

YOUNG

**Khushaal
Bachpan**

POWER

Children
as Agents
of Change



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MESSAGE

It gives me immense joy to present Young Power: Children as Agents of Change a compendium of inspiring stories that demonstrate the remarkable leadership, courage, and agency of children in shaping their communities. At Caritas India, we are committed to ensuring that every child enjoys a safe, healthy, nurturing, and dignified childhood and is empowered to realise their full potential. Caritas India firmly believes that children are not merely beneficiaries of development efforts but rightsholders and active contributors to social transformation. The stories captured in this compendium affirm that when children are provided opportunities, encouragement, and supportive spaces, they emerge as capable leaders who can influence decisions and herald positive change.

Through Khushaal Bachpan programme in Chhattisgarh, children have been encouraged to understand their rights, organise themselves on the plank of Bal Panchayats, engage with local governance institutions, and participate in democratic processes such as Gram Sabhas. Their collective actions have brought attention to issues affecting their lives and communities, while also demonstrating that children's perspectives can make governance systems more responsive and accountable. These stories illustrate how informed and organised children can become a constructive force for local development and active citizenship.



I extend my sincere appreciation to Caritas Australia, a long standing and valued partner of Caritas India, for its steadfast technical and financial support that has made this journey possible. I would also like to acknowledge Ms. Paige Wilson for her accompaniment, encouragement, and commitment to advancing children's rights and participation. I also salute the child champions and dedicate this compendium as a tribute to their solidarity, courage, and determination to bring about positive change. As you read these stories, I hope you will discover not only the power of children to create change today but also the promise they hold as the responsible leaders and citizens of tomorrow.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Fr. Jesudass R.'.

Fr. Jesudass R.
Executive Director, Caritas India

INTRODUCTION

The right of children to participate in decisions affecting their lives is unequivocally established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 of the Convention recognizes the right of every child to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. The right to participation extends beyond family and school environments to public decision-making processes, including governance institutions and community forums where decisions are taken that directly or indirectly affect children's lives.

A rights-based perspective to childhood views children not merely as passive beneficiaries of development interventions but as rights holders and active social actors capable of contributing to social change. Participation is therefore not simply a method of consultation but an essential component of democratic governance. When children engage with governance systems, they bring dimensions that are often overlooked by adults but hold critical importance to generational preparedness. Their experiences relating to education, health, protection, sanitation, safety, recreation, and social inclusion help governance institutions become more responsive, accountable, and sensitive to community needs.

Children can play a constructive role in local governance by identifying issues affecting their lives, prioritizing community concerns, proposing solutions, and engaging in dialogue with decision makers. Wherever children have obtained space and found their voice in governance processes, they have often surprised adults with their insight, practical understanding of local realities, and

nonpartisan approach to addressing community issues. Their participation contributes to better informed decision making and strengthens the democratic character of local institutions. In many contexts, children's collective action has helped draw attention to issues such as school infrastructure, access to drinking water, sanitation facilities, child protection concerns, and environmental conservation. Far from being passive recipients of development, children often emerge as catalysts of positive change within their communities.

One of the unique strengths of children's participation is its ability to unite diverse groups of the community around a common agenda. Children's concerns are inherently inclusive, sensitive to the needs of others, and oriented towards the future. Regardless of political affiliation, social background, or ideological position, communities generally recognize that investments in children are investments for the future. Children's agenda therefore possesses an unusual capacity to bring together families, community leaders, local governments, and civil society actors in pursuit of common goals. When children speak about their rights and aspirations, they often create spaces for constructive dialogue that transcends social and political divisions.

Khushaal Bachpan, which Caritas India implements in 5 districts of Chhattisgarh, places children's participation at the centre of its approach to child rights and community development. Khushaal Bachpan, supported by Caritas Australia, recognizes that today's children will become tomorrow's decision makers, leaders, and citizens. Consequently, Khushaal Bachpan works to enhance children's awareness, abilities, confidence, and leadership



skills so that they can engage with local governance institutions as informed rights holders. Khushaal Bachpan seeks to create an enabling environment in which children can understand their rights, articulate their concerns, and participate meaningfully in processes that shape their future.

The first step that Khushaal Bachpan took in this direction was the formation of Bal Panchayats, which serve as democratic platforms for collective action by children. These child-led institutions provide opportunities for children to discuss issues affecting their lives, identify priorities, develop leadership skills, and build collective voice. Experience from Khushaal Bachpan demonstrates that Bal Panchayats become powerful platforms through which children converge around common concerns and take those concerns to local governance institutions for action. Children possess tremendous power to influence social change. Their moral authority, clarity of purpose, and collective voice often succeed in mobilizing communities and prodding governance systems to respond.

With the support of Khushaal Bachpan, children have increasingly begun to participate in Gram Sabhas and other village level decision making forums. Rather than remaining passive bystanders, they are emerging as active contributors to local governance processes. A significant testimony to this growing engagement was witnessed on 14 April, when Gram Sabha meetings were held across the Khushaal Bachpan intervention areas. On that day, children's collectives supported by Khushaal Bachpan submitted 63 memoranda in 25 Gram Panchayats. These memoranda reflected children's priorities and demands and represented an important exercise in democratic participation and collective campaign.

