, in the now empty generator room of the microgrid powerhouse, when a sudden rainstorm forced everyone into their homes for shelter. In my rush to get inside, I forgot to bring in firewood I had collected for myself and kept outdoors. Only much later that day did I realise my mistake.

At this time I was still relatively new in Maligaon, my Odia was quite patchy (it still mostly is), and I was determined to integrate and have some independence as a new resident (buy and prepare my own food, for one). That night, I skipped cooking dinner and instead ate some dry snacks.

The next day, hungry, I decided I needed to get my hands on some firewood—of course mine was still soaked from the previous day. Too reluctant and embarrassed to directly ask to use someone else's firewood, I sheepishly asked around about where I might find some.

As people did not know me, I mostly received vague answers—"in the woods", "near the fields", etc. A youngster who'd had a bit to drink overheard my requests, and brashly began to dismantle some twig fencing built around someone's crops, offering it to me as firewood. His sudden actions caught me off-guard, and I quickly retreated back to the powerhouse—too confused to take any of what he had broken off.

I remember my stomach gurgled as I sat in the powerhouse thinking about what to do. Even any small twigs I could find nearby were still wet, despite it now being hot and sunny. I thought it would hopefully only be a matter of a few hours until my wood dried.

Still feeling a bit silly, I suddenly heard a faint call from outside my room, “ସାର୍! (Sir)”. I came to the door and found Baidehi Majhi, a mother to all, a matriarch of sorts, to the tribal pada of Maligaon.

On her head, she had a large bundle of firewood, neatly tied together with stringy bark. She gave me a huge, grinning smile, and as a few drops of sweat trickled down her forehead (she had walked the full length of Maligaon to deliver it to me—roughly 200 meters), she emphatically dropped the wood at my doorstep. “ମୁଁ ତୁମ ପାଇଁ କାଠ ଆଣିଛି! (mu tama pai katha aanichi!) (I brought you wood)” she declared. I was a bit speechless—I offered to pay, to make it up to her somehow, but she refused. She only smiled.

Such incidents are many at Gram Vikas, and at face value appear to have nothing to do with the development work that is central to our mission. However, what sets Gram Vikas apart is that our mission rests on a bedrock forged by countless such incidents, and deep interpersonal relationships—it’s even embodied in our logo.

To me, this is Joe Sir’s legacy. In the broader, global race to “develop”, stories like this one—and poor, rural communities themselves—are, lamentably, too often forgotten.

A beautiful poem, written by Laxman Naik, secretary of the Village Water and Sanitation Committee (VWSC) of Maligaon, perfectly expresses the deep joy that takes root in not forgetting, but instead reflecting on and cherishing such moments. I won’t include the whole poem here—just the main couplet that opens and closes the poem:

“ଭୁଲିଯିବା କଥା ଜତେତେ ଭାବୁଥିଲି, ଅଧିକ ନିଜର ଲାଗ ।
ତମକି କି ଜାନିତ ମୁଁ ହୃଦୟ ଦବେକ୍ତୁ, ରହିବାର ଜାଗା ମାଗ ।”

*“The more you think about that which could be forgotten, the more it feels a part of you,
You don’t know that I’d even give you my heart, if you asked for a place to live.”*

With great gratitude for the values that Joe Sir and Gram Vikas stand for and live by—and for all I’ve learned from them—a very happy 75th birthday and 50th anniversary!



ESHAAN PATHERIA (L) AND ARJUNA PATEL (R), PRESIDENT OF MALIGAON VILLAGE COMMITTEE, DISCUSS HOW TO SET UP THE ROOFING SHEETS ON THE NEWLY TERMITE-TREATED WOODEN TRUSSES OF THE POWERHOUSE. CREDIT: AJAYA BEHERA.

Eshaan Patheria is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Caltech working on developing scalable, sustainable lithium-ion battery technology using abundant industrial elements. He worked with Gram Vikas as a State Bank of India Youth for India Fellow from August 2018 to September 2019. He led the renewal of the Maligaon microgrid, which was originally established in 2009. He remains involved, helping with maintenance and supporting ongoing efforts to leverage the microgrid for local livelihoods. He is dedicated to accelerating the global transition to renewable energy and expanding energy access in underserved communities worldwide.

FOUR YEARS, COUNTLESS LESSONS



K A B I R R A N A

I joined Gram Vikas fresh out of university, right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many decisions before, I hadn't thought it through too much; I simply jumped in, uncertain of how it might unfold. I remember feeling both excited and unsure, knowing very little about the organisation beyond what I had read.

One of my earliest tasks was helping to prepare and collate material for a proposal within a tight deadline. The process was notoriously cumbersome: five long-answer questions, multiple document uploads, to a portal which timed out every few minutes, forcing us to log back in and start again.

In the process, I interfaced with several people within and outside the organisation and was amazed at how much they appreciated GV's work, and how readily, and with deep respect and affection, they spoke about their connection with Joe. That exercise not only helped me learn more about Joe, whom I

had until then only glimpsed riding his bicycle around the Mohuda campus, but also gave me a sense of the reverence he commanded among both staff and communities.

Joe and GV's beginnings in Odisha are now the stuff of legend and reading about that journey to build what Gram Vikas became, was very inspiring. That experience stayed with me as I took on new roles within the organisation, managing people, handling projects, and later joining management discussions to shape plans. Even in my relatively short stint of four years, I witnessed GV's dynamism, always evolving yet rooted in its partner communities. From water supply, water security, sanitation and health, to newer areas like livelihoods, migration, climate change, and technology, GV has shown that even after 50 years, it remains deeply connected to the people it serves.

Looking back, I realise that my journey within GV was not separate from its larger 50-year story. The reverence people had for Joe, that I came across first hand in my first weeks at GV, the warmth of colleagues, and the resilience of partner communities were not isolated impressions but part of a continuity. GV has always been less about individual programmes and more about nurturing people who carry forward its values in their own ways. My learnings, frustrations, and small breakthroughs were a microcosm of that larger ethos, which has sustained GV across decades of change.



