



# 12 IN A MILLION

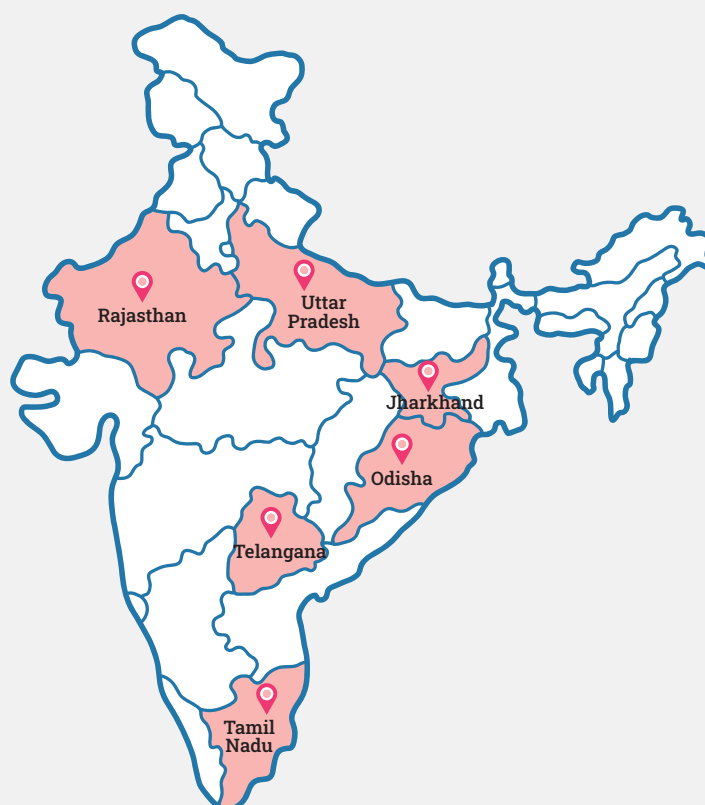
STORIES OF 12 YOUTH LEADERS  
TOWARDS AN ENHANCED  
QUALITY OF LIFE

# YOUTH KE BOL

**Y**outh Ke Bol is a 1 million-strong youth-led coalition in India, building the leadership of young people in the realm of sexual and reproductive health, towards enhancing their overall quality of life.

Dasra is the Hub for the consortium of 5 partners: [UNICEF YuWaah](#), [Restless Development](#), [Yuvaa](#), [The YP Foundation](#), and [Pravah](#).

The initiative, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, engages young people (19-29 years) through both digital and on-ground engagement, with a focus on six states - Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha, Telangana and Tamil Nadu.



## THE KEY OUTCOMES

**A cohort of 1 million youth capacitated to articulate their aspirations and lead social change initiatives.**

**A narrative of change, co-created by young people, that highlights the centrality of access to SRH information and services, towards enhancing their quality of life.**

**Young people represent their lived realities and recommendations with decision-makers from the hyperlocal to global levels.**



## Achievements so far

Over **1.1 million** young people have joined the coalition via online and offline engagement.

Over **325,000** followers on the dedicated social media handle on **JOSH**, with 70% of the followers from the youth community.

Garnered a reach of nearly **2 million** via **#SwitchtheSoch**, the largest Sexual and Reproductive Health campaign on Josh, a social media platform.

In partnership with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), created a cadre of nearly **50 youth policy champions** to dialogue and deliberate with different Ministries.

Acknowledged as a contributor to **India's FP2030** commitments, the national-level commitment to improving **safe and equitable family** planning access for all Indians.

Showcased as **one of the 25 nationwide** best practices that enhance young people's well-being at the '**Health of Youth, Wealth of Nation**' G-20 co-branded event by MoHFW and PMNCH-I.

# Glossary

## **SRH: Sexual and Reproductive Health**

The term 'sexual and reproductive health' refers to the state of physical, emotional, and social well-being in all matters related to the reproductive system and its functions of a person.

## **YL: Youth leaders**

A youth leader is a primary ambassador of Youth Ke Bol who is well versed in the areas of sexual reproductive health, contraceptive methods, its linkages with quality of life, and seeks to develop their leadership abilities. They lead change action projects and mobilise youth within their communities to join the coalition. They are generally directly trained by YKB partners.

## **CAP: Change Action Projects**

A project led by youth leaders that are part of YKB, aimed towards mobilising youth voices and engaging key stakeholders like policy makers, parents, institutional authorities, peers and community members. CAPs are conducted to foster safe spaces for young people, enhance perspective and awareness, and shape a narrative that is central to young people's well-being and access to SRH and contraception and how it links to their overall quality of life. It offers space for youth leaders to demonstrate their leadership abilities to dialogue on SRH.