Such initiatives demonstrate that children's participation is not merely symbolic. When adequately informed, organized, and supported, children can contribute meaningfully to local development. Their collective actions have already helped bring community issues to the attention of local authorities and have encouraged more responsive governance practices. In many instances,

children's engagement has served as a catalyst for improvements in local services and infrastructure, thereby contributing to broader community development outcomes.

Ultimately, children's participation in governance is about nurturing informed, capable, responsive, and responsible citizens. Children should not grow up merely as passive recipients of decisions made by parents, elders, and institutions. They should be encouraged to develop their capacities, exercise their rights responsibly, engage constructively with democratic processes, and contribute to the wellbeing of their communities. By investing in children's participation today, society strengthens the foundations of accountable governance, active citizenship, and sustainable development for the future.

The stories presented in this compendium are a testament to the leadership, agency, and transformative potential of children. They demonstrate that when children are informed, organised, and supported, they can become powerful agents of change within their communities and local governance systems. These examples of children's leadership reflect the core belief of Caritas India that children are not merely beneficiaries of development but active rights holders and contributors to social change. This journey would not have been possible without the technical and financial support of Caritas Australia, a long-standing partner of Caritas India, whose steadfast commitment has helped create opportunities for children to find their space and voice and shape their future.

Dr. Saju MK
Programme Lead, Caritas India





01

Children Lead the Fight for Relocation of School

In Remhla, a small forest surrounded village in the Sarguja district of Chhattisgarh, the middle school building had for decades been a space of learning, laughter, and morning assemblies. Over time, however, the structure began to deteriorate. By July 2025, deep cracks had appeared on the walls, the roof leaked during rains, and pieces of plaster occasionally fell without warning. What was once a safe and familiar place gradually became a source of fear, affecting the daily learning of children.

“When we sat in the new classroom for the first time, it felt like a new life. We felt safe. We felt heard.”

- Ansh Kumar,
A member of Bal Panchayat

“Sometimes, while writing, a piece of the roof would fall near our desk,” recalled Laxmi, a Class 7 student. “We used to sit together in one corner, hoping that the roof would not collapse.” Parents grew increasingly anxious, and some stopped sending their children to school altogether. Attendance declined sharply, and discussions in the village often centred on fears that the building might collapse one day. While the larger community hesitated to act, the children of the Remhla Bal Panchayat decided something had to be done.

The issue first came to light during a Bal Panchayat meeting on 25 July 2025. Formed under the Khushaal Bachpan programme, the Bal Panchayat provides children with a platform to discuss community issues and engage with local decision makers. During the meeting, Pawan Pando, the Bal Panchayat President and a Class 7 student, spoke firmly. “Every day we enter that classroom is a risk. If we keep waiting, something bad will happen. We must act now.”

Encouraged by the training received through Khushaal Bachpan, Pawan and other members organised a detailed inspection of the school. With guidance from their teacher, they documented widening cracks, unstable walls, and the sagging roof. They took photographs and recorded their observations. Later, they shared their findings with parents, helping the wider community understand the seriousness of the situation. Determined to seek a solution, the children decided to raise the issue



during the Gram Sabha held on 16 August 2025. On the day of the meeting, they sat together in the front row, nervous but determined. When their turn came, Roshni Korva, a Class 6 student, stood up and addressed the gathering. “If we wait any longer, someone will get hurt. We want a safe school. We don't want to drop out of school.” Her words left a strong impression on the community. The Sarpanch assured the children that the matter would be addressed immediately.

The Education Department responded by arranging a temporary solution. Middle school classes were shifted to the nearby primary school building and operated in two shifts. While this reduced the immediate danger, new challenges emerged. Children from distant hamlets returned home late, younger students struggled with overlapping schedules, and learning time was reduced. Recognising these difficulties, the Bal Panchayat met again. “This is better than the broken building. But it's not right. We need a proper, permanent place,” said Vikas Pando, a senior member.

The children, together with teachers, returned to the Gram Sabha with a new proposal. They

suggested relocating the middle school to the Panchayat Bhawan, an unused, spacious, and safe building. Presenting clear arguments on safety, accessibility, and uninterrupted learning, they convinced village leaders to consider the proposal. After discussion, the Gram Sabha passed a resolution approving the relocation. Within weeks, the Panchayat Bhawan was cleaned, repaired, and prepared as a functional school. On 25 August 2025, desks, teaching materials, and classroom facilities were shifted to the new location.

“When we sat in the new classroom for the first time, it felt like a new life,” said Ansh Kumar, a Bal Panchayat member. “We felt safe. We felt heard.” Attendance improved immediately. Parents regained confidence in the school, and teachers noticed renewed enthusiasm among students. The experience demonstrated how informed and organised children can successfully engage with local governance systems and bring meaningful change to their communities. ■



02

Children and Mothers Lead Safety Initiative

For the residents of Kataipali village of Raigarh district, travelling after sunset had long been difficult and dangerous. The village is connected only by an unpaved forest road that passes through a dense jungle, known for frequent elephant movement and sudden attacks, especially during the evening and night. With no houses or settlements along the route, children, women, and elderly villagers had little chance of getting help in an emergency. Children crossed this forest road every day to attend schools in nearby villages, leaving early and returning before sunset to avoid the risk of elephant encounters. During the rainy season, mud and poor visibility made the journey even more hazardous, forcing villagers to travel in groups for safety.