KABIR AT A VILLAGE MEETING TO UNDERSTAND ISSUES OF MIGRANT WORKERS

This dynamism was embodied most strongly by the youth in the organisation. I worked closely with two distinct groups: the Junior Managers, of which I was a part, and the Community Professionals Programme cohort, with whom I collaborated on several projects. Junior Managers were youth having degrees either in development, social work, or other fields, hoping to make a mark in the social sector. The Community Professionals Programme included youth from our partner villages, going through a rigorous selection and training process, building thematic expertise and implementation capabilities. Both groups carried immense responsibility as GV adapted to new challenges. They were thrust into leadership roles early, accelerating their growth and understanding of the field, while senior staff provided the much-needed anchor. And to think that Joe was only 25 years old when he came to Mohuda! It reminded me of how GV's early successes, carried forward by a group of young people, might have once seemed impossible, just as the present ambition of making a thousand Gram Panchayats water secure feels today.

My first independent project at GV was working with migrants and their families to ensure access to government entitlements. I was given complete agency: if the project failed, it would be on me; if it succeeded, it would succeed with me. For months, progress was slow, and by the ninth month, at a crucial review meeting with funding partners, we still had little to show. Yet my seniors stood firmly behind us, explaining the ground realities and urging everyone to trust the process. At the time, I was sceptical. But when the project was completed, with all deliverables met on time, I realised the importance of patience and perspective. That was a pivotal moment for me: I began to glimpse the bigger picture of GV's work.

Over time, as I grew within the organization, I came closer to GV's older thematic areas and began to see how everything was interconnected. Rural development, I realised, could never be reduced to individual projects; it was about weaving together water, health, livelihoods, and institutions into a whole. As a youngster, I often thought my work mattered more than that of others, or blamed policies and senior management for delays. But once I moved into management roles myself, I realised how many competing pressures, trade-offs, and constraints are at play. It was a sobering reality check.

There were moments of deep frustration, at the hierarchy, at the pace of implementation, at gaps in communication, and even at myself. Some days I couldn't see the bigger picture; other days it felt like no one else could. What

made it bearable was the camaraderie of colleagues who were going through the same struggles. They were the only ones who truly understood the context we were in. As we moved on to bigger roles, that closeness waned somewhat, but it was heartening to see the same spirit of solidarity remain alive among new entrants, young people stepping into a demanding but rewarding space. A year after leaving GV to pursue further studies, I returned to Mohuda to visit my old colleagues. Much had changed, but the warmth, love, and shared sense of purpose were intact. My biggest learning from GV has been the danger of complacency. We work best when we focus on simply doing our bit, and trust the process. The moment we begin to think of our work as extraordinary, we risk alienating ourselves from the very communities we are meant to serve. Too often, the social sector slips into a god complex. It has been deeply reassuring to see GV resist that temptation for five decades.

As Gram Vikas and Joe complete 50 years of dedicated work in Odisha, I offer my heartfelt congratulations. The journey has always been about giving it their all, and I am certain that spirit will continue for as long as it is needed.

Kabir Rana is a Masters in Research and PhD in Economics student at the University of Exeter Business School, with a research background in economics and development studies. He has worked with Gram Vikas from 2020 to 2024, contributing to rural development and community empowerment initiatives.

FROM PROJECTS TO A MOVEMENT: JOE'S LEGACY OF EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES



N R J A G A N N A T H

Gram Vikas and Joe: A Legacy of Transformative Change

The story of Gram Vikas is deeply intertwined with the vision and lifelong dedication of Joe, a testament to their profound impact on social change. Their collective journey has significantly transformed the lives of many, particularly within Odisha's communities, and inspired all who have witnessed their work. The author's personal experiences with Gram Vikas are marked by moments of profound human connection, quiet dignity, and remarkable transformation, all catalyzed by Joe's compassionate and equitable leadership. The joy of families accessing clean water or the pride of empowered village institutions reflects the enduring impact of their efforts. This narrative celebrates their shared trajectory, honors Joe, and looks to the future.

A Symbiotic Journey of Growth and Sustainability

Gram Vikas's development mirrors Joe's own life story, showcasing a journey of purpose and expanding influence. Evolving from traditional development models to dynamic innovation, the organization has mirrored Joe's personal and professional growth. Gram Vikas consistently demonstrates adaptability,

embraces fresh ideas, and deepens community ownership, foundational elements of sustainable development. This intertwined path embodies resilience, inclusivity, and a commitment to lasting change, all driven by the core values Joe has championed. Together, they represent progress, hope, and the strengthening of authentic community roots.

Joe's Visionary Leadership: Inspiring Dialogue and Lasting Impact

Joe's leadership is characterized by an extraordinary ability to simplify complex challenges and make grand visions achievable, blending profound insight with approachable ease. His wit and humor were not mere embellishments but integral to his engaging personality, injecting warmth and shared humanity into every discussion. This fostered genuine, enriching exchanges where time seemed to dissolve. Joe's openness, demonstrated through candid and self-deprecating anecdotes, cultivated immediate rapport, transforming casual chats into memorable dialogues. This rare combination of wit, wisdom, and an open heart made conversations with Joe a highlight, leaving a lasting impression.

Celebrating Joe at 75: A Legacy of Empowerment

Joe's 75th birthday marks a significant milestone, celebrating a legacy forged through decades of dedication, vision, and transformative impact. At this age, Joe embodies the wisdom and resilience gained from unwavering commitment to social change and community empowerment. His journey exemplifies a passion for bridging divides, fostering partnerships, and inspiring collective action. This milestone is an opportunity to honor his immense contributions, acknowledge the invaluable lessons learned, and anticipate his continued influence as a mentor to future change-makers. Joe's life serves as a powerful reminder that true leadership lies in empowering others to reach their full potential, shaping a brighter future for all.

The Evolution of Gram Vikas: From Projects to a Movement

Over the years, I have had the distinct privilege to observe Gram Vikas evolve significantly, transforming from an organization implementing isolated interventions to a comprehensive and powerful force for inclusive development across Odisha. Its role has expanded far beyond merely providing essential services; it now actively addresses the deep-seated, systemic challenges that often impede rural communities' well-being and progress. Today, Gram Vikas stands as a beacon of innovation and exemplary practice in critical sectors such

as water and sanitation, sustainable livelihoods, quality education, and robust village governance. It has solidified its position as a trusted partner, not only to the communities it serves with unwavering dedication but also to policy makers who are actively shaping the development narrative in the region. The organization's remarkable adaptability, coupled with its continually deepened understanding of intricate local contexts and social dynamics, has been absolutely paramount to this profound and impactful evolution.