## **PC: Policy Champions**

Policy Champions are young leaders from across India that are being nurtured as youth advocates to engage with key government stakeholders.

## **YAG: Youth Advisory Group**

The Youth Advisory Group (YAG) is a representative set of young leaders from across India who advise on the mandate and strategy of Youth Ke Bol.

## **LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual**

An acronym representing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual. It encompasses a diverse range of sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions within the community.





We present to you

## **12 in a Million**

A compilation of 12 stories of youth leaders who are spearheading change in their personal lives, communities, and policy spaces with their peers and decision-makers

# Harnessing the power of creativity for transformative impact

Akash Paliwal  
YOUTH LEADER, JAIPUR



“Over time, I have understood that the issues faced by the youth are many and interconnected. If you work with them on their dreams, you also need to address their rights.”

While life may not have been kind to 28-year-old Akash, he has vowed to not let others experience the same difficulties he overcame as a child. Through ‘Youth Ke Bol’ (YKB)– a one-million-strong youth-led coalition aimed at advancing young people’s access to family planning and sexual and reproductive health services –

Akash addresses issues related to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), masculinity, gender, and patriarchy.

“Over time, I have understood that the issues faced by the youth are many and interconnected. If you work with them on their dreams, you also need to address their rights. If you do not address certain issues, then the communication is incomplete. SRH, Gender, societal ills, and gender violence all need to be explained,” he says.

Akash initially began engaging with the youths in several bastis (hamlets). He found engaging with young men on issues like gender difficult. So, he innovated, using role-playing and sports to get through to them. He engaged with batches of 50 youngsters at a time. “I earlier worked with them on masculinity and patriarchy and now on their dreams,” he says. After joining YKB in March last year, he began conducting sessions with young men on SRH issues. Close to 400 young adults have benefited from engaging with Akash to date.

Akash was particularly inspired by the success of the ‘Aapka Sharir, Aapka Faisla’ webinar organised by YKB and

MTV Nishedh on International Youth Day last year. This panel discussion on contraception and healthy relationships reignited his passion for empowering young people to make informed life choices.

At the webinar, Akash talked about consent, contraception, and healthy relationships, and brought his learnings from communities in villages and bastis to the table. “Society doesn’t want people to talk about their bodies. Whenever a woman talks about sexuality, the man in the house suppresses her. Whenever a man wants to do something, he will do it, but no one thinks about women,” he says.

The association with YKB has enabled him to interact with other stakeholders like NGOs and local communities on issues surrounding SRH, from chaupal meetings in his colony to the nearby nukkad (street corner).

Akash’s journey as a youth advocate began after witnessing the terrible state of the girls’ washroom in a school. The girls hesitated to voice their concerns due to social stigma and uncomfortable dynamics

with teachers. Photographs of the shoddy spectacle became Akash’s voice, reaching the local councillor and securing a promise of action. This small victory ignited a larger mission - empowering young people to break the silence around sexuality and health.

Akash’s story resonates because it starts with empathy and action. He doesn’t merely preach; he listens, advocates, and bridges the gap between silence and understanding.

“What YKB has given me is a weapon that I can use to better the lives of the community around me. I have gained a better understanding of issues around SRH. Earlier, I was only working on gender and masculinity, but this has given me a more holistic lens. Earlier, I used to wonder how I would conduct sessions with women on SRH that are linked to all aspects of well-being. The program has enabled me and greatly enhanced my facilitation skills,” he says. ■

What YKB has given me is a weapon that I can use to better the lives of the community around me.”





# Breaking barriers around intimacy and sexuality, one conversation at a time

**Nazish Siddiqui**

YOUTH LEADER, JAIPUR

It's evident from her confidence that Nazish, whose name means 'proud' in Urdu, takes immense pride in what she does. The 23-year-old postgraduate student from Jaipur is one of about 800 Youth Leaders at the 'Youth Ke Bol' (YKB) initiative. When she's not attending classes, Nazish is busy spreading awareness among 100+ youths, especially girls, in her community about a subject often spoken in hushed tones— Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH). As someone who has deeply benefitted from engaging with youth-oriented foundations, Nazish wants to pull others into the journey. "I want to help youngsters make better life choices by engaging with the initiative," she says.