“Whenever my children crossed the forest for school, I remained worried until they returned home. Even during the daytime, we were afraid because elephant movement could happen anytime.”

- Phulwati,
A member of the
Mothers Group.

“Whenever my children crossed the forest for school, I remained worried until they returned home,” said Phulwati, a member of the Mothers Group. “Even during the daytime, we were afraid because elephant movement could happen anytime”, she said. The fear increased during evenings, when villagers returning from markets, schools, or work had to cross the isolated road. With no shelter or security arrangements, they had no safe place to wait or seek help during emergencies.

Monika, another Mothers Group member, recalled the anxiety faced by women in the village. “The forest road becomes very silent after evening. If somebody gets delayed, the whole family becomes tense because there is no mobile network and no houses nearby,” she said.

Recognising the seriousness of the issue, the mothers and children decided to raise the matter collectively before the Panchayat. During preparations for the Gram Sabha to be held on 26 January 2026, members of the Mothers Group and Bal Panchayat discussed possible solutions. Together, they prepared a memorandum demanding appointment of guards and construction of a shelter along the forest road.



“We discussed the issue together because we were facing the same danger while going to school,” said Manju Rathiya, Bal Panchayat President. “We wanted a place where people could get help if elephants appeared on the road”, she added.

On 26 January 2026, during the Gram Sabha, the memorandum was formally submitted to the village Sarpanch. The children explained how unsafe road was affecting education, daily travel, and the confidence of villagers. They requested the Panchayat to coordinate with the Forest Department for immediate action.

Ananya Yadav, Vice President of the Bal Panchayat, shared her experience during the meeting. “Sometimes we crossed the forest very quickly because we were scared. We requested the Panchayat to arrange guards so that children could travel more safely,” she said.

After reviewing the request, the Panchayat forwarded it to the Forest Department, which constructed a shelter near the midpoint of the forest road and deployed guards within two months. By April 2026, two guards had started duty along the forest route. The guards monitor elephant movement and escort villagers

travelling after 5:30 PM until they safely cross the forest stretch.

Rajani, a Mothers Group member, described the change after the intervention. “Earlier, people avoided travelling after evening because of fear. Now, at least there is support available on the road,” she said.

Parents now allow children to attend classes and activities with less anxiety compared to before. The shelter has also become a resting point for elderly villagers and women travelling through the route.■



03 Children Bring Road Connectivity Issue to Gram Sabha

For the children of Sihardand village in Jashpur district, travelling outside the village was often difficult and risky. The village was connected to the main road through a pothole filled, unpaved road that children used daily to attend school, while villagers relied on the same route to access health services, markets, and government offices. During the monsoon, the road frequently became muddy and slippery, making travel dangerous and sometimes nearly impossible.

Among those most affected were the children. Many students had to leave home early to reach school on time, and during heavy rains some were forced to miss classes altogether. Parents worried about their children's safety, especially when they had to walk long distances through damaged stretches of road. Despite repeated discussions among villagers, no formal action had been taken to address the issue.

In December 2025, children participating in the Khushaal Bachpan programme formed a Bal Panchayat in the village. Through regular meetings, they learned about children's rights, local governance, and the role of the Gram Sabha in addressing community concerns. During one such meeting, the poor condition of the village road emerged as a common issue affecting children, women, and elderly residents.

“We realized that almost every family in the village was facing the same problem,” said Nirjala Ekka, President of the Bal Panchayat and a Class VII student. “When we learned that citizens could raise issues in the Gram Sabha, we decided to speak about the road.”

On 26 January 2026, during the Republic Day Gram Sabha, the children formally presented their memorandum to the village leadership. They were joined by School Management Committee President Sandeep Ekka and members of the Community Action Group formed under Khushaal Bachpan.

“We often discuss school related challenges, but this was the first time children themselves formally raised an infrastructure issue in the Gram Sabha. Their participation encouraged many adults to support the proposal.”

- Sandeep Ekka
President of SMC



The memorandum highlighted how the poor road condition was affecting school attendance, access to healthcare, transportation of agricultural produce, and emergency services. The children requested the Panchayat to prioritize road construction and coordinate with relevant government departments.

Village Sarpanch Indravati Bhagat listened to the concerns raised by the children and community members. The issue was discussed during the Gram Sabha, and participants agreed that road connectivity was one of the village's most urgent needs.

"The children presented their concerns with confidence and clear reasons," said Sarpanch Indravati Bhagat. "Their participation helped the Gram Sabha recognize the importance of acting on this issue." Sandeep Ekka, President of the School Management Committee, appreciated the initiative taken by the children. "We often discuss school related challenges, but this was the first time children themselves formally raised an infrastructure issue in the Gram Sabha. Their participation encouraged many adults to support the proposal."

Several Bal Panchayat members also shared their

experiences. "We sometimes miss school during heavy rains because the road becomes difficult to walk on," said Sweeti Ekka, an active Bal Panchayat member. "Speaking in front of the Gram Sabha was new for us, but we felt confident because we were speaking for our village," shared Siyon Ekka, a Bal Panchayat member.

Following the submission of the memorandum, the Panchayat initiated discussions with the concerned authorities on road development. The issue was formally recorded in the Gram Sabha proceedings, creating an official basis for follow up action. Within a month, construction work commenced. The pothole filled, boulder strewn track was gradually transformed into an all weather cement concrete road and opened for villagers in April 2026, demonstrating the power of children's collective action.