I recall a project titled "Movement and Action Network for Transformation of Rural Areas (MANTRA) supported by SDC" the concept conceived and implemented by GV. In my view, MANTRA is a critically relevant and thoroughly justified initiative designed to address the persistent, multi-dimensional challenges faced by rural communities. Its relevance stems from the recognition that sustainable development requires more than isolated interventions; it demands a robust, interconnected ecosystem of empowered local actors. MANTRA is justified by its strategic approach: fostering a network that amplifies local voices, mobilizes collective action, shares best practices, and facilitates community-led transformation across diverse development spheres – from water and sanitation to livelihoods and governance. By building a sustained "movement" rather than just executing projects, MANTRA ensures long-term impact, strengthens social capital, and ultimately empowers communities to become the architects of their own equitable and dignified future, aligning perfectly with Gram Vikas's foundational commitment to comprehensive rural upliftment.

Learning from the Field: Principles of Sustainable Development

Several important learnings stand out vividly from this extensive journey. A fundamental pillar of Gram Vikas's success has consistently stemmed from its persistent, intense consultation and deep engagement with communities. This process is underscored by the rigorous enforcement of two non-negotiable principles: 100% participation and 100% contribution. These principles are not mere slogans; they are foundational to fostering genuine ownership, ensuring that solutions are not just co-created but also sustained locally, long after project completion. Projects that integrated water and sanitation with broader initiatives in livelihoods and education have consistently yielded multiplying benefits, powerfully affirming the critical importance of a holistic, interconnected approach to development.

However, this journey, like any significant endeavour, was not without its formidable challenges. Some early initiatives faced considerable setbacks, often due to limited community buy-in or an initial underestimation of the complex nuances of local social dynamics. These moments, rather than being seen as failures, demanded profound humility, rigorous reflection, and strategic adaptations—a vital willingness to listen more closely, to exercise greater patience, and to proactively strengthen institutional capacities at the grassroots level. These crucial course corrections were absolutely vital to embedding the principles of sustainability and resilience deeply within Gram Vikas's operational approach, ensuring that lessons learned translated into stronger, more effective future interventions.

A Paradigm Shift: From Donor-Donee to Genuine Partnership

The development sector has undergone a significant shift from a traditional “donor-donee” model to one of “genuine partnership.” For years, this hierarchical approach fostered dependency by positioning donors as resource providers and recipients as passive beneficiaries, often overlooking local agency and indigenous knowledge. Overcoming this required consciously unlearning biases and moving away from top-down solutions.

Embracing genuine partnership, as championed by the SDC, means valuing local knowledge, promoting equity, and recognizing partners as equals with critical insights and stakes in project outcomes. This involves co-creation, joint planning, and building relationships based on trust and open dialogue, rather than directives.

Initially, this shift faced resistance from within and outside organizations accustomed to the old model. However, this transformation has led to increased professional satisfaction. Projects have become locally owned, demonstrating greater resilience, relevance, and sustainability. This collaborative approach fosters innovation, shared success, and a stronger sense of collective achievement. Ultimately, this ethically aligned engagement, transcending mere financial transactions, yields greater dividends in human dignity and sustainable progress, proving the challenging transformation to be deeply worthwhile.

Personal Reflections: A Transformative Partnership

My collaboration with Gram Vikas has been an enriching experience shaped by the dedication of its staff. I contributed to its Human and Institutional

Development (HID) process, which redefined the organization's vision, mission, strategy, and goals. Moderated by Josef Imfeld, Head of HID at SDC-Delhi, the exercise charted a new growth path with clarity, foresight, and collective commitment. As Senior Programme Officer at SDC and file in-charge for Gram Vikas, I facilitated discussions that fostered sustainability, innovation, and capacity building within the organization.

Deep Dive into Impact: Water, Sanitation, and Empowerment

A key example of Gram Vikas's impact is the introduction of integrated water and sanitation projects in remote villages. This initiative went beyond infrastructure, fostering profound social change by building trust, ensuring gender inclusivity, and nurturing local leadership. Gram Vikas consistently prioritized empowerment over charity, transitioning from a project-based entity to a self-sustaining movement driven by dignity, equity, and self-reliance. The integrated model demonstrated how clean water access leads to improved health, better education for girls, and enhanced economic opportunities, all managed by the communities themselves.

Navigating the Future: Role and Strategic Priorities

Gram Vikas is well-positioned to address contemporary global challenges like climate change and urbanization with its community-centric approach. The organization's future involves being a reliable foundation for development and a catalyst for inclusive growth, leveraging its expertise to innovate and scale interventions that respect the dignity and aspirations of Odisha's rural communities. Maintaining its core values while embracing new challenges will ensure its continued impact. Strategically, Gram Vikas will do well to build on past experience and focus on programme-level interventions in water security, climate-smart livelihoods, education, and village institution empowerment, alongside organizational strengthening through decentralized management, robust HR policies, and a refined strategic direction balancing targets with participatory development and scalable inclusion.

The organisation has pivoted by responding to contemporary challenges in the social, economic and ecological contexts by crafting the Water Secure Gram Panchayat (WSGP) Programme and Safe and Dignified Migration (SDM) Programme.

To effectively implement the Water Secure Gram Panchayat (WSGP) Programme, it is recommended to prioritize strengthening the institutional capacity of Gram Panchayats through targeted training and resource support, enabling them to lead water and natural resource management within their jurisdictions. Establishing inclusive governance mechanisms that promote gender equity and active community participation will reinforce local ownership and accountability. Integrating scientific assessments with traditional knowledge can guide adaptive management practices that address water security challenges dynamically. Additionally, embedding robust monitoring and feedback systems will ensure continual improvement and transparency, ultimately driving better health and economic outcomes for communities.