Nazish's foray into issues around SRH began after a distressing incident during the pandemic. Responding to a friend's suicidal thoughts over an unintended pregnancy, Nazish discreetly used her savings for abortion pills. Unfortunately, the pills worsened her friend's condition, leading to prolonged health issues. Despite urging



"I want to help youngsters make better life choices by engaging with the initiative."

her to see a doctor, the friend declined for fear of recognition, resulting in severe consequences, including heavy bleeding, abdominal pain and fever. This ordeal emphasised to Nazish the dangerous impact of inadequate SRH-related information on young girls' lives.

As Nazish resolved to delve deeper into the subject, she discovered YKB through

awareness about menstruation, contraception, and safe sex in her community. She initiated the process by reaching out to Anganwadi centres and, with the help of 3 dedicated Anganwadi workers, began mobilising and facilitating sessions. Despite the initial challenges, she facilitated 12 sessions where she reached out to 100 young girls and women and connected them to Anganwadi Centers to access sanitary napkins

Youth Ke Bol wasn't just a platform for me; it was a lifeline that nurtured my confidence and gave me the space and voice to express myself freely."



Pravah. Fuelled by a growing determination to effect change, she joined the initiative and assumed the role of a Youth Leader. The initial months were challenging, to say the least. "Girls from my community, including my friends, mocked me for addressing matters of intimacy and sexuality," she says. But Nazish remained steadfast in her mission. She used past incidents and anecdotes from her own experience and eventually made them understand the consequences of ignorance around SRH.

Growing up in a home with six younger siblings, Nazish understood the impact of family size and decided to spread

offered by the government.

Nazish says YKB helped her improve her facilitation and negotiation skills by regularly interacting with parents, husbands, key persons from the local Municipal Corporation and Anganwadi centers to take the narrative on the ground. She also credits the Open Mic sessions from Youth Ke Bol for giving her the confidence to put her points firmly and gracefully. During these sessions, she interacted with mothers and other female decision-makers in the family.

One can easily sense the empathy on Nazish's face when she talks about her peers. She proactively ensures that others have access to the same

information resources as she does. Once a week, she teaches basic English and Hindi to girls in her community who haven't received formal education.

For someone raised in a conservative society where discussions about intimacy and sexuality were often forbidden, Nazish has come a long way. Her journey serves as an inspiration for others to navigate their journey toward autonomy and self-discovery. When asked what she attributes her personal development to, 'Youth Ke Bol' is her ready answer. "Youth Ke Bol wasn't just a platform for me; it was a lifeline that nurtured my confidence and gave me the space and voice to express myself freely," she stresses. ■

# Laying the foundations to defy societal traditions

**Sonia Meghwal**  
YOUTH LEADER, JAIPUR

**T**wenty six year old Sonia's confidence shines through with her repeated use of the phrases, "My Body, My Choice" and "Consent given once by any girl doesn't apply forever." As the first girl in her family to pursue a post-graduate degree, Sonia's exposure to 'Youth Ke Bol' (YKB) has transformed her into a fearless advocate of Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH). Her conviction is evident when she says, "Young people, regardless of their urban or rural background,

are increasingly becoming sexually active. Lack of information and misinformation puts their lives at risk, so it's better to have correct information and be safe."

Sonia's journey in reproductive health awareness began at 18 when she was part of a local NGO working on adolescent health in a district in Rajasthan. The program facilitated candid conversations around bodily changes and menstruation, allowing her to absorb information about

reproductive health in a non-judgmental way. Subsequently, her involvement with YKB in July of 2023 equipped her with the knowledge to facilitate sensitive conversations about sexual relationships with ease and empathy. As one of nearly 800 Youth Leaders associated with YKB across India, she has engaged with over 50 girls and young women in her community so far.

Sonia's mission of raising awareness on the subject



initially faced resistance, though. Girls in her community were forbidden from attending her sessions by their families as they feared the knowledge she was imparting would corrupt them. The Sarpanch (Village Head) also echoed these concerns. Undeterred, Sonia persisted in her efforts and negotiated with the families. It took a while but, eventually, she earned the trust of the families, and also softened the Sarpanch's stance.

Empowered by the newfound trust, Sonia embarked on her mission of empowering girls to take control of their bodies. But she soon realised that the fight for comprehensive sexual health access extended beyond personal empowerment. In her effort to create a more holistic change, she turned to the Ujala Kendra in her district - a centre designated by the government to offer essential services to youth and adolescents. But, there, she faced another challenge. "There was a prevailing perception that sexual health information and services were exclusively relevant to married couples," she says. Recognising the need to dispel the myth, Sonia approached the center's counselor and shared several anonymous accounts of teenage pregnancies to highlight a pattern of early sexual activity and a critical gap in young girls' access to essential sexual and reproductive health information. This encouraged the counselor to share her number so that girls can reach out to her without hesitation.

