



# EMPOWERING GRASSROOTS

Reflecting on the power of proximate leadership

# Foreword

Imagine a world where change is driven not by outsiders, but by those closest to the problem. Where leaders, who understand the complexities and aspirations of the communities they serve, create lasting solutions. Imagine a world where such leaders thrive and take the wellbeing of their communities to greater heights! Such is the world of proximate leadership!

## How do we define proximate leaders?

- Leaders belonging to communities affected by marginalization or vulnerabilities, which helps them empathize with issues and challenges deeply.
- Leaders who have personally experienced community needs and challenges, which helps them nurture effective solutions.

Throughout history, movements led by those with lived experiences<sup>1</sup> of injustice and inequalities have brought transformational change. From overthrowing colonialism in countries across Asia, Africa and South America, to ending apartheid in North America, expanding voting rights across the globe, and challenging laws prohibiting women's decision-making on abortion in Argentina and Mexico, societies have witnessed the impact that individuals create when they organize for their own liberation.

Leaders with lived experiences have also been playing a critical role in steering non-profit organizations and driving impact on ground.

Proximate leadership goes beyond mere observation of a community's challenges. It requires active participation, reflection and immersion into the perspectives, ideas, priorities, and strengths of affected communities. This approach fosters greater community resilience, a factor that is critical to addressing complex problems. Neglecting proximate leadership may correlate to inadvertent harm and greater resistance to change from the community<sup>2</sup>.

A growing body of global research<sup>3</sup> indicates that proximate leaders living the day-to-day life of the communities they serve are best equipped to understand community issues and help develop long-term solutions. Yet, despite the clear benefits of investing in proximate leadership, there remains a stark gap in funding and networking opportunities for proximate leaders. This gap results in limited access to resources, influential relationships, and promotional opportunities, hindering the ability of proximate leaders to support mission-driven work<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Reference: Personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people.

<sup>2</sup> Why Proximate Leadership Matters to MIT Solve's Community. <https://solve.mit.edu/articles/why-proximate-leadership-matters-to-mit-solve-s-community>

<sup>3</sup> Proximate Leadership: What Is It, and Why Does it Matter?, Educationfirst.

<sup>4</sup> Lighting the Way: A Report for Philanthropy on the Power and Promise of Feminist Movements |Bridgespan

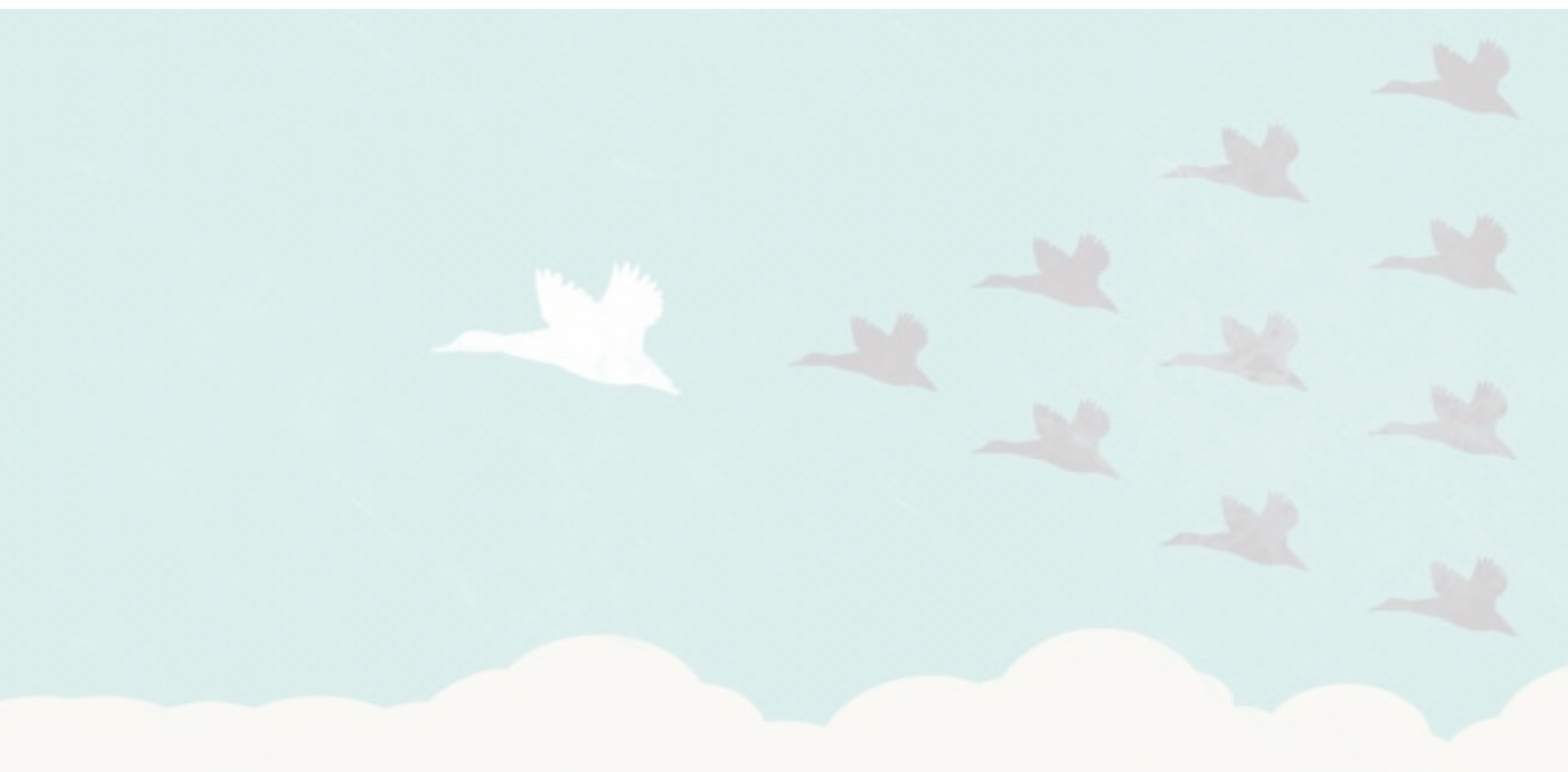
**Only 60% of funders** track leadership composition of grantee organizations that serve marginalized communities<sup>5</sup>.

