

Gram Vikas — The Toilet That Changed Everything Else

The story of Gram Vikas is, at its surface, a story about toilets. Every household in a village gets a toilet and a bathing room and a piped water connection — before the programme begins, every household must agree to this commitment. The village installs the piped water system....

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This insistence — which looks at first like bureaucratic rigidity — is actually the most radical design choice in the programme. Because when you require the participation of the most excluded household as the condition for the benefits to reach the most included ones, you have made inclusion the price of the programme, not its aspiration.

That is the real story of Gram Vikas.

Who They Are

Gram Vikas was founded in 1979 by a group of university students from Madras who had come to work with Kondh Adivasi communities in Ganjam district of southern Odisha. Invited by the district administration to promote commercial dairying, they discovered that earning money from animal husbandry was not among the villagers' priorities. Gram Vikas decided to start by understanding what the communities actually needed, and spent the next four decades in the disciplined pursuit of that question.

They are based in Mohuda, Odisha, and work primarily in Odisha with some presence in Jharkhand. Their forty-five years of Odisha rootedness is their most important asset

— the depth of community relationships and government relationships that this duration produces cannot be replicated by a newer organisation regardless of resources.

MANTRA: The Entry Point Programme

By the mid-1990s, Gram Vikas had developed its signature approach: MANTRA — Movement and Action Network for the Transformation of Rural Areas. The manifest goals are water and sanitation. The deeper goal is transformation of the patterns of social inequality within villages.

MANTRA's design insists on 100 percent household coverage — every family in the village, regardless of caste or economic status, must participate and must benefit. The wealthy household cannot get piped water until the poorest household has built its toilet. This turns the provision of infrastructure into an instrument of social inclusion.

The results, measured across multiple independent studies, are significant. A study of 100 villages that implemented MANTRA showed a reduction in waterborne diseases of up to 50 percent. An independent matched cohort study across 45 intervention villages found 85 percent improved toilet coverage (against 18 percent in control villages) and 74 percent adult toilet use (against 13 percent in controls). An internal survey from 2018 to 2020 found 92 percent piped water access in Gram Vikas intervention areas.

An Esther Duflo-led study in 2015 estimated a 30 to 50 percent reduction in treated diarrhoea episodes in MANTRA villages. MANTRA villages showed measurable protection against child soil-transmitted helminth infection and improved height-for-age Z scores in children under five — evidence that adequate water and sanitation translates into child nutrition outcomes.

By March 2024, the MANTRA programme has expanded to 51 Gram Panchayats encompassing 60,500 households. The cumulative reach across the programme's history has covered more than 1,300 village communities in Odisha and Jharkhand.

The Biogas Legacy

Before MANTRA, Gram Vikas ran one of India's most successful biogas programmes. Between 1982 and 1993, in partnership with the Odisha government, they installed biogas units in 54,000 households across nearly 6,000 villages in twenty-five districts. They trained 6,000 rural individuals as barefoot biogas technicians — allowing the organisation to eventually withdraw and focus on other challenges, with the technology maintained by communities themselves.

The biogas programme is relevant not only as history but as evidence of organisational philosophy: Gram Vikas builds local capacity to maintain what it builds, and then leaves. The institution's fingerprint on community infrastructure is designed to become invisible over time, as community capacity replaces organisational presence.

The Water Secure Gram Panchayat Programme

Gram Vikas's current strategic focus — the Water Secure Gram Panchayat (WSGP) Programme — builds on MANTRA's household-level foundation to address water security at the panchayat level. As of March 2024, the programme covers 51 GPs and 60,500 households. The goal: a Gram Panchayat labelled water secure has every household with safe drinking water and sanitation, and the community manages land and water resources effectively.

The WSGP programme's significance is institutional: it is the first time Gram Vikas has formally integrated its water infrastructure work with Panchayati Raj Institutions — moving from NGO-led implementation toward government system strengthening. The Water Secure GP is a status that panchayats achieve and own, not a project that an NGO runs.

The 2024-25 Frontiers: Women Enterprise and Carbon Markets

Gram Vikas's 2024-25 Annual Report documents two new directions. First: the Mission Shakti Women Entrepreneurs Programme, begun October 2023, targeting up to 200,000 women entrepreneurs in 30 blocks across Bargarh, Gajapati, Ganjam, and Kandhamal districts — building on Mission Shakti's SHG foundation with enterprise development approaches in 475 Gram Panchayats reaching 2.97 lakh women.

Second: early steps into carbon markets, with community-driven agro and social forestry in Odisha's villages earning carbon credits while restoring degraded lands.

The combination — women's enterprise development and community carbon revenues — represents the next evolution of Gram Vikas's rural livelihoods work, now explicitly engaging climate and market mechanisms.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: gramvikas.org | **Annual reports:** gramvikas.org (2023-24 and 2024-25 available as PDFs)

Key evidence:

- Gram Vikas Annual Report 2023-24 and 2024-25 — primary source for all recent programme data
- Stanford Social Innovation Review: *Water is Power* — SSIR documentation of MANTRA's social design logic
- PMC peer-reviewed study: MANTRA intervention matched cohort (45 villages, Ganjam and Gajapati, 2015-2016)
- SustainabilityNext: *Gram Vikas and the MANTRA for Inclusive Community Development* (2024) — most recent comprehensive summary

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