Today, thanks to their continued efforts, the centre is

witnessing an increased footfall of youths seeking information and guidance. Around 80-90 young women and girls have visited Ujala Kendras so far.

With Youth ke Bol, Sonia is also finding her voice. She took the stage at an Open Mic event at Jaipur Polytechnic College, addressing 100 girls with candid clarity about sexual health. Her words, embraced by the college principal herself, sparked a ripple effect. Youths, girls especially, around her now openly share their sexual needs, readily seeking Sonia's support and guidance as they navigate Ujala Kendra's services.

Seeing the tangible effects, women of the community have

Several girls and women are defying regressive practices like those forbidding them from entering the kitchen or using utensils and beds during their periods."



also started approaching Sonia to facilitate discussions around issues associated with gender.

Sonia is considered a beacon of defiance against the tide of tradition in her community. Inspired by her, six girls have moved out of the community for professional courses. "Several others are defying regressive practices like those forbidding them from entering the kitchen or using utensils and beds during their periods. Additionally, girls are now negotiating with their elders for higher education and pushing the boundaries of traditional restrictions by attending social gatherings like weddings by themselves," Sonia says, beaming with pride. ■

# A queer man's quest for inclusive youth narratives

**Saad Alam Khan**

POLICY CHAMPION, DELHI

June 11, 2021. “The date changed my life,” says 24-year-old Saad Alam Khan, a queer Muslim man from Delhi. “My parents threw me out because of my sexual identity, and I was homeless for a while,” he says. This was at a time when there was a raging pandemic outside, which had claimed the lives of lakhs of people in India.

Fortunately, Saad found refuge with trans-rights activists he met during his brief stint at Pravah in 2018. While staying with them, he developed an interest in social work and a conviction to make a difference by influencing policy.

Saad heard about the ‘Youth Ke Bol’ (YKB) initiative during his association with Pravah, a partner organisation associated with YKB. The prospect of directly contributing to policy making as a ‘Youth Champion’ piqued his interest and he applied for

it. “The idea was that young people can work in the policy space without going through the conventional process,” he says, adding that he was very interested in the “public health space and especially Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH).”

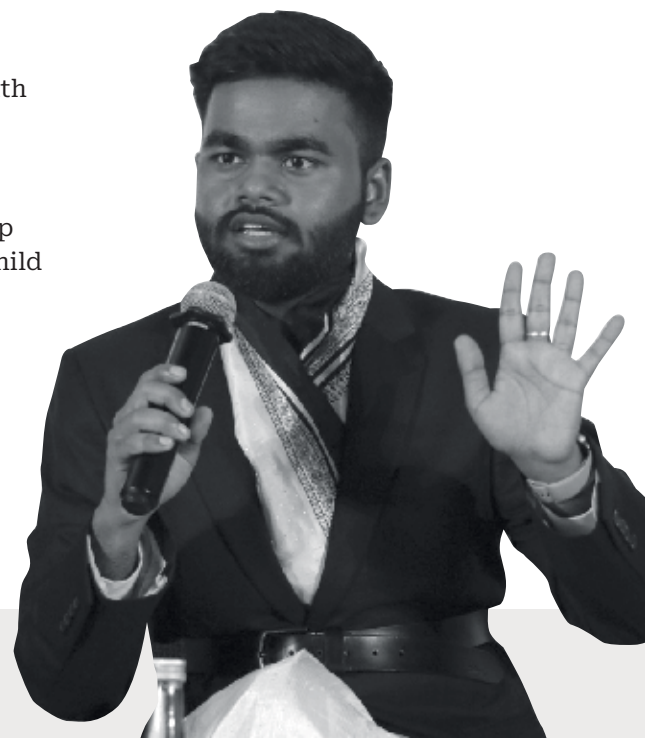
Saad has been associated with YKB since February 2023. As a Policy Champion undergoing capacity-building to work with decision-makers within the government system, he is now well-placed to influence dialogue and formulate policies as per the current needs of youths.

Saad represented YKB at the G20 co-branded event titled ‘Health of Youth - Wealth of Nation’. The event was organised by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) and the Partnership for Maternal Newborn and Child

Health (PMNCH). The event brought together national and international delegates, including young people from India and G20 countries to interact with policymakers. The esteemed guests, including the Union Minister of Health, Dr. Mansukh Mandaviya, Dr. Sushma Dureja (Ex-Additional Commissioner, MoHFW), and Ann Starrs (Director, Family Planning, BMGF), recognized the significant impact of YKB's work.

Saad was also part of the Youth Town Hall which discussed recommendations in a session

“There is a need for healthcare services to be more diversity-friendly and queer affirmative.”





