

How is the Aspirational District Lohardaga Stitching Together Its Empowerment Story?

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Lush green farmlands, majestic rocks and a backdrop of breath-taking hills will greet you as you travel 73 kms east from Ranchi and set foot into the aspirational district Lohardaga. Carved out of Ranchi in 1983, Lohardaga encompasses 7 administrative blocks with a total of 66 Gram Panchayats.

A district affected by Left Wing Extremism (LWE), Lohardaga is one of the poorest districts in Jharkhand. Around 90% of the district population is engaged in agriculture. Further, being largely dependent on rainfall for irrigation, the farmers do not earn a decent income from their primary occupation given that the majority of farmers are able to harvest only one crop in a year. These underlying issues of high dependence on agriculture and low-income levels forces locals to migrate to neighbouring and far-off areas in search for seasonal work. As per the 2017 Economic Survey of India, Lohardaga found itself among districts with the highest out-migration list.

Given the context, enabling alternate means of income for the locals within the district is high on the agenda for the Lohardaga District Administration. The District Administration is also convinced that enhanced livelihoods and better work opportunities will not only help with reducing migration, but will serve as a powerful weapon for curbing naxalism as the locals gain greater trust in the administration. Thus, a number of projects undertaken by the district through central assistance aim to provide alternate employment opportunities to the local communities.

During my visit to this Aspirational District, I had the opportunity to learn about some of these initiatives and the impact they have had on the lives of the locals. Three main strategies have been identified by the District Administration for empowering the locals.

Identifying local demand and developing local supply chains to ensure business continuity

One of the important factors for ensuring the self-sustenance of business models is continuous local demand for the good or service. With this context, the District Administration responded to the local demand for school uniforms by setting up an industrial sewing centre in one of the poorest blocks in the district, Kisko. Given the success of the sewing centre in benefitting more than 80 women through a regular monthly wage, the administration has been on the lookout for investing in other similar projects. The next project in the pipeline is an industrial knitting centre to cater to the demand of local schools for sweaters. A lesson learned through such initiatives is that initial support for capital expenditure, skilling and market identification helps build a solid ground for sustainable business handovers from the Government to citizens.

Igniting behavioural change through incentive models to drive environment protection

In an effort to solve the pressing local environmental challenge of forest fires due to burning of dried leaves, the source of the problem (i.e., dried leaves) is being recycled into green fuel through a briquette production plant. The plant incentivizes local forest dwellers to collect and sell the dried leaves to the plant in return for cash. The dried leaves are subsequently recycled into the briquette which is sold by the plant owners in the market. Forest waste that seemed to be worthless has now become valuable to the locals as it has become a means for generating additional income. The briquette production plant is indeed a perfect example of how income generating models can instil behaviour change.

Bring the locals closer to the market

Lohardaga, being an LWE district, faces the challenge of limited connectivity to the mainstream market thereby disadvantaging the locals who are unable to sell their products with a good margin. Farming being the primary occupation in the region, it is essential to provide connectivity to all farmers so that they can easily sell their harvest in the markets. One such effort involves building a *pakka* road for farmers in Peshrar block, thus linking them with the markets. Also, local weavers have been deprived of connectivity to the lucrative national market for their art. The Government's effort to link these artisans to the markets for their woven rugs has ignited confidence amongst them with respect to their weaving skills.

The strategies adopted by the district demonstrate high potential for enhancing the livelihoods of the locals. The District Administration is gradually sowing the seeds for the garden of the industrial economy to grow in Lohardaga. The journey appears to be difficult given the multiplicity of challenges in the district, however, persistent efforts will surely make the garden bloom fully in a not-too-distant future.

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