The process also showed how children can effectively engage with local governance systems when given opportunities and guidance. Today, the road issue remains a shared priority for the village. More importantly, the experience has strengthened children's confidence that their voices can influence local decision making. ■



04 Children's Panchayat Launches Campaign for Girls' Toilet

For the members of the Children's Panchayat at the Learning Centre in Chhadia village, weekly meetings were a space to discuss school life and issues affecting children in their community. During an orientation session in early January, the facilitator introduced the children to their rights and responsibilities and explained the roles of local authorities such as the school headmaster, School Management Committee (SMC), and Gram Panchayat. As the discussion progressed, one concern quickly emerged among the girls.

The children realised that the absence of a proper toilet for girls was an issue linked to health, dignity, and education.

Several girls explained that their school did not have a usable toilet for them. This meant they either had to wait until they returned home or find alternatives outside the school premises. The situation affected their comfort during school hours and sometimes led to irregular attendance. The children realised that the absence of a proper toilet for girls was an issue linked to health, dignity, and education.

During a Children's Panchayat meeting, members discussed how they could raise the issue with responsible authorities. The group, led by president Dimple along with members Himanshu and Jigyasha, agreed to prepare a written application highlighting the need for a functional girls' toilet.

On 20 January, the children submitted their application to the school headmaster, Mr. Dharendra Kumar Verma, and village Sarpanch Ms. Sarita Ugendra Dewangan. In the letter, they explained how the lack of a girls' toilet was affecting students' daily routines and requested action from the Panchayat.

“We wrote that girls should have the same basic facilities as boys in the school,” said Ritu, president of the Children's Panchayat. The children decided to raise the issue further in the upcoming Gram Sabha. They prepared themselves to explain how the lack of sanitation facilities was affecting girls and why action was urgently needed.



On 31 January, the application was presented before the Gram Sabha. Members of the Children's Panchayat attended the meeting along with Learning Centre mentor Ms. Shubhashini Yadav. The children explained how the absence of a girls' toilet was affecting students' health, comfort, and participation in school activities. After hearing their concerns, the Sarpanch assured them that the Panchayat would address the matter.

The children continued their efforts and on 25 February presented the issue during a School Management Committee meeting. They explained that a functional toilet would improve attendance and create a safer and more supportive environment for girls.

“If the school has a toilet for girls, students will feel comfortable attending classes for the whole day,” said Dimple.

The SMC members acknowledged the concern and discussed possible solutions with Panchayat representatives. Soon after, the Panchayat inspected the existing toilet structure within the school premises. It was found that the facility had already been constructed but remained unused because of poor maintenance. The

Panchayat decided to repair the structure and make it operational.

On 26 February, the toilet was officially opened for use by the girls of the school. Responsibility for managing the facility was entrusted to Children's Panchayat members Dimple and Jigyasha, while teachers agreed to supervise its proper use. The children also encouraged younger students to keep the facility clean and accessible.

“We told the younger students that the toilet should be kept clean so everyone can use it properly,” said Himanshu.

Today, the girls of Chhadia Middle School have access to a safe and functional toilet facility. The initiative strengthened the children's understanding of local governance and demonstrated how organised participation can improve essential school facilities. Their efforts showed that when children collectively raise their concerns, they can help bring meaningful changes to their learning environment and ensure that schools become safer, more inclusive spaces for all students.■



05 Children-Led Action Secures Safe Learning Space

Siwardand is a remote village in Jashpur district where access to child friendly educational spaces remains limited. Under Caritas India's Khushaal Bachpan programme, a Learning Corner was established to support children's education through structured activities beyond regular school hours. For nearly six months, the Learning Corner functioned from a vacant private building within the village.

The Learning Corner became a regular space for educational engagement, attended by children from different age groups. Activities included foundational learning, games based education, and group discussions facilitated by trained community volunteers. According to Rahim Ekka, academic mentor, attendance remained consistent throughout this period.

The arrangement faced an unexpected challenge when the landowner requested the building back for agricultural use in September 2025. As a result, Learning Corner activities were temporarily shifted to the school premises. While this ensured continuity, space constraints and school schedules limited the scope of activities.

The situation was discussed on 24 September 2025 among children attending the Learning Corner. Members of the village Bal Panchayat raised concerns about the lack of a dedicated space. "We felt the Learning Corner should have its own place, like before," said Dipesh Toppo, a 14 year old Bal Panchayat member.

A formal Bal Panchayat meeting was convened on 29 September 2025. Members including Nirjala Ekka, Dil Bahal Ram, Rupesh Ram, Siyon Ekka, Navin Niral Ekka, and Kavya Minj discussed how the shortage of space was affecting participation and decided to approach village leadership through a formal memorandum.

With support from the Khushaal Bachpan field team, the children

**"We felt
the Learning Corner
should have its
own place"**

- Dipesh Toppo
Member of Bal Panchayat



drafted a memorandum addressed to the Gram Sabha and the village Sarpanch. The memorandum highlighted the importance of the Learning Corner and requested a permanent and safe location. “We wanted the elders to understand that this place helps us study better,” said Nirjala Ekka.

The issue was placed before the Gram Sabha on 2 October 2025. The meeting was attended by Sarpanch Ms. Indravati Bhagat, school headmaster Mr. Narayan Yadav, parents, community representatives, and Bal Panchayat members. The children explained how the Learning Corner supported their studies and provided a safe environment after school hours.

