



# **Niraksharta Se Aazadi Campaign, Mandla (MP)**

## Innovation (District)

**M**andla is a predominantly tribal district with forest cover of above 44%. The Primitive vulnerable tribal groups- Baigas and Gonds reside in the district. Mandla being a tribal district, it was apparent that a lot of fund was flowing on account of various government schemes in the account of tribal beneficiaries, but at the same time, the district administration was receiving a lot of complaints about issues in banking transactions. On close perusal, it became apparent that the lack of awareness and lack of functional literacy was often keeping the locals at the receiving end of the issue. It was also apparent that a lot of other social issues in the realm of health, livelihood, etc. were

associated with the lack of awareness and lack of basic and functional literacy amongst them, which made the administration realise the need to work for literacy. Also, while visiting the Gram Panchayats and Wards in the district, it was apparent that there was another set of people who were literate and lettered. This gave us the idea to let them do the handholding of unlettered people and pull them up the literacy ladder. Why can't 67% literate Mandla do the handholding of 33% illiterate Mandla? This triggered the imagination and led to the conceptualisation of the 'Niraksharta se Aazadi' campaign. Once this idea was conceived, the next big challenge was to work for the mobilisation of resources as also to delineate the nuances for the



implementation of the campaign. The administration met the challenges of physical resource mobilisation by starting a project called 'Gyaan Daan', wherein physical resources in the form of stationary, chalk, slate, books, etc. were mobilised from citizen. In the absence of financial resources needed for the remuneration of human resources, the administration reached out to every 'sakshar' in the district and requested them to join the campaign as 'Akshar Sathi'. As of today, more than 25,000 Akshar Sathis are actively involved in the campaign.

The entire government machinery was then engaged to do an exhaustive door-to-door survey to identify the 'nirakshars' (people who could not read, write or do basic arithmetic). As a result of this, 2,11,850 nirakshars were identified in July 2020.

Thereafter, 490 'Mahila Gyanalay' (a unique initiative of the district) were established. These Gyanalays were established and were completely run by women, where literate women did the handholding of illiterate women of the Gram-panchayat. This was a campaign 'Of the women, By the women, For the women', which yielded tremendous results in the initial few days, which further motivated us to scale it up, resulting in the establishment of 615 Samajik Chetna Kendras or Adult Literacy Schools in the district.



The efforts were, however, not restricted to the venue of the kendras and the challenge of geography was met head on by the Askshar Sathis who took the worksite to riverbank, to MNREGA site classes. The initial beneficiary mobilisation challenge was met by taking in confidence the natural tribal leaders, the “mukadams”-people whose voices were dictat for the community, made various folk songs, and converted the idea in local Baiga and Gondi dialect and took it to the local populace.

The campaign was monitored by the core team of Women and Child Development Department and Education Department at the Panchayat, Block and District level The entire social experiment was carried forward without incurring a single cost to the exchequer, and instead by motivating the stakeholders, mainly the Akshar sathis. On 26<sup>th</sup> January and 15<sup>th</sup> August, it would be Akshar sathis who would do flag hoisting in Gram Panchayat & wards of the district. All efforts were taken to make them feel Special in the district. More than 50,000 Bal Akshar Sathis and Yuva Akshar Sathis were also motivated for the cause, who took up the responsibility of handholding the unlettered adults of their household.

As a result of this mass mobilisation, the Mandla initiative saw significant result in the last 2 years of its implementation. The number of ‘nirakshars’, as per a surveys reduced from 2,11,850 in July 2020 to 35048 in July 2022. Those left are mainly dokra-dokri (above 60+ aged population), incapacitated, and migrant population. The district has thus reached the level where the majority population can read and write their name and do basic arithmetic. They can count and withdraw money using withdrawal slip at the bank branch and are able to use the ATM card. People can now read and appreciate the SMS they receive after taking the Ration from PDS shop and also count different denominations of currency. As a step forward, the district is now moving towards digital and financial literacy.

The culture of the district has changed. The adults can be found with books, chalk, and slates in hand, with their own Sakshar Sathis taking practice sessions.

As a result of the Saksharta Abhiyan, tribal people can now boldly face the world and take up day-to-day activities confidently.