

A large, circular bandstand with a thatched roof is situated under a massive, ancient tree. The bandstand is built with a wooden frame and a thatched roof made of dried grass or straw. The tree's thick trunk and sprawling branches provide shade over the structure. The background shows a lush green field under a bright sky.

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11.
The Bandstand is Not Just for the Bands !!



Living in shrinking spaces in metropolitan cities like *Delhi* and *Mumbai* we all know the value of open community spaces where people can just sit quietly or meet with friends. The parks we see in most residential colonies still can't bridge the gap of anonymity that cities breed.

This story shares how this acutely felt but the often neglected need has been addressed in the Indian villages by the efforts of people, with city material acting as a facilitator. For those of us who hail from smaller towns, we know of the little raised platform outside homes where in the evenings, men and women of the neighbourhood gather

around to talk about their day. In the villages, there are some spots under big trees or near a religious place; called a *chabutara* or a bandstand, often the hub of informal socio-cultural interaction.

Why the name 'band stand'? People say that often musical bands before entering the venue, would gather and test their equipment and sound here, at the bandstand, a little away from the heart of a village.

Today these platforms serve many purposes- people gather for festivals while children play here and important meetings of *Panchayats* (the village councils) are also commonly held here. A bandstand or a *chabutara* doesn't involve a huge construction cost but is an important venue for social gatherings and a resting place for tired travellers.

Saharsa, Bihar

60 year old *Sham Shankar Jha* runs a makeshift *paan* shop near a *chabutara*, under a banyan tree in the village *Bargaon (Saharsa)*. This is a preferred resting spot for travellers after miles of walking and for villagers who come to the nearby water canal to feed and





were rendering a service and creating something valuable. The constable finally relented and confessed, *"We policemen need this bandstand the most. Regardless of whether travellers come here or not, we have to pass through this area daily on duty!"*

Satna, Madhya Pradesh

The bandstand-making work started in *Bihar* but has now spread to many other states. Ram Kali, from village *Selha Gujwaha (Satna)*, took the lead to build a 'common place' for the meetings of the Self Help Group (SHG) she heads. Another group from the village in search of a similar space joined her efforts. One of our partner organisations mobilised these two groups to identify a common convenient place. People from the village collected sand, gravel, stones, etc. among other essential materials and worked together for two days to construct a community space of 20x20x2 ft. They also cleaned up a 20 metres long filthy drain next to the chosen spot.

wash their cattle. The calm atmosphere of the place adds to its charm. In 2011, when our team chanced upon this place, there was only a banyan tree here. Some people were sitting under its shade, taking refuge from the scorching sun. Despite the dirt and waste all around the weary travellers had no other option.

The villagers lamented that the lone banyan tree was quite old and frail. We proposed that the villagers clean the place and construct a platform around the tree to support it, under the **'Cloth for Work' (CFW)** initiative. People liked the idea and started working on it. They cleaned the place and collected the pieces of bricks, stones and piles of mud from nearby areas. A few bags of cement were the only additional material needed for the effort. At this point, a policeman arrived on the scene and tried to assert his authority by saying that the bricks belonged to the *Kosi* dam project and therefore couldn't be used. The villagers asserted that they had only taken the leftovers of broken bricks lying scattered around the place, obviously discarded. They collectively pointed out that in fact, by using the leftover broken pieces abandoned as waste, they



Today five *SHG* groups from the village use this place for their group meetings while it is also useful for the 120 families of the village on a daily basis.

Mandla, Madhya Pradesh

Goonj has been working in the *Mandla* district for over a decade on education, water, agriculture and livelihood with partner grassroots groups like *Prayas Shiksha Samiti (PSS)*. Our partner noticed that people from many villages wait at a major crossroad for hours to catch a bus for *Mawai* and *Mandla*. It was a deserted spot where women were especially fearful of the wait. 83 men and women participated to build a bandstand under a tree using straw and mud while a *Jalpaan Greh* (canteen) was started in a nearby broken hut, to offer the weary travellers some refreshments in a safe environment. A committee of locals is responsible for the maintenance and cleanliness of the bandstand.



West Medinipur, West Bengal

Skill building is a buzzword today in India but this story underlines that rural India has always had the wisdom to solve its problems with the most minimal means. They just need a little motivation, attention and nurturing.

At the end of a hard day, the shepherds of *Dhobanishole* (West *Medinipur*) and nearby villages, herding their cattle, would sorely miss having a place to rest for a little while before heading home for the night. The visitors to the nearby *Dhumsai* market also faced the same problem. Team Goonj motivated people from *Dhobanishole*, who had promised to do something for their community to build a covered bandstand.

On the day, some people brought shovels and spades while others brought tools, bamboo poles, hay and ropes among other essential

materials. Using their machetes these men shaped the bamboo poles, built a bamboo framework, covered the roof with grass and hay and levelled the seating area. The 12x9 ft shed was ready in two days. *“Earlier we didn’t have a place to rest while herding our cattle in the fields. It used to get very difficult during summer. Now, we have a place to rest. We’re very happy to have done this together.”* says Ganesh Murmu, an enthusiastic participant. *Kajla Jana Kalyan Samiti* (KJKS) was our partner organisation in this work. In times to come, it would perhaps be useful to make these bandstands stronger by constructing a concrete base for each but the decision will have to come from the local communities because once people are involved in making something they maintain it as well.

It is interesting how the simple act of building a space for the community's welfare also pays back to the community. We wonder if we, in the cities, can come together for such efforts for safer public spaces by the people and for the people !!



UPDATE FOOTNOTE

By facilitating the construction and repair of over **3200+** village bandstands in remote rural areas across the country over the past 9 years (**FY 2014-2023**), Goonj, in collaboration with local communities, has provided safer public spaces for people to rest, gather, and take shelter – meeting a basic but long unfulfilled need. With these community-driven efforts, local communities are able to create local assets with their own labour and hard work, creating ownership and pride, as well as addressing the lack of resting areas in the remotest areas through decentralised, sustainable models tailored to local needs and constraints.