“The Learning Corner helps children who need additional attention,” said Mr. Narayan Yadav, supporting the proposal.

Following deliberations, the Gram Sabha identified an unused Panchayat-owned building near the school as suitable for the Learning Corner. The building had remained vacant for several years and was formally allocated for Learning Corner activities on 10 October 2025.

The transition was completed quickly. The Khushaal Bachpan team coordinated cleaning and preparation of the space, and activities resumed from 16 October 2025. Attendance stabilised and activities expanded due to improved space availability. “Now we have enough room to sit and learn properly,” said Rupesh Ram, a Bal Panchayat member.

The process strengthened community recognition of children's participation in local governance. “The children presented their point clearly, which helped us take a decision,” said Sarpanch Ms. Indravati Bhagat.

Today, the Learning Corner operates regularly from the newly allotted building. The experience demonstrates how child led initiatives, supported by community institutions, can effectively address local challenges and strengthen educational opportunities for children.■



06 Children Power Change in Alesur

For nearly two years, the Learning Centre in Alesur village functioned without electricity.

Hosted by the Gram Panchayat, the centre serves as an important space where children gather before and after school for study support, learning activities, and recreation. Without electricity, however, the centre became increasingly difficult to use, particularly during the summer months. Children had to sit through intense heat without fans, and poor lighting often affected evening activities. As temperatures rose, attendance frequently dropped and the learning environment became less conducive to study.

“A learning space should have basic facilities, and we felt it was important to stand with them.”

– Sunita
Child Volunteer

The issue gained momentum after children began organising themselves through the Bal Panchayat formed under the Khushaal Bachpan programme. Through regular meetings and orientation sessions, children learned about their rights, leadership, and ways to engage with local governance institutions.

On 19 January 2026, members of the Bal Panchayat met to discuss concerns affecting children in the village. The absence of electricity at the Learning Centre quickly emerged as their top priority. The Bal Panchayat had established a cabinet structure that enabled children to take responsibility for different areas of community life. Led by Prime Minister Khileshwar Verma, Deputy Prime Minister Chanchal Verma, Finance Minister Priyanka, Sports Minister Annu, Sanitation Minister Yashu, and Cultural Minister Dageshwar, the group decided to take collective action.

The children drafted an application requesting electricity facilities for the Learning Centre and submitted it to the Gram Panchayat on 20 January 2026. They also met Sarpanch Ms. Likheshwari Verma and explained how the lack of electricity was affecting their education. “We enjoy coming to the Learning Centre, but during summer it became very



difficult to sit and study for long hours,” said Khileshwar Verma. “We felt that electricity was necessary if we wanted to learn comfortably.”

Deputy Prime Minister Chanchal Verma said the children drew confidence from the knowledge and skills gained through the programme. “The orientation sessions taught us that we can raise issues affecting children. We decided to work together and approach the Panchayat,” she said.

While the Sarpanch assured the children of support, progress remained slow. A week later, with no visible action, Bal Panchayat members decided to raise the issue again during the Republic Day Gram Sabha on 26 January 2026.

Their appeal received support from village women leaders, including education volunteers associated with the Khushaal Bachpan programme. “The children raised a genuine concern,” said Sunita, an education volunteer. “A learning space should have basic facilities, and we felt it was important to stand with them.”

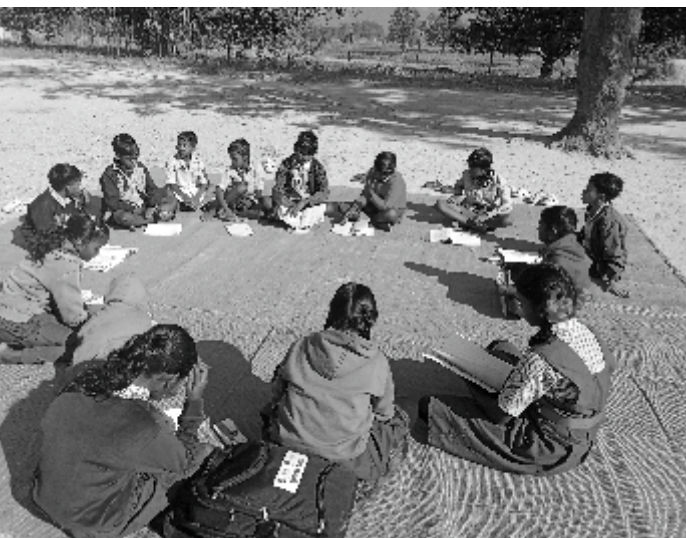
The Panchayat subsequently arranged the required electrical materials, but installation work continued to face delays. Rather than abandoning the issue, the children continued to follow up over the following months.

Throughout February, March, and April, they repeatedly raised the matter during community meetings, interacted with Panchayat representatives, and used Gram Sabha platforms to seek updates.

Their persistence did not go unnoticed. “The children consistently followed up on this issue and presented their concerns responsibly,” said Sarpanch Likheshwari Verma. “Their commitment encouraged all of us to ensure the work was completed.”

Finally, on 29 May 2026, electricity was installed at the Learning Centre. Fans and lighting soon became operational, transforming the space into a more comfortable and functional environment for learning.