It's time to change that. It is time to break down barriers that prevent proximate leaders from reaching their full potential. It's time to empower these leaders with the resources, relationships, and opportunities they need to create lasting change. It's time to Rebuild.

In this moment of reckoning, “Empowering Grassroots: Reflecting on the power of Proximate Leadership” brings a spectrum of proximate leaders into the spotlight. Why? Because at Rebuild, we believe that leaders who rise from the communities they serve, have the experience, relationships and knowledge that are essential for sustainable and inclusive impact.

~60% of Rebuild's portfolio of NGOs are led by proximate leaders. They see the complex, multiple root causes behind the issues they are addressing. As a result, their interventions are often more systemic in nature, addressing the conditions. The opportunity staring at us is to wholeheartedly trust and back proximate leaders at NGOs, who understand the needs of their communities, and have the desire and competence to solve problems.

*This document discusses powerful proximate NGO leaders and their work, in areas with high farmer suicide rates, gender based violence and caste based discrimination. While we believe this information is significant to their journeys and community's experience, we acknowledge that it may be difficult for some readers who have experienced mental health challenges or trauma related to suicide and violence. We urge readers to take care of themselves and seek support if they feel triggered or distressed.*



<sup>5</sup>Pay What It Takes Initiative survey by Bridgespan group.

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# DEEPA PAWAR

## Inspiring generations of NT-DNT communities and youth

Thane, Maharashtra

*"I belong to the Ghisadi community, my fundamental truth is connected to the ghumantu janjati (nomadic tribes), so naturally I feel a sense of belongingness and responsibility towards working with these communities."*  
- Deepa Pawar, Anubhuti Trust.

## Over 80% of India's nomadic and de-notified communities lack access to basic toilet facilities<sup>6</sup>

Growing up in a community that has been historically labeled as "criminals," Deepa experienced the harsh reality of systemic injustice and poverty faced by the Nomadic and De-notified tribes (NT-DNT) in India. NT-DNT were listed as criminals by birth under the colonial Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. Though the law was repealed in 1952, they suffer from historic socio-economic marginalization, social stigma and lack of agency. From long lines at community toilets to being forced to endure poor mental health, Deepa's own experiences fueled her mission to uplift marginalized communities.

## Despite possessing immense strength and resilience, women from marginalized communities face discrimination and are often underrepresented in leadership positions within the social sector.

For Deepa, the road to empowerment was not easy. A lack of known female leaders from marginalized backgrounds, provided little opportunity for guidance and inspiration while creating her own organization. The added responsibility of supporting a family only magnified the difficulties in dedicating time to the organization's formation. However, the will to succeed was compounded by the fact that the community was relying on the success of her effort.