I think the biggest importance of the platform provided by YKB is the positioning of young people advocating for policy change.”



from a youth-perspective. The recommendations led to a communique for the G20 nations. He says it was a learning curve where he understood the need for specific advocacy which needs to be done for youth and adolescent issues within the gamut of health and wellness which can get lost sometimes. “I understood the need for listening to other young people (his YKB cohorts) while designing a document like this,” he adds.

Another international conference Saad participated in was a multi-stakeholder event organised by the Management Development Institute (MDI) in Gurugram. At the roundtable, Saad talked about the often-overlooked needs of the queer community. The conference had representatives from the private

sector, academia, and civil society. Saad says he learned a lot from interacting with the vast spectrum of players involved, especially about how change needs to happen from the top. “More equity than equality, and it needs to reflect in terms of actual decision-making positions also. That’s how we create an environment for inclusion,” he elaborates.

His most satisfying experience, one closer to his heart, came at a meeting alongside government functionaries on World Contraception Day. “I advocated for healthcare services for sexual minorities based on my experience at a government-run clinic in Delhi. There is a need for healthcare services to be more diversity-friendly and queer

affirmative especially for a young person availing those services,” he says.

For Saad, YKB has opened doors and channelled his effervescent energy. He is now a Programme Associate for the adolescent and youth at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). “I think the biggest importance of the platform provided by YKB is the positioning of young people advocating for policy change. They make it possible for young people to even aspire to be able to be in the ‘inner space’ where they can advocate for Sexual and Reproductive Health. The initiative also brings diverse people from rural and urban platforms who bring their know-how,” he says. ■

# From local champion to a global voice on SRH

Vaibhav Gaur

YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP MEMBER, LUCKNOW



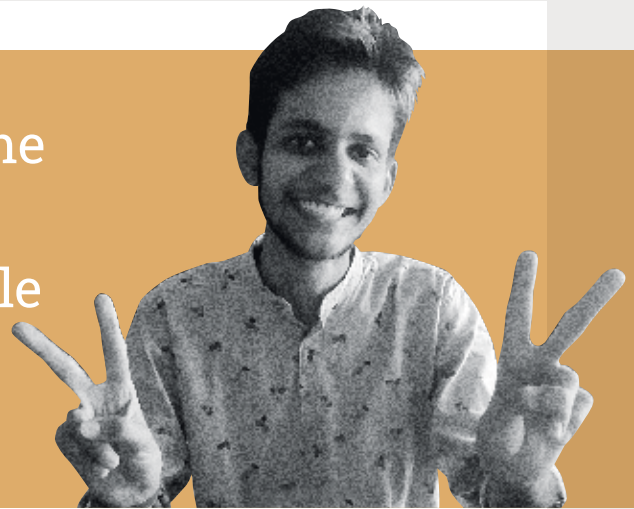
Hailing from the ‘City of Nawabs’, Lucknow, 21-year-old Vaibhav finds solace in the lyrics of Sahir Ludhianvi. The poet, writer, and weaver of ghazals became his soundtrack, resonating with his journey with ‘Youth Ke Bol’ (YKB) and his philosophy of enjoying the process without fixating on the outcome.

Initially shy, the young man’s reluctance to open up was challenged by his association with the initiative. “YKB has not just changed my life but that of countless others as well” he says. Today, Vaibhav is a member of the ‘Youth Advisory Group’ (YAG), a cohort of young leaders who advise the strategy for the YKB coalition.

Throughout his narrative, Vaibhav used the pandemic as a chronological framework, highlighting how specific developments or events within the global crisis coincided with turning points in his journey.

YKB was conceptualized during the second wave. Vaibhav’s mentor at the YP Foundation, one of the consortium members

The open dialogues pushed me outside my comfort zone and shattered my inhibitions while igniting a passion to break down barriers for others.”



of the coalition, connected him to the initiative. Online sessions were conducted by YKB with the YAG while setting up the core strategy of YKB. Dasra initiated youth perspectives research, culminating in the formation of the YAG, where Vaibhav played a key role in shaping YKB until the third wave.

Despite being the youngest in the team, Vaibhav’s unwavering passion and insightful contributions landed him a place among the seasoned members of the cohort. “The open dialogues pushed me outside my comfort zone and shattered my inhibitions while igniting a passion to break down barriers for others,” he says. The platform reignited his passion, allowing him to share his views, engage in multiple online and offline strategy planning sessions, and contribute to designing the website and communication collateral of YKB.