For the children, the achievement represented much more than an electricity connection. It was the result of months of collective effort, follow up, and engagement with local governance institutions. Today, the lights and fans running inside the Learning Centre stand as a reminder that when children are given opportunities to participate meaningfully and communities respond to their voices, long standing problems can find solutions.■



07 Children Lead Collective Action for Safe Drinking Water

For the children of Sihardand village, the school was more than just a place of learning. It was where they gathered every morning with slates and notebooks, shared stories during lunch breaks, and dreamed of brighter futures. But in the monsoon of 2025, a simple yet critical problem disrupted their daily routine: the school's hand pump stopped working.

What initially seemed like a minor technical issue soon became a daily struggle. Children no longer had access to clean drinking water during school hours. Some carried water from home, while others avoided drinking altogether. Teachers worried about dehydration, especially during hot and humid days, and parents began expressing concern about their children's health.

"Studying without water was very difficult," said 11 year old Ramesh, a Class 5 student. "When we felt thirsty, we could not concentrate. Sometimes, we would ask permission to go home just to drink water."

For younger children, the situation was even more troubling. Without clean water, basic hygiene suffered, and the school environment became uncomfortable. Sihardand is a small village where most families depend on agriculture and daily wage labour. The school hand pump was the most reliable source of drinking water for children during the day. When it stopped working, teachers informed village elders and parents discussed the issue, but no solution emerged.

It was during this time that the Bal Panchayat, formed in July 2025 under Caritas India's Khushaal Bachpan programme, stepped forward. The child led group regularly met to discuss issues affecting children in the village. During one such meeting, the broken hand pump became the central concern. "We all raised our hands when asked what problems we were facing in school," recalled a Bal Panchayat member.

"We have learned that children also have the right to speak and demand what is necessary for us..."

- Member
Bal Panchayat



“Water was the biggest issue. How can we study properly if such a basic need is not met?”

The children discussed the impact on health, attendance, and learning. Guided by the leadership and rights based training received through the programme, they decided not to wait for adults to act on their behalf.

“We have learned that children also have the right to speak and demand what is necessary for us,” said another member.

The Bal Panchayat decided to submit a written memorandum to the village Sarpanch requesting immediate repair of the hand pump. Together, they drafted the application, explaining the problem and its impact on students. In September 2025, accompanied by the School Management Committee President, the children visited the Sarpanch’s office to submit their request.

Standing before the Sarpanch, the children explained how the lack of drinking water was affecting their studies and wellbeing. Their confidence and unity left a strong impression on community leaders.

Recognising the seriousness of the issue, the Sarpanch assured immediate action. Within five days, a mechanic was sent to the school. The damaged parts were repaired and the hand pump was restored to full functionality.

When water finally flowed again, cheers echoed across the school courtyard. Children gathered around the hand pump, filling bottles and washing their hands with smiles on their faces. “We felt very proud,” said one Bal Panchayat member. “Because of us, everyone in the school got water again.”

Today, the primary school once again has safe and reliable access to drinking water. Attendance has stabilised, children are healthier, and teachers can conduct classes without interruption. More importantly, the experience strengthened children’s confidence in their ability to influence decisions affecting their lives. The story of Sihardand demonstrates how informed and organised children, supported through the Khushaal Bachpan programme, can become effective agents of change in their communities. ■



08 Assertive Children and Women Transform Grassroots Governance

Women and children of Kataipali village in Raigarh district came forward not only to demand but also to organize a Special Gram Sabha or special village council meeting exclusively for women and children, marking a first not only for their village but also for the surrounding areas. Led by the Jai Ambe Self Help Group and the Bal Sabha, this pioneering initiative reflected not merely community engagement in local self-governance but the assertive and confident participation of women and children in grassroots governance and decision-making processes.

“This Special Gram Sabha has given us a platform to voice our concerns and work together towards a better future...”

- Pushpa Mahant
Member of SHG

Kataipali is located on the periphery of a dense forest area, where the threat from wild animals is grave and persistent. Elephant and bear attacks have been reported in and around the village, and last year elephants killed a person in a nearby village, creating widespread fear among residents. Wild boars frequently destroy standing crops, while other wild animals stray into settlements, damage farms, and sometimes pull-down hutments and houses of villagers. These recurring challenges, along with gaps in local infrastructure, prompted the community to come together and assertively participate in Panchayat discussions.

The initiative began with proactive planning and mobilisation by women leaders. “First, information was taken from the Sarpanch about the Gram Sabha, and the entire panchayat was informed. Discussion was held on how to fulfil the panchayat's shortcomings,” said Siria Rathia, SHG Member. The Special Gram Sabha held on 2 February 2026 brought together villagers, SHG members, Bal Panchayat representatives, and government officials to collectively deliberate on pressing village concerns.

This process was strengthened through sustained facilitation under Khushaal Bachpan, which organised women into Self Help Groups, including Jai Ambe SHG, and mobilized children through Bal Sabhas.



Through regular capacity building and awareness sessions, women and children were oriented on the importance of Gram Sabhas, women's powers and entitlements in local governance, the role of children in participatory governance, and the provisions related to Special Gram Sabhas. These efforts enabled both women and children to move from passive participation to informed and assertive engagement in local governance spaces.