## Anubhuti Trust

**Mental Justice:** Anubhuti Trust challenges the predominantly westernized approach to addressing mental health and makes it relevant for individuals from vulnerable social identities based on caste, gender and sexuality by tracing the root cause of injustice, discrimination or violence faced by 10 crore Indians<sup>7</sup> from 1,400 communities belong to NT-DNT groups.

**Constitutional Literacy:** It has been 75 years since the Constitution of India came into effect, yet many citizens continue to be unaware of the values and deeper concepts enshrined in the empowering document that inspires and protects millions of vulnerable Indians. Anubhuti Trust has organized a Constitutional Literacy competition since 2019 for youth to empower them with values of equality, justice, equity, liberty, fraternity, sovereignty, dignity and non-discrimination.

<sup>6</sup>Audit conducted by Anubhuti Trust.

<https://thewire.in/rights/for-nt-dnt-communities-in-maharashtra-swachh-bharat-has-not-brought-clean-toilets>

<sup>7</sup>Denotified, nomadic, semi-nomadic tribes: 402 SEED registrations so far online, none approved yet | The Hindu



# SITAVAA JODDATI

## Liberating Devadasis Belgaum, Karnataka

*"I was only 7 years old when my parents devoted me as a Devadasi woman. But it was not until my father's demise that I was given to a man. We were 6 daughters in the family and my parents were told that if they dedicate me to Goddess Yellamma as Devadasi, I will be a source of financial support to my parental home! I wanted to sustain myself with agricultural labour work, my mother eventually took money from a man and sent me to him. Although he wanted to marry me, his family did not support Devadasi women. After my second child, my mother and sister wanted more money so they sent me to another man with 18 acres of land." – Sitavaa Joddati.*

There are more than 80,000 Devadasi women in Karnataka<sup>8</sup> where over 26% of female sex workers are entering into sex work through the devadasi system<sup>9</sup>.

Devadasi, meaning a “servant of god” is a now illegal, religious custom of dedicating young girls mainly from the Dalit community to the Goddess Yellamma – a local Hindu deity in the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka.

**Devadasis are overwhelmingly ‘identified’<sup>10</sup> from the Dalit community, subject to systemic socio-economic oppression<sup>11</sup>.**

Sitavaa Joddati, dedicated by her parents as young girl to become a Devadasi, started a movement to end the practice that culminated in the formation of Mahila Abhivruddhi Mattu Samrakshna Samsthe (MASS) in 1997. Her journey started while volunteering in the devadasi rehabilitation programmes in various NGOs. Awarded the Padma Shree in 2018, she has won several other accolades, but according to her, the fact that generations that have followed hers haven't fallen prey to the Devadasi custom is her greatest reward.

## MASS

MASS has succeeded in ending the Devadasi system in Belgaum with its focus on community participation, strong proximate leadership and a comprehensive approach towards addressing root causes such as poverty and patriarchal norms. This approach created a movement driven by affected communities and resulted in lasting change.

<sup>8</sup>Survey by Karnataka State Women's University

<sup>9</sup>Sathyanarayana T N, Babu GR. Targeted sexual exploitation of children and women in India: Policy perspectives on Devadasi system. Ann Trop Med Public Health 2012;5:157-62

<sup>10</sup>Hidden Apartheid | Caste Discrimination against India's "Untouchables" | HRW

<sup>11</sup>Women in Ritual Slavery | Anti-Slavery International 2007



# NIRMAL CHANDEL

## Collectivizing widows for policy change in Himachal Pradesh

Solan, Himachal Pradesh

*“Several single women from villages are denied access and rights to property once they lose their husband and are made to struggle for survival all alone with their children. Widows are deprived off the opportunity to eat certain foods, wear colored clothes and participate in festivals or cultural events...Sometimes I used to sleep in the jungle hoping some animal would kill me and I would not have to endure this widow's life anymore,”- Nirmal Chandel.*

**India is home to nearly 55 million widows<sup>12</sup>, accounting for 4% of total population in India.**

Life came to a standstill for Nirmala Chandel, when she was widowed at the age of only 23, four years after her marriage in the remote village of Sarkaghat in rural Himachal Pradesh. She was socially excluded as if she was responsible for the ‘misfortune’ of her husband’s death. Nirmal dared to break the shackles of her community’s social norms and escaped to work independently with Social Uplift through Rural Action (SUTRA), in Jagjitnagar, Solan district as an accountant. At that point, she did not know that it was her first step towards a remarkable journey for empowerment of single women, poor or jobless widows, divorcee and deserted women, who are often cursed, harassed and abandoned as part of social norms in the Himalayan region.