For the Safe and Dignified Migration (SDM) Programme, a coordinated block-level approach should be adopted, ensuring comprehensive coverage of all villages while tailoring interventions to local migration patterns and livelihood contexts. Building strong partnerships with skill development agencies, employers, and financial institutions is essential to create safe and sustainable migration pathways. Pre-departure orientation and post-migration support services will safeguard migrant rights and welfare. Community engagement through awareness campaigns can reduce migration-related stigma and empower both men and women to make informed decisions. These steps will contribute to enhancing household incomes, making informed choices and reducing distress migration, and fostering inclusive rural development.

A Legacy of Hope and Empowerment

The combined narrative of Joe and Gram Vikas is more than just a story of development; it is an epic of empowerment, resilience, and the triumph of the human spirit. Their work demonstrates that true change emanates not from external handouts, but from within, catalysed by visionary leadership and sustained by collective action and genuine partnership. As we reflect on this remarkable journey, we are reminded of the profound impact one individual, when synergized with a dedicated organization, can have on transforming communities and inspiring future generations.

This milestone invites not only reflection and celebration but, more importantly, a renewed and steadfast commitment to advancing a future where both Joe's profound personal legacy and Gram Vikas's communal mission continue to flourish, radiating hope and progress across the landscapes they serve.

Wishing both GV and Joe the very best

Dr. N. R. Jagannath is a Natural Resources Management Specialist and Development Consultant, specializing in water resources management and climate change adaptation. He has worked with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), leading significant national and international projects focused on sustainable water management and environmental governance. During this time he supported the Human and Institutional Development Process at Gram Vikas.

JOE MADIATH'S CONTRIBUTION TO DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND PRÄXIS

F O N S V A N D E R V E L D E N ⁵

Joe and I got to know each other in 1987. After a year of serious illness, I decided to opt for a career shift, I resigned from my post at the University of Nijmegen and joined ICCO (a state funded ecumenical funding agency operating from the village Zeist, in the Netherlands).

On account of a mixture of reasons, ICCO leadership had decided to focus more, among others in India, on the funding of so-called 'Big Non-Governmental Development Organisations' (BINGO's), Gram Vikas being one of them.⁶

Hence, my first experiences with Gram Vikas was as a funding agency representative during the years from

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- 5 Fons expresses his gratitude to Pradeep Esteves for his feedback towards an earlier vision of this text.
- 6 The main reason for the ICCO management to offer me a post was that I had been involved in research (together with colleagues of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) about the functioning of Multinational Corporations in India and hence was deemed to be able to assess and monitor the functioning of big entities, including BINGOs.

1987 to 1992. After resigning from ICCO, I started a small social business that provided support to NGDOs and social businesses.

In 2002, Gram Vikas approached me and requested if I would like to act as team leader for an external evaluation of their work. Apart from various Gram Vikas staff members, Deep Joshi from PRADAN and I jointly carried out this exercise. Later in 2006, I met Joe again while I was facilitating a workshop which was designed for improving better cooperation between BINGOs in India. There were undoubtedly other assignments and moments that we have met and worked together during the past four decades.⁷

It must be said that working with Joe and his colleagues from Gram Vikas was always professional, focused, and a real pleasure, made even better by their wonderful hospitality.

The broader context – End of the age of NGDOs

Globally the eighties and nineties can definitely be labelled as the golden era of the Non-Governmental Development sector. However, by the end of the previous century, first publications emerged that questioned the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the NGDO-sector worldwide.⁸ Over the last two and a half decades this trend has continued. In their recent article ‘The End of the Age of NGOs? How Civil Society Lost Its Post-Cold War Power’, published in Foreign Affairs, S. Bush and J. Hadden, provide an interesting succinct overview of these developments.

7 During those years, Joe and his colleagues regularly visited the ICCO office in the Netherlands. During one of these visits, Joe and one of his colleagues were mistakenly booked into a hotel where drug dealers and users were active. The gentlemen kept watch over their belongings that night while they took turns and only slept in shifts. The next day, we tried to make up for this blunder by treating them to a large rice table – which Joe loves – at an Indonesian restaurant

8 Ref among others Michael Edwards & David Hulme, *Non-Governmental Organisations – Performance and Accountability – Beyond the Magic Bullet*, London (Earthscan), 1995; Deborah Eade & Ernst Ligteringen, *Debating Development*, London (Oxfam GB), 2001; Leslie Groves & Rachel Hinton, *inclusive aid; changing power and relationships in international development*, London (Earthscan), 2004. See for an overview with regards to India among others Fons van der Velden & Lau Schulpen, *Private Development Aid in Transition*, New Delhi (Concept Publishing Company), 2002 with an interesting Foreword by F. Stephen, at that time director of SEARCH, Bangalore.

The authors take as a starting point the 1990s as ‘a golden age of nongovernmental organizations’: wherein budgets increased; thousands of organisations mushroomed; many organisations became important political players; the influence on public policies was big; quite often organisations started performing also state functions such as providing basic social services. Today the situation is remarkably different, argue the authors: there is a stagnation in growth and in a number of countries the numbers have gone down; public scepticism about the contribution of NGOs has deepened; governments have sharpened strategies to curtail NGO activity; revenue streams have begun to dry up. et cetera. The authors conclude: ‘Growing popular skepticism of NGOs, active government efforts to undermine these organizations, and shrinking resources all reduce the power of NGOs in world politics’.

Crisis of the INGDO sector; resistance to change

In their article in *Foreign Affairs* Bush and Hadden, very unfortunately, do not distinguish between different types of NGOs. My personal observation is that their analysis also largely applies to organisations in Western Europe that provide funding to development organisations in the global South.⁹ Many of these so-called International Non-Governmental Development Organisations (INGDOs) are not only facing a cash crunch, but – what is more important – they have lost power, as well as their moral authority and legitimacy.

An example of an organisation that was not able to overcome this crisis is the ecumenical funding agency ICCO, which used to be one of the leading INGDOs in the Netherlands and which for many years had also been an important financier of Gram Vikas 1984–2014. When ICCO was dissolved in 2020, it was euphemistically stated that ‘ICCO’s legacy will be integrated into the Dutch catholic development agency Cordaid as of 1 January 2021’¹⁰, while in fact there was intellectual and financial bankruptcy.

