Birsa Vahini – Concept Note

1. Background

Odisha Shramajeebee Manch (OSM) and Mahila Shramajeebe Mancha Odisha (MSMO) are two state-level forums representing 15 regional Jan Sangathans covering 62 blocks and more than 500 Gram Panchayats in Adivasi inhabited areas of central, southern, western and north Odisha. These regional people's forums under the leadership of OSM are collectively escalating governance, entitlements-related demands and issues to the local, districts and state administration, questioning ruling dispensation on various development and governance aspects. OSM aims to fill in the vacuum of actual grassroots marginalization by creating a platform between community and state so that dialogue for development in the following areas can be created:

- Better grassroots governance
- Community participation in planning and decision making
- Make local institutions accountable through community participation
- Create a conducive environment for the community's collective actions by initiating multiple community awareness programmes on various entitlements and constitutional provisions to live a better and dignified life
- Create local leadership by empowering existing committees at the village, panchayat, block, and districts level, created by regional Jan Sangathan in their respective districts
- Organize events to mobilize the community to exert pressure on different stakeholders, such as media, community, larger civil society organizations, local and state administration, and elected representatives to address the issue of grassroots governance and other issues of marginalization.
- Capacitate the community and their leaders to identify the structural root cause of marginalization, such as the role of different actors and variables in the larger marginalization process. Enable the community to understand the politics of marginalization deeper and how this concern can be addressed via the collective action of the Sangathan.
- Capacitate the leaders on making effective strategies to counter administrative and other bottlenecks for better governance at the grassroots.
- Democratize and further decentralize the Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- Create a forum to have better and more effective conflict resolution mechanisms at the regional and state level.
- Democratize our regional and state-level forums by providing diverse mechanisms to address local conflict resolutions.

2. Objective:

Ever since our intervention we have been closely scrutinizing the activist intervention model and its modus operandi. It has been a decade, and since then, we have observed many transitions and organic evolution in people's collective, such as

- Changing nature of community's needs, their demand, and participation in grassroots governance-related lacunas and violations of constitutional entitlements and special provisions for indigenous communities
- How do indigenous community look at the process of social change, and what is their idea of development

- How do indigenous communities align their customary knowledge and indigenous science with non-indigenous scientific approaches? How together, they can contribute substantially to modern science and why there is a need to recognize their traditional knowledge and science
- Why is there a need to have their own spaces for dialogue and representation with the larger mainstream community so that stereotypes about indigenous community and their challenges can be dealt with more sensitivity and empathy
- Why is there a need of having their own leadership while having a larger dialogue with all stakeholders responsible for constructive inclusive development?

Through our years of work at the grassroots level, the need for a people's collective which would be strong, self-sustained, and inclusive was strongly felt. The need for the formation of strong indigenous community networks for creating democratic spaces for dialogue & negotiation with local, districts, and state administration was at the core of the creation of Birsa Vahini. The underlying notion was that, through the active participation of the communities in the collectives, the community could mobilize themselves, have dialogue with all stakeholders and escalate their demand or voice by using constitutional methods and provisions. Thus, Birsa Vahini was created to address such nuances through various methodologies and techniques.

Coverage and Manpower:

To orient and capacitate Sangathan's village, panchayat, block, district and state executive committees from 15 districts and 62 blocks from the following operational zones:

1. Western Odisha – Sundergarh, Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Kalahandi, Bolangir, Nuapada, Deogarh
2. Central Odisha – Kandhamal, Nayagarh, Gajapati, Boudh
3. Southern – Rayagada, Korapur, Malkangiri
4. Northern – Mayurbhanj

Modus Operandi:

With an objective of creating perspective on various development themes and critical understanding of various social-political-economic challenges. Why and how to intervene to address the issue of marginalization and disempowerment through collective action under organized sustainable Jan Sangathan's. Therefore beyond day-to-day field operations, we are trying to create a structural framework with clearly defined outcome indicators and manpower responsible for leading the facilitation process. Their role is to give persistent inputs by analyzing the current status of targeted manpower. Accordingly, creating their profiles and then documenting the process of empowerment that how it is creating impact by looking at the nature of collective actions, such as changing nature of the following:

- Status of grassroots governance,
- Role of community leaders in larger decision-making,
- Nature and participation of community leaders in local events and campaigns,
- How community leaders independently manage events and campaigns
- Community participation towards financially sustaining the Jan Sangathan's through membership and other voluntary contributions.

The targeted manpower to be trained has been divided into 6 broad categories:

1. **Jansathi Forum** – This forum was created after realizing the need to have direct communication or a dialogue with the local activists – Jansathis. The Jansathis, the manpower in the field, play a key role in sustaining the process of collective action and community mobilization. Currently, fellowships have been given to more than 300 + Jansathis at the grassroots level. Hence, there is a need to meet the Jansathis regularly to understand field challenges and grassroots realities. These regular meetings are a good platform to understand their expectations and mentor them effectively so we can mutually make strategies and effective action plans. Till date, we have created a body of 24 elected Jansathis covering 15 districts representing their co-field members and regions.

2. **Block Committees** – Currently, we have 62 Block Committees. The main role of the committee leaders is to represent their respective panchayats in the forum so that their panchayat-related governance and marginalization challenges can be discussed. Accordingly, action can be taken collectively by escalating the matter to the respective government bodies or departments.

   Now we are trying to democratize and decentralize Block committees' governance so that these committees actively participate and independently raise their governance and marginalization issues directly with the block administration.

3. **URMI** - This a forum wherein women from Women Federated Blocks would be trained on various leadership aspects. The focus of this forum would be to work in the field of socio-economic-political institutions marginalization. The URMI women leaders would be identified from the indigenous community so that issues of such marginalization can be addressed through an active women's sustainable forum (sangathan).

4. **Executive Committee** – Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha (OSM) and Mahila Shramajeebee Mancha Odisha (MSMO) are two state-level forums representing 72 blocks and more than 1000 Panchayats. We are committed to making these two state-level forums completely sustainable and independent in a manner that strong leadership from the grassroots would lead and represent them in forums with government agencies or grassroots organizations.

5. **Regional Community Learning and Development school** – This is a platform wherein identified targeted manpower would be trained under regional schools. Currently, training of our existing manpower is being conducted at Bhubaneswar Activist School – Community Learning and Development Centre. Through the training, existing manpower is exposed to various development themes and other topics. With the regional schools, our goal is to create short regional modules to train the targeted community leaders through creating effective Training of Trainers (TOT) with field assignments.

6. **Documentation and impact evaluation** – The Birsa Bahini team would be responsible in building and making effective formats for the collection of quantifiable data so that the data can be consolidated and analyzed to understand and evaluate the impact of the various interventions. The same findings are to be shared with the government, communities we are working with as well as civil society organizations, and the media. The documentation team will also be responsible for designing formats and tools which will bring out the qualitative impact and transformation of the integrated team approach of Birsa Vahini. The team will study and identify various ways to share the qualitative impact with a more extensive network.