**Globally, one in ten of the widows live in extreme poverty – with little or no input to policies impacting their survival<sup>13</sup>.**

## SUTRA

SUTRA established Ekal Naree Shakti Sangathan in 2005 which is headed by Nirmal Chandel. In 2008, Nirmal Chandel led 3500+ widows, divorcees and single women, including 70-80 year old women, from remote rural areas to walk 45 kilometers over three days to state headquarters in Shimla to seek their welfare rights.

The effort virtually shook the system and instilled confidence in single women to take up the fight for their dignity and rights, while preparing them for leadership roles in society. With the march, the political and institutional leadership in Himachal recognized and responded the challenges of single women in **accessing social protection schemes**.

SUTRA has played a significant role in enabling access to social benefits and entitlements for migrants and single women.

<sup>12</sup>Verma, S. (2020, September 28). Widowhood in India. <https://www.probono-india.in/blog-detail.php?id=172>

<sup>13</sup>United Nations.



# M. THANGAVEL

**Enabling a discrimination free present and future for Arunthatiyars**  
Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu

*"The most challenging aspect of our work is to make a community believe that they have rights and can have aspirations other than what they have seen their families live through over the years, from being denied entry into temples to clearing half eaten feasts on banana leaves... they have started to believe they actually do not deserve a better life"- M. Thangavel*

**325 Manual scavengers have been identified and 210 liberated from manual scavenging with VSED T's support.**

M. Thangavel is the first school-going boy and graduate from a village with 76 Arunthatiyar families. Historically subjugated and excluded basis their oppressive caste role of being manual scavengers, waste pickers and bonded labor, according to M. Thangavel, his community have been asset less, daily wage earners who have been landless for over 2000 years.

Having endured countless acts of discrimination and violence, Arunthatiyars in M. Thangavel's village never reported caste crimes to police stations. They also never migrated to other cities, as they were too fearful of backlash from upper castes in their village. M. Thangavel too continued facing the same circumstances until he entered college and met other like-minded Arunthatiyar youth, together they began a student movement against caste oppression in 1990.

## **Vizhuthugal Social Education and Development Trust (VSED T)**

When he first set up VSED T, the office was attacked by upper castes and the glass windows were shattered. Intimidation and threats were common, but the VSED T staff continued to spread awareness about rights and agency amongst the community. Vizhuthugal in Tamil means the roots hanging from the branches of banyan trees, like these branches, VSED T continues to impact the lives of thousands of Arunthatiyars in Tiruppur district.

With VSED T's support, 142 young female bonded laborers have been rescued from spinning mills and provided government compensation through VSED T's assistance. Additionally, 46 rights violations and atrocity incidents have been challenged, resulting in compensation for 186 individuals who experienced violations. Furthermore, VSED T conducts special coaching classes for 420 children, with 62 students achieving scores of over 80% in their high school exams.



# CHANDNI

## **Creating acceptance for gendered sexual identities.**

Bangalore, Karnataka

*“Because I myself was from the community, I understood their pain points and empathised. It was important for the community to have someone understand them too, because they felt anyone outside would never truly understand their reality”-Chandni.*

**The first-ever study on rights of transgenders by the National Human Rights Commission<sup>14</sup> revealed that 92% transgenders are deprived of the right to participate in any economic activity. While 50-60% never attended school, 52% were harassed by their classmates and 15% by their teachers. 96% transgenders are denied jobs and are forced to take low paying or undignified work for livelihoods.**

Chandni began to explore her gender identity as a transgender girl born to a Dalit family. She left her home at the age of 18 under severe societal and familial pressures. A prolific and decorated author in Kannada literature, she articulates the under-representation of trans-narratives while pursuing activism based on intersectionality within trans-activism<sup>15</sup>. It is her aspiration for the community to break through education barriers and complete their education, for employment barriers and stigma to be removed and dignity for the community members. Chandni believes that while State and National laws make provisions for gendered identities, she wants everyone to.

**“Starting from registering our organization to now having FCRA for 4 years in a row, we’ve come a long way. Some of our team members do not know English, but our ambitions are what drive us to break all these barriers.”**

## Payana

‘Payana’, or journey in Kannada, identifies itself as ‘community owned’ and community led. It was formed in 2010 with 31 activists. It is a fully community managed organization with membership-based governance mechanism, enabling community members to be elected on a rotational basis to identify needs, plan, design and implement programs while being trained to become community champions. Payana provides awareness, testing and clinical support and counselling services around HIV/AIDS prevention, cure and diagnosis. It also facilitates access to basic documentation and linkage to government schemes and entitlements. Payana provides paralegal support for cases of violence and exploitation against the LGBTQIA++ community.