Key demands raised during the Gram Sabha included road repair, appointment of a forest guard, construction of a school boundary, improvement of water facilities, and strengthening local education facilities. “Our demands were construction of a road, appointment of a forest guard, school boundary, and water facility,” said Savita Rathia, SHG Member. “During the rainy season, the village road turns into a stretch of puddles, leading to vehicle accidents. In the absence of a boundary, wild animals destroy farms and stray into the school premises. We wanted the Panchayat to address these issues,” she added.

“This Special Gram Sabha has given us a platform to voice our concerns and work together towards a better future,” said Puspa Mahant, an SHG Member. Sumitra Mahant, a

Bal Panchayat member, added, “Since there are only primary and middle schools in the village, we have to travel long distances to attend higher classes in nearby schools. Hence, we requested the Panchayat to construct a new school in the village,” she said with a sense of satisfaction.

The outcomes were encouraging, with government officials committing to addressing the demands raised by the community. Participants reported increased confidence and a stronger sense of agency in shaping village development priorities. “We felt good attending the Gram Sabha. We got information about the village's development and panchayat's progress,” said Hema Agaria, a member of the SHG.

This special Gram Sabha meeting exclusively for women and women demonstrates how women's collective leadership and assertive participation of children can transform grassroots governance by fostering transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision making. The experience reflects a significant shift in local power dynamics, where women and children are emerging as active drivers of participatory, and community led development.■



09 Child Participation in Local Governance Lights the Way

For the children of Cherakur, a village on the forest periphery of Bastar district, gathering at the Learning Centre each evening came with a challenge. The area around the centre had no streetlight. As darkness fell, particularly during the rainy season and winter months, children found it difficult and often unsafe to walk home after study sessions. Parents worried about their children's safety and were reluctant to allow younger children to attend activities after sunset.

For years, concerns affecting children rarely found a place in Gram Sabha discussions. Children were generally not included in village meetings, and decisions impacting them were often taken without their participation.

This began to change through Caritas India's Khushaal Bachpan programme, which promotes children's rights, education, protection, and participation. Through Bal Panchayats, children were encouraged to discuss issues affecting them, build leadership skills, and engage constructively with local governance institutions.

In Cherakur, Bal Panchayat members learned about child rights, leadership, and the functioning of local governance systems. Through regular meetings, they became familiar with the role of the Gram Sabha and how community members could bring issues before local authorities. As their confidence grew, so did their willingness to participate in village affairs.

During one Bal Panchayat meeting, the children identified the lack of lighting near the Learning Centre as a priority concern. The issue affected their safety, attendance, and ability to participate fully in educational activities. Determined to find a solution, they decided to raise the matter before the Gram Sabha.

With support from programme facilitators, the children prepared a

"I was nervous before speaking in the Gram Sabha, but I felt happy when the members listened to us carefully..."

- Karishma Kashyap
Member of Bal Panchayat



written application requesting the installation of a streetlight near the centre. On 14 April 2026, Bal Panchayat members attended the Gram Sabha and presented their request before Panchayat representatives and community members. For many, it was their first experience speaking in a public forum.

“I was nervous before speaking in the Gram Sabha, but I felt happy when the members listened to us carefully,” said Karishma Kashyap, a Class 4 student and active Bal Panchayat member. “It was the first time I felt that children could also contribute to village development.”

Riya Kashyap explained why the issue mattered. “The area near the Learning Centre was very dark in the evening. Sometimes we would leave early because it was difficult to walk home. We wanted a safe place where all children could continue learning.”

The children's presentation drew the attention of the Gram Sabha. Panchayat members discussed the issue and acknowledged the need for better lighting around the Learning Centre. After reviewing the proposal, the Panchayat approved the installation of a streetlight.

Ananda Baghel, Sarpanch of Cherakur Panchayat, welcomed the initiative shown by the children. “The children presented their concern in a clear and responsible manner. Their request was genuine and beneficial for the entire community. We were happy to support their proposal and encourage their participation in local governance,” he said.

Within a short period, the streetlight was installed. The impact was immediate. Children attended evening study sessions with greater confidence, parents felt reassured about their safety, and visibility around the Learning Centre improved significantly. The lighting also benefited local residents using the road after dark.

More importantly, the experience demonstrated the value of child participation in local governance. By identifying a problem, preparing a formal application, and presenting it before the Gram Sabha, the children experienced democratic participation firsthand. Today, the streetlight stands not only as a piece of village infrastructure but also as a symbol of children's growing voice and influence in community decision making. ■



10 Children Bring Light Back to Their Learning Centre

For the children of Bardih village, the Bal Chaupal, a Child Learning Centre established under Caritas India's Khushaal Bachpan programme, had always been a lively space. Every evening, children gathered there to study, solve worksheets, practice poems, and discuss school lessons. But during the summer of 2025, that vibrant atmosphere began to fade when the centre lost its electricity connection.

As darkness fell each evening, the room became unusable. Without lights or fans, children found it difficult to continue their studies. "We couldn't study even if we wanted to," said 12 year old Rakhi, a member of the Bardih Bal Panchayat. "It became too hot inside the room without a fan. We would sit for a few minutes and then leave."

The absence of electricity disrupted more than learning. For nearly 45 children, the centre was a safe place to spend their evenings while parents worked as daily labourers and returned home late. Without electricity, support classes and activities gradually came to a halt.