9 See among others the chapter ‘Social Business: a novel approach to socio-political change’, in Fons van der Velden (ed), *New approaches to international development cooperation*, Utrecht, 2011.

10 Letter (dated September 30, 2021) of the then CEO of Cordaid while presenting a booklet (*‘Een andere wereld is mogelijk’* [‘Another world is possible’] about the history of ICCO.

Box: Six major challenges for INGDOs

As this is a constituency with which I am a bit more familiar, I take the liberty to elaborate a bit more on the crisis of the INGDO sector.¹¹ The current situation provides certainly an opportunity for a fundamental rethinking by funding agencies focusing on international development cooperation.

This sector has long struggled with six interrelated fundamental challenges, which - by all appearances - are proving difficult to overcome.

1. **Development paradigm:** The first, and perhaps the biggest challenge, is that many organisations continue to struggle with finding a response to substantial radical changes that have occurred in recent decades: much of the work of INGDOs is still positioned within the now outdated traditional North-South dichotomy; in many organisations, there is still a view that 'we' have to bring development 'there', and employees of donor organisations frequently still see themselves as the 'expert' who has to steer change processes 'over there'.
2. **Capacity development:** In the last two to three decades, the keyword of donors has become capacity building. However, in most countries, the problem of absolute or relative lack of capacities has been resolved. There is among Northern agencies often far too little recognition that local organisations usually have relevant history, knowledge and experience that are usually preferable to foreign 'expertise' that is often inadequate to local situations. The justified demand for what is called 'cognitive justice' is seldom heard.
3. **Partnership issues:** A third, and one of the greatest tragedies of modern private development cooperation, is that INGDOs have in many cases failed to treat organisations from low and middle-income countries as equal partners and graft relationships on mutual respect and reciprocity.
4. **South – South cooperation:** In the aid chain, the number of actors between 'giver' and 'receiver' can reach eight. This raises the question of the added value of INGDOs, which usually cling frenetically to their place (role) in the 'aid chain', while further promoting direct South-South contacts is probably more efficient and effective in many cases.

11 The text of this paragraph was earlier (on December 2, 2024) published as an opinion piece in the Dutch daily newspaper Trouw.

5. Ethnocentric monitoring: the above mentioned points often get clearly manifested within donor guidelines with regard to monitoring. In theory, the implementing organisation must pay attention to accountability in three directions: to those in whose name grants are received (downward accountability); to fellow institutions, civil society and (sometimes) to the government of the country in which the organisation operates (horizontal accountability); to the donors (upward accountability). In reality the focus in many cases is primarily on upward accountability on the basis of substantive priorities and operational guidelines as drawn up by the donors themselves. Decades ago Robert Chambers has therefore rightly asked the question 'Who's reality counts?'. In many cases, such a donor driven approach has led to artificial standardisation and (political) discipline (measuring according to the objectives of the donor). The current state of affairs, has mostly and especially acquired the character of an extractive, transactional process and not of actual co-creation with attention to joint learning.
6. Institutional racism: Sixth and last, a sensitive but very fundamental issue. British historian and Africa expert Basil Davidson (*Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*) and many colleagues from Africa and Asia (including India) have pointed out, already more than 30 years ago, that it is too crazy to think that solutions to problems of continents such as Africa and (South-) Asia should come from outside. Unfortunately, there is still a lot of direct and indirect evidence that a Western sense of superiority and (often hidden institutional) racism is regularly present even in development cooperation.

The Dutch comedian and writer Kees van Kooten has, on the basis of personal experience, argued that: 'Those who are doing relatively well, can unfortunately be painfully wrong when they want to support people elsewhere; without being aware and knowing what they actually did wrong'.¹² Despite appreciation for the great commitment and good intentions of many INGDOs, it must be noted that there is a resistance to change and many pertinent challenges have remained unresolved.

12 Kees van Kooten, *Zwemmen met droog haar [Swimming with dry hair]*, Amsterdam (De Bezige Bij), 1991.

NGDO sector in India – view from a distance

I started this essay by commenting deliberately about INGDOs that operate from the part of the globe where I live and with whom I am a bit more familiar. With regard to an appraisal of the situation in India I want to be a bit more cautious, as it is the privilege of Indian development practitioners and researchers to share their observations, analysis and conclusions.

However, on the basis of a relatively short trip I made in early 2025 with field visits in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Orissa, and a quick review of relevant literature, I have the impression that ‘all is not too well’ and that there are similar challenges as described by Bush and Hadden in their article in *Foreign Affairs*. The ambition to create ‘new politics’, with NGDOs as Non-Party Political Formations¹³ appears to have completely faded. Since 2014 the Indian Government has revoked the registration of thousands of foreign-funded NGOs; organisations seem to be experiencing difficulties with their repositioning, just like their Northern counterparts; there is a glaring shortage of money; the question arises as to what to do with the (often huge) fixed assets which have been acquired with foreign money in the past; furthermore, leaders are getting older – often there is no second line to take over the work are some of my observations.

Joe Madiath, social entrepreneur *avant la lettre*

Now back to Joe. My partner Karin is still using a key ring which has been made from bamboo plywood in the late eighties. It was a small, but a remarkable present from Joe when I visited Gram Vikas. At that time, Gram Vikas had started a small bamboo plywood factory and requested ICCO for a loan, not a grant. (Incidentally, this led to much discussion within ICCO, because we were grant makers, not a lending facility, and did not have the policies, systems, and procedures in place to deal with such a request.)

I was sent by ICCO to visit the bamboo plywood factory to provide feedback with regard to this somewhat unusual request of Gram Vikas. The visit to the factory turned out to be an interesting but also somewhat hilarious, surreal experience. The philosophy and rationale for the factory was explained to me in detail. During this visit, a somewhat nervous factory manager (in a neat black suit and tie) operated the press in such a manner that it produced some toxic

13 Ref. among others Harsh Sethi with Smithu Kothari (eds), *The Non-Party Political Process: Uncertain Alternatives*, New Delhi (UNRISD/LOKAYANO, 1983.

smoke and substances that made us all run outside. At the end of it all, the request to provide a loan was approved. (Incidentally, I do not know whether ICCO ever asked Gram Vikas for the loan to be repaid.)