Vaibhav beamed with pride as he recounted how YKB’s support propelled him onto the global stage, representing the initiative at the prestigious International Conference on Family Planning (ICFP) 2022. This monumental

event, held in Thailand and convening 3,500 diverse stakeholders from 135 countries, provided him with an invaluable platform to advocate for youth leadership in SRH.

This pivotal moment arrived amidst his studies when he was invited to an international conference and asked to submit an abstract on YKB. His idea, highlighting the importance of youth perspectives, was selected, and he presented it on that platform.

“This experience was an eye-opener for me as, apart from learning more about the intricacies of Sexual and Reproductive Health, I also learned about the intersectionality of the issue with other domains like climate change, uses of technologies, mental health, and demand and supply system. All these factors play a crucial role in the overall well-being of an individual,” he says.

He subsequently became part of the cohort in all three phases. The first phase focused on capacity building for the youth cohort. The second

phase revolved around content development and module design, considering SRH intersections with other fields, while the third phase aimed to expand the narrative through ground-level youth work.

In Feb. 2023, when officials from BMGF visited India, Vaibhav was chosen to present the youth’s perspective and recommendations on sexual and reproductive health in the state, drawing insights from the research conducted and his participation in YKB.

Witnessing the initiative’s ripple effects spreading through the community, Vaibhav realised that YKB had transformed countless lives, including his own. “This experience with YKB enabled me to learn about the intricacies of Sexual and Reproductive Health. I am now more responsive and articulate to draft a policy brief reflecting the intersectionality of SRH with climate change and technology.” Once a hesitant student, he now stands as a confident speaker, his voice echoing the silent struggles of many. ■



# Overcoming stigma to create safe spaces for the LGBTQIA+ community

**Ayush Lal**

YOUTH LEADER, VARANASI

**C**onfident and rebellious, 18-year-old Ayush is a native of Varanasi and belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community. Unruffled by all the stigma brought on by his sexual identity, the young man had always been on the lookout for people to call his own. Committed to fostering safe spaces and dismantling harmful myths, Ayush actively participated in the 'Change Action Project' (CAP) under 'Youth Ke Bol' (YKB). As part of the project, Ayush and five other YKB youth leaders created the 'Parwah' Instagram page where they tackle misconceptions about Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) alongside experts from the field.

The profile was formed as part of their YKB journey and has a 20,000-strong audience. Today, it is a haven for many marginalised youths from various communities to voice their opinions and seek advice on issues surrounding gender, sexuality and SRH.

The platform recently organised an online workshop on prevention and redressal of sexual harassment with other youth-oriented civil society

groups. It has testimonies of over 70 young people talking about their sexuality. "People have come out with their takes on consent, different ideas of pleasure, dancing, eating, even masturbation." Ayush intends for its scope to expand swiftly. He wants to continue with the work even after his association with YKB ends.

School was a difficult place for

Ayush because of his classmates' attitudes towards his sexuality. Despite the daily harassment, Ayush remained resilient, refusing to let the taunts affect him. "There should be enough awareness in society about handling young sensitive kids. They shouldn't be subjected to negativity. It leaves an irreversible impact on them," he says, reflecting on his experience.

**"We human beings have set norms for ourselves. I am against these norms."**





I have developed an in-depth understanding of a host of issues and gained a lot of knowledge. I have a voice of my own now.”

A problem-solver who is not very academically inclined, Ayush decided to take a break from studies after the twelfth grade. One day, he came across an activity session organised by YKB on the Banaras Hindu University campus. “I like engaging with topics and having conversations,” he says. His topic was ‘gender roles’ and Ayush loved the experience of engaging and discussing. “We human beings have set norms for ourselves. I am against these norms,” he says, explaining why the so-called

consent and pleasure, and the second day was focused on policy advocacy, youth leadership in SRH space, and how SRH impacts Quality of Life.

“The best two days of my life,” says Ayush, adding he is “grateful” to Dasra and the YP Foundation for the community they have built. As one of about a million youth leaders engaged with YKB, he initiates conversations with his peers and communities. Still in his teens, Ayush has facilitated workshops

‘man’ of the house doesn’t need to be the breadwinner.

When Ayush joined YKB, he remembers feeling nervous before his first two-day session last year. The session on the first day was on

in universities in Varanasi. “The agenda was to break barriers, get people out of their comfort zones to enable them to speak about SRH,” he says. The youngster was also part of a roundtable by UNICEF and Yuva, giving his inputs on a ‘Quality of Life’ resource kit for the youth. He helped make flowcharts and diagrams to make the five-part compendium more accessible to readers. Ayush was also part of the Varanasi ‘Pride Parade’ alongside other youth leaders, ensuring that some conversations no longer remain taboo.