The Khushaal Bachpan field team first raised the issue with the village Sarpanch in July 2025. A temporary electricity arrangement was made, and a fan was provided to improve children's comfort. However, within a few weeks the connection was cut again because of technical and procedural issues.

"Each time we talked about it, someone would say the paperwork was pending or the connection needed approval," recalled Sagar Banjare, a Bal Panchayat member.

Although the problem was widely discussed, no lasting solution emerged. A turning point came in August 2025 when the Bardih Bal Panchayat was formally constituted and trained under the Khushaal Bachpan programme. For the first time, children had a collective platform to discuss issues affecting them and take action.

"When the lights came on, it felt like we had achieved something big, we realised that children could solve problems if we come together."

- Arushi
Member of Bal Panchayat



During one of their early meetings, the electricity problem quickly resurfaced. “Almost all children raised their hands when we asked what problems they were facing,” said 13 year old Arushi Gendre. “Some said they could not complete homework. Others stopped coming because of the heat and darkness. We understood that this was our responsibility now.”

The Bal Panchayat organised a special meeting to analyse the issue. Members identified its impact on learning, attendance, evening activities, and the safety of younger children returning home in the dark. They also discussed possible solutions and the authorities they needed to approach.

On 10 October 2025, eight Bal Panchayat members visited the Panchayat office with a written application requesting a permanent electricity connection for the Bal Chaupal.

“We had practised what to say,” said Deepti, Secretary of the Bal Panchayat. “We were nervous, but we knew this was important for all of us.” The children explained how the lack of electricity was affecting their education and learning opportunities. Their confidence and preparation impressed Panchayat representatives.

The visit was only the beginning. Over the next three weeks, the children continued to follow up. They tracked paperwork, met local electricity staff, and repeatedly raised the issue. “Every time we went to meet officials, all of us would speak,” said Vikram, a Bal Panchayat member. “We wanted them to know we were united.”

Their persistence paid off. In November 2025, the Bal Panchayat received the news they had been waiting for: the electricity connection had been permanently restored.

“When the lights came on, it felt like we had achieved something big,” said Arushi. “We realised that children could solve problems if we come together.”

Today, the Bal Chaupal is once again full of activity. Evening classes have resumed, attendance has increased, and the centre has become a vibrant learning space once more. Parents now admire their children’s leadership, while the Panchayat has started involving the Bal Panchayat in other community discussions. The experience demonstrated how organised and informed children can successfully address issues affecting their lives and contribute meaningfully to community development.■



11 Children's Leadership Paves the Way

For the people of Kewaradih village in Raipur district, travelling to the school, market, and nearby health facilities had become a daily challenge. The village road was uneven and filled with potholes, making it unsafe for children, elderly people, and other commuters. During the monsoon, rainwater and wastewater collected on the road, creating stagnant pools that not only made movement difficult but also increased the risk of mosquito breeding and waterborne diseases.

Children were among those most affected. Every day, they had to cross the muddy road to reach school and attend Bal Chaupal meetings. Walking or cycling often meant slipping on the uneven surface, while heavy rains sometimes made the road almost impossible to use.

Swati Dahariya, a 6th standard female student and a member of the Bal Panchayat, recalled, "During the rainy season, we often reached school with muddy clothes and wet shoes. We wanted a road where children could walk safely without worrying about slipping."

Under the Khushaal Bachpan programme, children in the village had formed a Bal Panchayat to participate in local governance and raise issues affecting their lives. A Community Action Group (CAG), comprising parents and community elders, worked alongside them to create a supportive environment for children and address issues such as child marriage, child labour, school dropout, sanitation, and other civic concerns.

Recognising that the damaged road affected the entire village, members of the Bal Panchayat and the CAG decided to work together. During the second week of April 2026, they organised a joint meeting to discuss the issue and prepared a memorandum requesting the Gram Panchayat to construct a proper road with drainage facilities.

On 14 April 2026, members of the Bal Panchayat, accompanied by

"The children brought the issue forward, and we stood with them. When children and adults work together for a common cause, the Panchayat pays attention."

- Rajani

Member of Community Action Group



representatives of the CAG, presented the memorandum during the Gram Sabha. They explained how the damaged road affected children's education, public health, and the daily lives of all villagers. Their presentation persuaded the Panchayat to give the issue priority.

Looking back on the meeting, Dipanjali, another girl member of the Bal Panchayat, said, "We were nervous before speaking in the Gram Sabha, but we knew the road was important for everyone. When the Panchayat accepted our memorandum, we felt that children's voices also matter in decisions that shape our village."

Following the Gram Sabha, the Panchayat completed the required administrative formalities and initiated the road construction work. The road was completed during the second week of June 2026. Along with the new road, a proper drainage system was also constructed, preventing rainwater and wastewater from accumulating during the monsoon.

The changes were soon visible. Children could walk and cycle to school more safely, villagers travelled with greater ease, and the surroundings became cleaner and healthier.

Reflecting on the experience, Rajani, a member of the Community Action Group, said, "The children brought the issue forward, and we stood with them. When children and adults work together for a common cause, the Panchayat pays attention."

For the members of the Bal Panchayat, the new road represents much more than improved infrastructure. It has shown them that their concerns deserve to be heard and that they can work alongside adults to improve their village. For the wider community, it is a reminder that local problems can often be resolved when children come together, use democratic forums effectively, and remain persistent in pursuing solutions.■



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