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*Building Bridges Over  
Troubled Waters..*





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Every year, floods devastate people living on the banks of many rivers across India; be it the *Ganges*, the *Brahmaputra* or the *Kosi* - in their flooding fury, all of these cause annual annihilation. The 2014 floods in *Kashmir*, caused by the *Jhelum* or the floods of the *Kosi* river (*Bihar*) in 2008, are just some of the horrific examples. You would probably remember how in the *Kosi* river floods, the river changed its course completely and began flowing on a new path causing unprecedented devastation across hundreds of villages.





When Goonj initiated a large-scale relief operation in the affected villages (post the *Kosi* floods), we soon realised that it would have to be long-term work. *Sukhasan* was one of the first flood-affected villages where we started by sharing the concept of '**Cloth for Work**' (**CFW**). That is when the villagers narrated the disturbing story of 13 children drowning in the river next to their village over the years. Our question to them was simple, "*Will you build a bridge over the river so that this never happens again?*" It was a 'first' for us as well but we had an unwavering faith in the wisdom and resources of these people.

### ***Madhepura, Bihar***

For the people of *Sukhasan* in *Madhepura* district, *Bihar*, living on the banks of river *Sursar* (a tributary to the *Kosi* river), swelling up of the river in monsoons, was a fact of life. The absence of any bridge on the river forced the children to swim across to reach their school on the other side. This is why many children lost their lives crossing the river, scaring many parents into stopping their children's education.

On the team's nudge, 50 villagers collected and contributed at least

a bamboo or two and worked for several days. The incredible result was that this village community built for itself a 240x6ft bamboo bridge without any external expertise and advice. With this, 7-8 villages got connected as hundreds of people, cycles and motorcycles could crossover! In essence, a lot of other dots like local education, economy, infrastructure, communication, etc. also got connected.

For the Goonj Team, this bridge became a hugely inspirational story. By this time we had started to understand the power of *CFW* as a powerful barter between two new currencies; urban underutilised material and the labour and wisdom of locals, to create a strong sense of self-worth and dignity. This bridge was made without any engineer's expertise with an expense of just ₹ 2,250, spent on nails, some wires and logistics. This was a little after a well had been dug under *CFW*, in *Salidhana* village (*Madhya Pradesh*)

*"We had never imagined that with such a small monetary input, just with the invaluable local wisdom, efforts and resources, a sturdy bridge could come up,"* says Anshu Gupta, Founder, Goonj..

Many bridges have since come up in *Bihar* and other places but this first one is special because it motivated the villagers to later demand a *pakka* (permanent) bridge. Today, there is a concrete bridge in the village and one often witnesses children running across it to reach their school.

### ***Gabatbadi, Odisha***

For the five villages (*Gabatbadi, Kudimanja, Laribadi, Baligada* and *Aadagadu* of the *Simanbadi Panchayat*) on one side of the *Tikapata* river, everything else is on the other side - the agricultural fields, the local market and so on.





These villagers were often deprived of timely medical attention because there was no medical centre on their side of the river.. And no doctor was willing to risk his life, walking across the ropeway to reach these villages. In the rainy season, it becomes even riskier to cross over because of the perched river water. Thus, children were compelled to skip school almost for the entire monsoon.

20-year-old *Aarti Pradhan*, now pursuing her BBA from *Bhubh-aneswar* recounts the dangerous journey of going to school. *"We don't have an aanganwadi in our village, there's only a primary school. Even the school teachers have to cross this ropeway, to get to the school. Every day at least 6 college-going students and 12 small children walk this ropeway, risking their lives."* Aarti further recalls, *"There have been many minor and major accidents as people have lost their balance and injured themselves or fallen into the river. For many, crossing across on the ropeway is a compulsion as the nearest road path is quite a few kilometres away."*

*Francis Pradhan*, a local youth said, *"Hardly anything has changed since my childhood. 15 years ago, the construction of a bridge started near this ropeway but it stopped abruptly."* This half-constructed bridge with some pillars still stands next to the ropeway.

Many small and big bridges have since been made under Goonj's CFW initiative but the making of this one was an exhilarating experience. 90 enthusiastic villagers from 42 families of *Gabatbadi* village in *Daringbadi* block (*Kandhmal, Odisha*) worked for 22 days straight, to build a 300x5 ft bridge with their local resources. These people also repaired a 1.5 km road leading up to this bridge. Each participant received a comprehensive 'Family Kit' as reward, from Goonj. A great sense of camaraderie grew among the people as they cooked and ate together in the midst of all the hard work. Goonj ensured basic rations along with health check-up camps during this time.







#### ***Lohardaga, Jharkhand***

In September 2016, a bridge over the *Bokta* river in the village of *Bhujania* was severely damaged due to heavy rains. This bridge was not only this village's only link to the rest of the world, it was also crucial for transporting hundreds of litres of milk produced in the area, to the local market. The villagers even approached the local authorities with their earnest appeal to repair the bridge, but in vain. When we started work in this area under the *CFW* initiative, we encouraged the villagers to solve this problem with their own efforts. As a result, two members from each village family (from a total of 110 families) got together with their spades and baskets and filled the huge gap with 20-25 tractor trolleys of mud and stones. After two days of intensive labour, a 20 metre long gap was filled, restoring the connection with the bridge. *Bihari Pahan*, a milk producer from the village said, "*Due to the damaged bridge, we had to spend more time and money to supply the milk to the city. Now things will be back to normal and the milk van will come to our village to collect it*". Another example of what collective responsibility and hard work of village communities can achieve.





There are many such remarkable stories of what people we tend to call 'beneficiaries', can achieve with their local resources, wisdom and hard work. For us, these experiences are also great learning about the power of the so-called discarded cloth and other materials. Goonj's bridge-making work has spread to many other states like Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Odisha, West Bengal, etc. where bigger and sturdier bamboo and wooden bridges have been made.

*A reminder that anything is possible if we value village wisdom and understand that there are additional 'currencies' of great value. Material, be it new or old, is surely turning out to be a powerful currency for enhancing development.*

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## UPDATE FOOTNOTE

We're excited to share that from **FY 2014-2023**, Goonj, together with local communities implemented more than **600** big and small bridges and pulia making/repairing projects across **12** states of India. These efforts have been instrumental in enhancing rural connectivity and accessibility, positively impacting the social, cultural and economic fabric of the local communities. This work has also made the local communities more resilient and self reliant and brought their attention to their own knowledge and wisdom about their problems and solutions, that has long term multidimensional impact on rural life, contributing to the creation of stronger, more connected communities.