In the late eighties and early nineties, the concept of social entrepreneurship was not so well known as it is being practiced nowadays in a number of countries. One of the first major publications about this subject was a book by David Bornstein 'How to change the world; Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas', which was published only in 2007. Currently the concept of social entrepreneurship is widely known and accepted. However, very unfortunately there continues to exist many different definitions of social entrepreneurship, and there is a lot of confusion about what constitutes 'real/genuine' social business.¹⁴

I perceive social business is a strategic approach towards a much broader political-economic discourse that aims at fundamentally transforming the neo-liberal development model through a combined strategy of interrelated local and global action. It is an approach whereby alternative business models are positioned with the broader macro-economic systemic change processes.¹⁵

Social business are organisations that use business principles to create 'blended value'¹⁶ in a (financially) sustainable manner in order to contribute to systemic societal change. It should especially be noted that in a social business, the social and financial purposes are intertwined.¹⁷ In short, it is an attempt to take back the economy.

If I look back at the experiment of Gram Vikas' bamboo plywood factory, I realise that a very significant development had taken place at Gram Vikas even before there was any much discussion on social business. Joe Madiath had obviously decided, without engaging in extensive ideological or theoretical discussions, to start experimenting with a more social entrepreneurial approach to facilitating change processes in a geographical area, such as the operational

14 For a succinct overview of various definitions see among others Tanja Collavo, *Foundations of Social Entrepreneurship; Theory, Practical Tools and Skills*, London (Routledge), 2023, especially Chapter 1.

15 Ref Fons van der Velden (ed.) *Social Business; Transformational approach to a fair and just society*, New Delhi (Rawat Publications), 2019 especially the Introduction and Chapter II.

16 The concept of Blended Value has been developed by Jed Emerson. Within the context of the operational area of Gram Vikas this may contain components such as reducing poverty and inequality, contributing to social justice and gender equity in particular, improved environment, and enhanced democracy.

17 Ibid.

area of Gram Vikas, where abject poverty, exclusion and human rights violations were commonplace. I remember that during this same period, a large housing project was carried out with a loan from the Dutch Postcode Lottery. Voila, this is certainly a case of social entrepreneurship *avant la lettre*.

The Water and Sanitation Programme: a unique combination Civic Driven Change and Social Business

Many of us know that Joe is sometimes a somewhat restless man who is always keen to develop something new with innovative ideas and puts them into practice. So, a few years after the smoke from the bamboo plywood factory had cleared, a new idea had already emerged: the Gram Vikas Water and Sanitation Programme.

On the website of Gram Vikas this programme is described as follows: 'We motivate communities to adopt safe sanitation and hygiene behaviour and help build household infrastructure. Our integrated water and sanitation model reduces incidences of water-borne diseases and lowers malnutrition rates thereby keeping children and families healthy. Access to private, safe toilets and bathrooms with water affords women dignity and reduces the daily drudgery of fetching and carrying water'. It is furthermore stated that 'The Movement and Action Network for Transformation of Rural Areas (MANTRA) approach promotes a socially inclusive, gender equitable, self-managed and financially viable model of sustainable and holistic development, where everybody benefits. The principles that guide our approach demonstrate our commitment to such a development process'.¹⁸

In this programme it is assured that every single household in a village is included; that the community contributes significantly to the capital investments and bears the cost of maintenance of the facilities; are actively involved in all stages of the programme; with special emphasis on the active involvement of women and poor and marginalised communities; that measures are taken to safeguard financial sustainability. As per the information of Gram Vikas, this Water and Sanitation Programme has in the meantime been implemented in 1,200 villages where 80,000 families have toilets and bathrooms. This comprehensive programme has of course tremendous implications for different spheres of life including self-respect and dignity; gender equity; health; work, et cetera.

¹⁸ Gram Vikas website visited on September 29, 2025.

Social business leaders are often 'doers', Peattie and Morley¹⁹ argue rightly that 'such personality types may be inclined towards benign autocracy rather than participation and particularly democratic approaches'.²⁰ However, benign autocracy seems out of place in social business.

The beauty of the Water and Sanitation Programme of Gram Vikas is not only that it has a tremendous impact at community level, but that it also makes an important contribution to development theory by combining the best elements of a Social Business approach to transformation processes and what is in the meantime called Civic Driven Change.²¹

In various publications Biekart and Fowler argue that Civic Driven Change: 'Gives primacy to civic agency – people's action in shaping society – which happens in all walks of life'.²² They argue furthermore among others that 'At best, aid agencies with good intentions and practices that - at a minimum 'do no harm' - can play at most a facilitating role'.

The latter is in my view exactly what Gram Vikas does in the Water and Sanitation Programme which is a unique combination of a Civic Driven Change and a Social Business approach towards transformational change processes.

Epilogue: Joe Madiath as an innovator

We as development practitioners and academics owe Gram Vikas and Joe Madiath, in particular, a lot for his contribution to praxis based innovative approaches to development theory and practical applications for the development sector at large.

The importance of this contribution by Joe and his colleagues, in my opinion, goes far beyond the NGDO-sector in India and is relevant for the international NGDO sector as well.

19 K. Peattie, K. & A. Morley, (n.d.), *Social Enterprises: Diversity and dynamics, contexts and contributions*, Cardiff, (Economic & Social Research Council), page 8.

20 Liam Black, L., *The social entrepreneur's A to Z; On anxiety, leadership and getting enough sleep*, London, (London Fields Publishing Ltd), 2014, page 8.

21 K. Fowler & A. Fowler, *Civic Driven Change; A concise guide to the basics*, The Hague (Institute of Social Studies) 2008, page 9.

22 Ibid, page 15.

In order to take back the economy, to develop further relevant strategies and tactics in the present geopolitical context, requires of course much more action and research. I am sure that the present Gram Vikas leadership, while standing on the broad and tall shoulders of Joe Madiath, will carry forward this search through collaborative action research.

