

How PSD's Community Sports Program Transformed Sailekha's confidence, health, and leadership abilities



Bhubaneswar, Odisha, August 2024

In a society where progress often meets resistance, traditional norms and biases continue to restrict the opportunities available to girls and women, particularly in education, professional life, and sport. These societal constraints impede their holistic growth, depriving them of a multitude of opportunities. The lack of parental support for girls' participation in social activities, especially sport and physical activity, coupled with a lack of empathy from peers – especially boys – further hampers their personal growth and self-confidence.

[Pro Sport Development \(PSD\)](#), through its flagship [Community Sports Program \(CSP\)](#), seeks to challenge these societal norms by fostering gender sensitivity, empathy, and social awareness among young people through the powerful medium of sport, physical activity, and play. The CSP engages young people aged 5-16 years from underserved slum communities in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, immersing them in recreational games and activities to promote a culture of equality and collective growth.

Increased exposure to sport

Sailekha Behra, a student at St. Joseph's High School in Bharatpur, Bhubaneswar, joined the CSP in Class 6. Prior to her involvement, Sailekha faced several challenges related to self-esteem, health, and hygiene. She often doubted her abilities and struggled with societal taboos surrounding adolescent health, particularly menstruation. However, her journey with the CSP marked a significant transformation.



Sailekha Behra

Sailekha's initial involvement with the CSP introduced her to multiple sports, including netball, football, volleyball, and cricket, the latter becoming her favorite. Previously, Sailekha's access to sport was limited due to restrictions on her mobility outside the home. She was rarely allowed to go out, which hindered her participation in physical activities. Joining PSD's CSP was a turning point, increasing her mobility and engaging her in various sports and co-curricular activities.

[“I live in a colony where girls are not allowed to go outside much. My mother was very strict and rarely let me leave the house, especially because our neighbors would constantly remind her that I had grown up and should stay indoors. Sometimes, she did not allow me to go outside at all.](#)

Joining CSP changed everything for me. It was the first time I could freely participate in different sports.”

Through her participation in CSP’s sport and play-based activities, Sailekha developed a passion for cricket and even took part in tournaments. She shared how PSD’s facilitators and coordinators guided her and taught her stretching exercises whenever she experienced discomfort while batting. This guidance not only improved her physical capabilities but also instilled a sense of self-discipline.



Sailekha stretching before a CSP session

“They [PSD’s facilitators] were always there to guide me through my muscle pain with specific stretching exercises. Their consistent support and insistence on regular practice helped me become more disciplined”

Moreover, whenever Sailekha felt like giving up, the motivation and support from PSD’s facilitators and coordinators played a crucial role in boosting her confidence. One of PSD’s Community Sports Coordinators, Bhaktamohan Swain, observed Sailekha's remarkable growth:

“Initially, Sailekha was hesitant to come forward and participate. Now, she eagerly steps up to suggest ideas and strategies whenever a game is introduced, and she is ready to play before anyone else. Her leadership qualities have blossomed tremendously.”

Revamping habits and breaking the stigma

Involvement in the CSP also enabled Sailekha to overcome certain habits, such as waking up late for school, being lazy, and eating unhealthy foods. Participation in the CSP brought about a noticeable shift in her health and habits. She adopted healthier eating practices, avoiding fast food and increasing her intake of homemade meals and fruits, as suggested by CSP’s facilitators. This change resulted in weight loss, enhanced physical performance, and a more energetic and enthusiastic outlook. Sailekha’s mother observed:

"She has become more active and fit after joining PSD's program. She is no longer lazy like before. Before, I had to put her school dress on while she was still sleeping in the morning. But now, she wakes up early and gets ready herself. She is enthusiastic about going to school, unlike before."

Additionally, the program’s focus on health and hygiene education helped Sailekha understand the importance of maintaining personal hygiene, particularly during menstruation. Through the sessions, she learned that open discussions about menstrual health are not taboo, empowering her

to manage her menstrual health confidently. Previously, her mother had instilled the belief that periods should not be discussed openly, especially in front of her father. Sailekha shared,

"Before joining CSP, I was always told that discussing periods with my father or any male figure was not appropriate. It should be hidden. Now, I feel more confident and informed to manage my menstrual health, and I understand that open discussions about periods are not a bad thing."

Promoting gender equality and inclusivity

The CSP emphasizes gender equality and inclusive behavior through various sessions on gender sensitivity and awareness, which positively influenced Sailekha's interactions with her classmates, including boys. Initially, like many girls, she had internalized the fear of competing with boys due to societal norms. Comments from male classmates suggesting that "girls cannot do anything" further reinforced this fear. However, the gender sessions and CSP's mixed-gender approach to play encouraged her to recognize the equal potential of girls and embrace a spirit of collaboration.



Sailekha also noted that she previously did not have any male friends due to her hesitancy to talk to others. Attending multiple sessions on gender gradually changed her attitude, empowering her to interact more confidently. She is notably proud of her newfound friendship with Karan, a classmate with physical and mental disabilities. Sailekha has taken an active role in advocating for his inclusion in their group of friends, encouraging her classmates to be understanding and to treat him with kindness and respect, without discrimination. Sailekha shared:

"I used to be shy and hesitant, but now I feel more confident in standing up for myself and others. Karan is just like us, and it's important to treat him with respect."

Vision of reaching for the sky

Sailekha's transformation through the CSP embodies the program's potential to positively impact young lives. Her journey from a hesitant and restricted individual to a confident and empowered young woman reflects the broader objectives of CSP.

Her participation in sports tournaments and newfound joy in sport have propelled her to envision a future filled with possibilities that were once out of reach. Her engagement in sport has not only

improved her physical health but has also provided her with valuable life skills such as teamwork, leadership, and resilience.

“I was never this happy before. After joining PSD, I am able to play many sports. I even participated in two tournaments, football and cricket, in my school, which was not possible for me before, and this makes me very happy.”

Beyond her achievements in sport, Sailekha's improved health and hygiene practices highlight the program's holistic approach. The knowledge she has gained about menstrual health and the importance of personal hygiene has empowered her to manage her own well-being confidently and advocate for openness within her family and community.

Moreover, Sailekha's aspiration to become an air hostess and explore the world illustrates her newfound sense of possibility. The skills and confidence she has gained through CSP have expanded her horizons, allowing her to dream beyond the confines of her previous limitations. Her ambition to travel the world and pursue a career that was once considered beyond her reach underscores the transformative power of the program.



Sailekha playing her favourite sport

Sailekha's story powerfully illustrates how targeted interventions like CSP can unlock the potential of young individuals, helping them overcome obstacles and realize their dreams. Her growth highlights the vital importance of participating in programs that foster not just physical development but also personal and social empowerment.

Sailekha's experience with CSP sheds light on the pivotal role of sport and education in shaping the future of young people. It demonstrates that, with the right guidance and opportunities, young people can transcend societal limitations and pursue their dreams with renewed confidence and determination.

Started in 2015, [Pro Sport Development's Community Sports Program](#) has been active in working with young people aged 5-16 years from underserved slum communities in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, leveraging sport, physical activity and play to empower them as confident, competent and gender-sensitive leaders. PSD's sport, physical activity and play-based curricula has been purposefully designed to improve young people's health and wellbeing, facilitate their socio-emotional development, and sensitize them on issues of gender, adolescent health and hygiene and child rights.