“I have developed an in-depth understanding of a host of issues and gained a lot of knowledge. I have a voice of my own now. I want to work in the development sector. I am bolder as well and I’ve almost left my stage fright behind,” he says. ■

# Promoting a better quality of life by championing sexual and reproductive health

Priyanka Panda

YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP MEMBER, BHUBANESHWAR



**T**wenty three year old Priyanka Panda from Bhubaneswar forayed into climate and gender activism as a teenager in school. Such was her zeal that her efforts were recognised by the President of India in 2016. An activist by nature and keen to effect change, Priyanka is a member of the Youth Advisory Group (YAG), which is a representative set of young leaders from across India, who advise on the mandate and strategy of 'Youth Ke Bol' (YKB).

“YKB has really given me an insight into how to implement programs in spaces that are resistant to change.”



It has been an enriching journey. I have been able to talk more about SRH and make an impact, which I didn't think was possible."

Always sensitive to problems around her, Priyanka recounts an incident at school where she and a few classmates interviewed senior boys on their views on female infanticide. "It was really awkward initially. Some of them even used humour to deflect the topic," she says. It was a start for Priyanka, who says she felt emboldened to speak about issues that matter.

Priyanka was one of the YKB youth delegates who attended the G20 co-branded 'Health of Youth - Wealth of Nation' event organised by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and PMNCH-I. YKB was showcased at the event as one of the 25 best practices from India to meaningfully engage young people on sexual and reproductive health (SRH).

Priyanka then applied to become a member of the YAG. "I have been learning a lot from them and engaging more with the community now," she says of her experience, adding that her urban existence initially held her back from direct contact with rural communities. "I thought I couldn't engage anymore,

but they sort of pushed that boundary for me as well, and I loved it," she mentions.

The capacity-building sessions immensely benefitted Priyanka's understanding of how quality of life is linked to SRH. "I learned there are so many ways to look at a problem and was given resources & information which are difficult to find on your own," she says. In December last year, Priyanka organised a webinar with other YAG members on building leadership in the space of SRH and how it is intrinsically linked to quality of life for an audience of 30 young people.

Priyanka also represented YKB at the National Conclave for Menstrual Health organised by MHAi and Uninhibited India where she discussed how critical non-governmental stakeholders can help advance the menstrual health agenda in India, referencing the government's draft Menstrual Health Policy.

Aside from engaging with government and private sector participants, she was impressed by the diversity of views being

considered. "I was very happy to see the government taking feedback from people on how to make the policy more inclusive," she says.

Priyanka has engaged with issues like child marriage, teenage pregnancies, and abortions - issues far removed from her relatively sanitised urban existence. She says YKB has also exposed her to the work of her peers, who have engaged dozens of other young men in helping sensitise local communities on periods.

"YKB has really given me an insight into how to implement programs in spaces which are resistant to change. Also, I was entirely unaware of the pillars of quality of life," she says.

Priyanka credits YKB for ensuring her engagement with people from marginalised communities who do not have access to many resources that people residing in urban areas do. "YKB has been an enriching journey. I have been able to use my learnings to talk more about SRH and make an impact, which I didn't think was possible," she says. ■

# Unveiling the spectrum of identity and becoming a queer youth leader

## Aarya

YOUTH LEADER, VARANASI

Aarya from Varanasi is especially proud of bringing events like “Pride Parade” and “Safar Rangon Ka” to a city steeped in religious and spiritual traditions for the first time. But the journey leading to this moment of triumph was paved with challenges for the 20-year-old statistics student from Banaras Hindu University.

Aarya’s foray into activism began after an Instagram post by “Varanasi Queer Pride” led her to engage with young people her age with different sexual orientations. Later, she learned about the ‘Youth Ke Bol’ (YKB) initiative through a YP Foundation member. Aarya was drawn to YKB when she learned that different people from diverse sexual orientations were

part of this youth-led coalition. Aspiring to learn more about youth leadership in the SRH realm, she became a youth leader with YKB.

Aarya considers her stint at YKB a milestone in her life. “YKB gave me the confidence to primarily acknowledge who I was and explore the myriad dimensions of



those around me, especially the youth,” she says.

Attracted to girls during her adolescence, Arya remembers feeling uncertainty and guilt as if being born different was a mistake. Rebuked by her mother for engaging with members of the LGBTQIA+ community, she found an anchor in her younger brother, who fondly called her ‘Bhaiya’.

skills allowed her to develop her skills to facilitate sessions in a participatory manner. Arya learned that it was self-pride and academic credentials that truly shape an individual’s real identity, independent of one’s sexual identity.