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THE ENDURING VALUE OF CIVIL SOCIETY INSTITUTIONS: LESSONS FROM GRAM VIKAS



N E E L I M A K H E T A N

From Tocqueville to Ambedkar: Civil Society and the Making of Democratic Life

In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville, travelling across America, marvelled at how ordinary citizens constantly formed associations – for politics, religion, welfare, and even leisure. He described them as the “schools of democracy,” where people learned the everyday habits of cooperation, deliberation, and self-rule. These associations, he argued, were not incidental to democracy but its lifeblood.

More than a century later, Robert Putnam, in *Making Democracy Work* (1993), reached a similar conclusion in his study of Italy’s regional governments. Where civic associations were dense and long-standing, institutions functioned more effectively. Where civic life was weak, even the best-designed political systems floundered. In his later work, *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam worried about the decline of associational life in the United States, linking it to fraying trust and democratic backsliding.

Tocqueville and Putnam remind us that the strength of societies lies not only in formal institutions of state and market, but also in the fabric of civic associations that link citizens to one another. States and markets mostly work vertically – through authority or exchange – with the citizen often getting reduced to being a client or a consumer.

Civic associations, by contrast, build horizontal solidarities: habits of trust, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility that allow people to solve problems together. Many of the deepest challenges in Indian society – from child marriage to son preference, from caste exclusion to environmental stewardship – cannot be resolved by policy decrees or market incentives alone. They require citizens themselves to shift norms and practices. Civic associations matter because they are the seedbeds where such social change takes root, generation after generation.

This is especially resonant in India. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar warned while drafting the Constitution, political democracy in India was “a top-dressing on an undemocratic soil.” The Constitution could design rights and institutions, but it could not by itself undo centuries of caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and social inequality. In that light, civil society is not decorative – it must be the terrain where deeper transformation occurs.

Mahatma Gandhi, too, envisioned a social order in which the power of the state is mediated and bound by the moral force of associations and local institutions. His emphasis on the constructive programme – village sanitation, khadi, basic education, eradication of untouchability, and voluntary associations – was not an add-on to politics, but a foundation for it. Gandhi ji’s ashrams and the associational experiments they seeded across the country were micro-spaces for practicing non-violent democracy, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. In Gandhi ji’s vision, such associations are not substitutes for the state, but the soil in which democratic life must be rooted – the active, moral, participatory ground that gives depth to constitutional democracy.

Gram Vikas in Odisha, alongside others such as Seva Mandir in Rajasthan (which I have known somewhat longer), belong to this tradition – as living instantiations of what democracy can demand of the everyday. They are not just development NGOs; they are long-standing civil society institutions that have cultivated social capital, nurtured democratic habits at the village level, and enabled communities to undertake the slow, profound work of reshaping themselves – in ways that are more just and more democratic.

Continuity Amidst Churn

There was a time when civil society organizations across the world were seen as part of a long arc of social change – shaping values, and nurturing citizens' capacities to act together. Over the past few decades, that horizon has narrowed. As funding became more tightly tied to tangible, measurable outcomes, development practice was recast into projects and log-frames, each with a beginning, an end, and a metric of success. The language of “impact” replaced the patience of institution-building. And in the process, social change became projects, and institutions became vendors. In such a landscape, organizations that have simply stayed – year after year, through shifting donor priorities and funding cycles – have become rarities. Their very continuity is a reminder of what sustained presence can make possible.

Gram Vikas's presence in Odisha since the mid-1970s illustrates the societal value of staying power. From land and forest rights struggles to water and sanitation systems, from livelihoods and education to today's climate challenges, the organisation has remained a steady ally to rural and Adivasi communities. Its constancy built the kind of generational trust that cannot be manufactured by short-term interventions.

The organisation's own recent reflection exercise, Learning from the Past, Reading the Present, Planning for the Future, underscores this point. The study of Gram Vikas's residential schools (in which I was involved) found that children of largely illiterate Adivasi families – where female literacy was below 5% in the early 1980s – went on to graduate, enter diverse professions, and change occupational trajectories not only for themselves but for their families and villages. Women, in particular, made striking generational leaps, moving into teaching, government jobs, and leadership roles.

What made such a transformation possible was not only the quality of the residential schools themselves – though they were unusual institutions in their time, and have since become highly aspirational – but the fact that these schools were part of a wider ecosystem of relationships that Gram Vikas had patiently built with the communities around them. The trust that parents placed in sending their children away to study, the confidence with which alumni returned to serve their villages, and the credibility that Gram Vikas carried as a long-term companion to their struggles – all these formed the invisible scaffolding that made for the success of the schools.

Social Capital in Action

Putnam's central concept of social capital – the networks, trust, and norms that enable collective action – is not abstract in the Gram Vikas story. It is embodied in everyday practice. From water and sanitation committees to school committees, Gram Vikas has consistently helped create local bodies that persist beyond project cycles. These institutions have become places where villagers deliberate, decide, and act together – practicing democracy in its most ordinary and tangible form. In Gram Vikas's residential schools, children of different castes lived and ate together, quietly changing entrenched taboos. Such daily practices did not erase caste hierarchies overnight, but they shifted what was thinkable – establishing new baselines of acceptance and respect. Over time, alumni of these schools have formed their own networks: vertically, by becoming role models for younger generations and opening pathways into new occupations; and horizontally, by building peer solidarity and mutual support.

The societal value here lies not merely in the delivery of education, water systems, or livelihoods, but in the embedding of collective habits – of sitting together, negotiating, deciding, and acting in concert. These are precisely the associational practices Tocqueville once called the “schools of democracy,” and the dense civic networks that Putnam saw as the foundation of effective institutions. In nurturing them, Gram Vikas has helped communities build not only material assets but the deeper infrastructure of cooperation and trust.

Why does longevity matter?

Longevity is not merely a measure of time; it is a condition for depth. When an organisation remains rooted in a place long enough, it begins to occupy a different moral and social space – no longer an external actor but a familiar presence woven into local life. Continuity allows relationships to grow more real. Over time, working together through both success and setback, builds a special trust. It also builds the space to question each other, to disagree, to admit when things have not worked. And not just between organisations and communities, but within organisations too, that same longevity creates spaces for reflection and humility, for recognising how much of change is uncertain and shared.