<sup>14</sup>[https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/Study\\_HR\\_transgender\\_03082018.pdf](https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/Study_HR_transgender_03082018.pdf)

<sup>15</sup><https://dalithistorymonth.medium.com/celebrating-transgender-day-chandini-gagana-ddfc72fc4c0e>



# MANISHA SITARAM GHULE

**Leading gender and climate justice for Beed's sugarcane cutters**  
Beed, Maharashtra

*"Aap toh humare jaise dikhte ho, aap kaise humare liye kuch change karenge"* (You look like us, how will you change our lives?) – one of the responses Manisha received during her initial visit to rural communities.

**Every year, nearly 400 suicides are reported from Marathwada in the first six months of the year. By the end of the year, nearly 1,000 suicides are registered.<sup>16</sup>**

Apart from being the poorest district of Marathwada, Maharashtra – Beed has also been grappling with some of the most pressing issues when it comes to socio-economic and human development. It is infamous for being a district that reports high cases of forcible uterus removal of women employed as daily-wage labourers on sugarcane farms. The phenomenon is common in the area because contractors and family members think of this to avoid period and pregnancy complications in the field. This enables them to continue exploiting the women employed on low wages. Other linked problems faced by women include unsafe migration, gender-based violence, and child marriage.

Manisha Ghule, a survivor of gender-based violence co-founded Navchetna Sarvangin Vikas Kendra, her personal story underpins the hardships faced by women that Navchetna works with, most of whom come from extremely marginalized communities including the Nomadic and De-notified Tribes, and Dalit communities. Having experienced poverty, child marriage and domestic violence, Manisha was forced to drop out of school in the 8th grade and was pushed into an abusive marriage. She broke past these barriers to complete her school education while working at a local NGO and eventually received Master's degree in social work. She is highly respected within the community and her organization provides employment to women who are from similar circumstances.

## Navchetna Sarvangin Vikas Kendra

Navchetna uses a dual approach of community integration and network utilization to tackle issues such as **child marriage, domestic violence and harassment** through years of fieldwork. The organization facilitates climate widows for building community networks and savings to become financially independent. Realizing the need for **financial independence** as a key and immediate requirement to bring about dignity in the lives of women who have faced adversity due to agrarian distress or collectivized women from the communities to start a bank.

<sup>16</sup>Reported by an official of the divisional Commissionerate an article published by Indian Express in 2020.

## EMPOWERING GRASSROOTS WITH PROXIMATE LEADERS

To identify leaders like Chandni, Deepa, M. Thangavel, Manisha, Nirmal and Sitavaa, Rebuild relies on trusted partners or ‘nodes’<sup>17</sup> who recommend organizations working with marginalized communities, facing multiple systemic challenges in fundraising, collaboration and exposure to the larger sector.

In vulnerable and socially excluded communities, a proximate leader is often the only trusted source. For Deepa, being a NT-DNT leader enables her to speak the language of her people while understanding the nuances of community relationships, gender norms that are different from mainstream society and a myriad of exclusions faced. For Manisha, being a survivor of gender-based violence, she leads an organization that prioritizes hiring women who have come from similar circumstances, giving them an opportunity to thrive in a safe space and have difficult conversations with other women. Nirmal, who endured the exclusion that comes with widowhood in Himachal - being unable to eat certain foods, participate in social events, constantly being threatened or intimidated was able to collectivize and articulate the needs of widows and deserted single women.

Similarly, for Sitavaa, having been dedicated as a Devadasi allows her the opportunity to articulate against the practice through her own lived experience. M. Thangavel’s inspirational and continuing fight for the dignity of and justice for the Arunthathiyar community is deeply personal as he has been physically assaulted and experienced discrimination as a child, youth and adult. For Chandni, her journey of seeking acceptance, dignity and safe livelihoods for all gendered identities is also one of empathy as she understands her community’s needs.

Investing in proximate leaders seeking to establish sustainable organizations seeped in the values of Gender, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion enables the communities they serve to make resilient pathways out of the endless cycle of vulnerability.