In Gram Vikas's story, the value of time reveals itself first through trust. Communities that were initially skeptical – even resistant – came to see the organisation as an “all-weather friend.” This trust was not won through

persuasion alone but through the slow proof of constancy: returning year after year, showing up in moments of difficulty, standing by commitments. It was this long horizon of credibility because of which parents in the 1980s sent their children, often first-generation learners, to residential schools far from home. Time also nurtures institutional memory – the capacity to learn from missteps and adapt without losing one’s bearings. When Gram Vikas’s early non-formal education centres faltered, the organisation carried those lessons forward, building residential schools that endured. The shift was not just programmatic but philosophical: from offering short-term instruction to creating spaces of care, continuity, and aspiration. Such evolution is possible only when an organisation stays embedded long enough to see its own experiments fail, mature, and evolve.

Finally, longevity allows for generational impact. The addition of Class 10 in Gram Vikas’s school in Kankia, in 1999, was a game changer; 40 children sat for the board exam in the first year, of whom 17 cleared it. And the incredible part of the story is that each one of these 17 children went on to secure a government job. Their success rippled outward, altering what entire villages imagined possible. Younger siblings followed new educational paths; parents invested differently in their children’s futures. These “role model effects” are cumulative: each generation expands the horizon of the next.

Intergenerational Change as “Deerghasthayi Vikas”

The Gram Vikas reflection exercise used a powerful phrase: deerghasthayi vikas – sustainable, long-term development. Intergenerational change is its essence. The study shows how:

- Gen-0, largely illiterate, trusted Gram Vikas enough to send their children to school.
- Gen-1, the first-decade cohorts, became teachers, health workers, government employees, entrepreneurs, and sportspeople. Women, in particular, saw unprecedented mobility.
- Gen-2, children of alumni, now enter school with different aspirations and possibilities, often in private or better-equipped institutions.

This “staircase” of change – or as the report puts it, “a hand protecting a candle against the wind” – is exactly what long-standing institutions enable. Development is not the delivery of goods or services; it is the shaping of life trajectories over decades.

Looking Ahead: Why These Institutions Still Matter

If Gram Vikas mattered in the 1970s and 1980s, when literacy rates were abysmal and water systems absent, why does it matter now, in an India of digital platforms, expansive welfare schemes, and corporate social responsibility projects?

Today's development landscape looks very different from the one in which Gram Vikas came of age. The state is far more present, and its reach far deeper. Markets, too, now touch the remotest villages through digital technologies and supply chains. Yet this growing presence of the state and market has paradoxically thinned the space in between – the civic sphere where citizens organise, deliberate, and act together.

Building or sustaining such spaces has become harder. Civil society organisations are now expected to demonstrate measurable outcomes within short cycles, often in domains defined by others. Funding is increasingly fragmented, episodic, and compliance-driven. The moral legitimacy of NGOs themselves is sometimes under attack, eroded by suspicion or the demand for constant proof of efficiency. In this environment, the very qualities that once made institutions like Gram Vikas valuable – patience, embeddedness, experimentation – are the hardest to sustain.

And yet, it is precisely because of these constraints that such institutions remain indispensable.

Bridging scales: Organisations like Gram Vikas play a mediating role that neither the state nor the market can easily fulfil. They translate global discourses – on sanitation, climate adaptation, gender equality, or digital learning – into practices that make sense locally. Just as (or even more) importantly, they carry local experience back upward, ensuring that policy and research remain connected to lived realities.

Institutional ballast: As civic space narrows and development becomes increasingly technocratic, rooted institutions provide continuity, moral ballast, and voice. They keep alive the idea that people are not “beneficiaries” but agents – capable of diagnosing their own problems, making decisions, and shaping the institutions that govern their lives.

Future resilience: With climate change, migration, and digital disruption reshaping rural lives, trusted local institutions will determine whether communities adapt or are overwhelmed. Gram Vikas's history offers clues: its long engagement with water systems, education, and livelihoods created capacities for collective action that can now be turned toward newer risks – from climate shocks to the social isolation of migration. Its embeddedness allows it to be there long enough for communities to find their own footing.

To build or even sustain such institutions today demands a different kind of courage. It requires donors and governments willing to value patience over performance, and leaderships ready to see accountability as something owed first to people, not to metrics. Above all, it calls for a renewal of faith in the civic – in the belief that enduring change still depends on citizens acting together, in trust.

Humour, Hospitality and Endurance

The story of Gram Vikas is inseparable from the story of Joe Madiath and the companions who made Mohuda their home in the 1970s. What began as a small collective of young people moved by conviction has, over five decades, grown into an enduring institution – one that has stayed true to its founding impulse while continually renewing its ways of working. As Gram Vikas marks fifty years of this journey, and Joe turns seventy-five, the milestone feels less like a celebration of longevity than a recognition of fidelity – to people, to place, and to the idea that genuine change begins with trust.

Those who have known Joe over the years will speak as readily of his humour and hospitality as of his leadership – qualities that made Mohuda not just a workplace but a home. That spirit of warmth and camaraderie has, in many ways, shaped the culture of Gram Vikas itself: an organisation serious in purpose but light in tone, confident enough to laugh, and generous enough to welcome all who come its way. And therein lies the durability of both the man and the institution – in a willingness to listen, to learn, and to remain present through the long arc of transformation.

If, as Tocqueville, Gandhi, and Ambedkar each argued in their own ways, democracy's deepest work happens in the moral life of communities, then institutions like Gram Vikas are not marginal to development – they are its very core and its most enduring foundation.



NEELIMA KHETAN IN A VILLAGE MEETING DURING THE STUDY ON INTERGENERATIONAL IMPACT OF GRAM VIKAS' EDUCATION PROGRAMME (2023)

Neelima Khetan has over four decades of experience of working on developmental and social challenges. She has worked extensively with civil society organisations, notably Seva Mandir in Rajasthan, where she worked for 25 years, and led its work for a decade. She has also worked with large corporations handling their Corporate Social Responsibility portfolios and currently serves on the boards of several foundations and not-for-profit organisations. She is a respected advisor and senior practitioner on development issues, especially strategy, governance, design and impact. She was a member of Gram Vikas Society between 2003 and 2012. She co-edited the book “Anchoring Change - Seventy Five Years of Grassroots Interventions that Made a Difference” published in 2022.



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