<sup>17</sup>Existing networks, collectives and organizations who recommend NGOs to Rebuild India Fund

# Glossary of Terms

**Lived Experience:** Personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people.

**Socio-Demographic identities used in India:** These socio-demographic identities cover those who have been historically, socially, economically, and culturally discriminated against. This discrimination is acknowledged by the system and various constitutional safeguards have been created to empower individuals identifying with these identities.

**Some of these identities are as follows:**

**Adivasi:** the collective name used for indigenous peoples of India, constitutionally known as Scheduled Tribes  
**Caste:** a uniquely Indian and Hindu system of social organization. In sociological writings, it is often viewed as a “closed system” of social stratification in which groups are divided on the basis of ritual purity, pollution, or social status. While the stratification is sanctioned by the Hindu religious belief, in the context of South Asia and its diaspora, caste systems transcend across to other religions as well.

**Dalit:** derived from the word “dalan”, meaning broken or oppressed, ‘Dalit’ is a nomenclature chosen and used by the Scheduled Caste community to identify itself.

**Devadasi:** A social practice, where a young girl is devoted and married to a deity, before she reaches puberty, to act as a caretaker. Recently, this practice has been used to push girls into prostitution. \*\*As per Kerala State Women’s Development Corporation.

**Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities:** stands for all those communities which were once notified under the Criminal Tribes Acts, enforced by the British between 1871 and 1947. These Acts were repealed by the Independent Indian Government in 1952, and these communities were “De-Notified”. A few of these communities which were listed as de-notified are also nomadic. DNTs are hard to reach, less visible, and therefore frequently left out of welfare schemes/ programs. Terms such as nomads and semi-nomads are applied to social groups who undertook a fairly frequent, usually seasonal physical movement as part of their livelihood strategy in the recent past.

**Double Decker:** is gendered men who take on both masculine and feminine roles in sexual activities

# Glossary of Terms

**Ghisadi:** Ghisadi is a wandering caste of iron-workers, polishers, tinkers and knife-grinders. The name 'Ghisadi' seems to be derived from the Urdu word 'ghaisna', meaning 'to rub.'

**Kothi:** is gendered men who have feminine feelings.

**LGBTQIA++:** LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more. These terms are used to describe a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Minority Groups:** a group of people whose practices, race, religion, ethnicity, or other characteristics like sexual orientation or disability, and are fewer in numbers than the main groups of those classifications.

**Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group:** a classification of 75 tribes for whom the Ministry of Tribal Affairs carries out specific welfare initiatives not extended to all Scheduled Tribes.

**Persons with Disabilities:** people with physical disability, intellectual disability, mental illness, or multiple disabilities caused due to chronic neurological conditions or blood disorder.

**Scheduled Castes:** Scheduled Castes is the official name given in India to the lowest strata of the caste system who were infamously referred to as 'untouchables.' These castes faced social, educational, and economic isolation and have been among the most disadvantaged communities historically.

**Scheduled Tribes:** Scheduled Tribes are classified as marginalized communities on the basis of geographical isolation, primitive traits, distinct culture, economically backward, or shy of contact with the community at large.

**Tribes:** A tribe is a group of people who live and work together in a shared geographical area, having a common culture, dialect, and religion. A tribal society is a group of tribes organized around kinships.

**Transgender:** Transgender is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth. "Trans" is sometimes used as shorthand for "transgender."

# Acknowledgments

## **Anubhuti Trust**

<https://www.anubhutitrust.org/>

## **Dhwani Foundation**

<https://dhwanifoundation.org/>

## **Mahila Abhivrudhi Mattu Samrakshana Samsthe**

<https://massbelgaum.org/>

## **Navchetna Sarvangin Vikas Kendra Solutions**

<https://navchetna.org/>

## **Payana**

<https://www.facebook.com/PayanaBangalore/>

## **Social Uplift Through Rural Action**

<http://www.sutrahp.org/>

## **Vizhuthugal Social Education and Development Trust**

<http://vizhuthugal.org.in/>

## **About Dasra**

Dasra, which means 'enlightened giving' in Sanskrit, has worked to catalyze social change since 1999. Dasra was founded on the premise that supporting non-profits in their growth will scale their impact on the vulnerable lives they serve. It focuses on strengthening non-profits, supporting philanthropists to build strong and equal partnerships with organizations, educating them on effective principles of giving, and enabling the government to better serve communities.

## **About Rebuild**

The Rebuild India Fund, founded by Dasra and Tarsadia Foundation in 2021, supports grassroots NGOs with flexible funding and capacity building - recognizing and respecting NGO leaders' ability and power to run their organizations in a manner that serves their communities most meaningfully.