Committed to fostering safe spaces and dismantling

page also received overwhelming appreciation for organising the “Varanasi Queer Pride” and creating an inclusive space. Arya regularly contributes to ‘Parwah’, planning and facilitating sessions. Apart from having face-to-face sessions, she also uses social media platforms to connect with the youth on various issues.

“YKB gave me the confidence to primarily acknowledge who I was and explore the myriad dimensions of those around me, especially the youth.”



YKB gave her a safe space where she felt accepted and validated. “What truly impressed me was how YKB embraced diversity and ensured that every young person’s concerns, regardless of their sexual orientation, were heard and addressed with respect and understanding,” she says. As a Youth Leader, she is taking the compelling narrative to further conversations with her peers, decision-makers, and the public.

Interacting with the local queer community at events and sessions on contraception, gender identity, sexuality, healthy sexual relationship, and leadership

harmful myths, Arya actively participated in the YKB’s Change Action Project (CAP). As part of this CAP, Arya and five other YKB youth leaders created the ‘Parwah’ Instagram page, where they tackle misconceptions about sexual and reproductive health alongside experts from the field.

The page is currently being followed by 168 individuals who actively engage with the content. The page received several queries about both the “Prevention and Redressal of Sexual Harassment” and “Consent and Pleasure” workshops from followers who showed their interest in participating in these events. The

Arya opened up about the various challenges she faced during the sessions. She says, “In our society, since talking about sexual pleasure is considered taboo, the sessions were often hijacked by a few initially. But we stayed resilient by using gender-neutral language and refraining from comments based on sexuality or identity. We forged a safe space under the guidance of YKB mentors.”

The courage to embrace their identity and empower peer stakeholders through the Parwah CAP demonstrates the remarkable influence of YKB among the youth. ■

# A beacon of change and a champion for sexual and reproductive health

**Kriti Tirkey**

POLICY CHAMPION, RANCHI

**B**orn in Jagannathpur, Ranchi's largest slum area, 23-year-old Kriti Tirkey has a remarkable clarity of thought and purpose. As a Policy Champion, she is associated with 'Youth Ke Bol' (YKB) initiative, which aims to advance young people's access to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) information and services, to improve their overall quality of life. Kriti is undergoing capacity-building to work with decision-makers within the government system while educating women over twice her age about Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH). Close to 500 families from Khunti and Ranchi in Jharkhand have benefitted from Kriti's verve to make a difference.

Intelligent and diligent, Kriti topped her school in the tenth standard. But, by that time, some of her friends in the basti (hamlet) were getting married. Early unwanted pregnancies among unmarried girls in the slum led to early marriages. Teenagers and young adults were stuck in a vicious cycle. Kriti wasn't going to be a mute spectator.

Before joining college, Kriti led

the biggest community centre in Jagannathpur, which was close to her home. She helped and engaged with over 200 children, improving their understanding of health through interactive sessions.

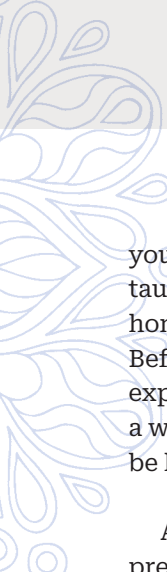
Feeling the need to improve her understanding of issues, Kriti joined YKB early last year. She is one of over 40 Policy Champions who help highlight the need for SRH among young people. Initially confused about the sphere of SRH, the sessions conducted by UNICEF-YuWaah gave her a definitive lens. "The initial capacity-building

sessions on communication and advocacy greatly improved my understanding in engaging with my community on SRH," she says.

In September 2023, Kriti and four other Policy Champions represented YKB at a roundtable on World Contraception Day organised by UNICEF-YuWaah in Delhi. The multi-stakeholder event included members of civil society, government officials from the Ministry of Health, and members of the private sector as well. At a panel discussion on quality of life, she shared her learnings from her community. "I spoke about how they become



The initial capacity-building sessions on communication and advocacy greatly improved my understanding in engaging with my community on SRH."



young parents because SRH is not taught in schools or discussed at home. It was a great experience. Before that, I did not know I could explain issues of my community to a wider audience and that I would be heard,” she adds.

Aside from giving her access to prestigious platforms, Kriti says her stint as a Policy Champion at YKB has helped her understand issues much better. “I was always lacking in social media

skills. During capacity-building sessions at YKB, I was told about its importance and skills to use it appropriately. I was advised on content, suggested topics, and also taught how to talk about them,” she explains.

Kriti mentions she has learned a lot from YKB’s diverse group of Policy Champions, saying, “My perspective has changed so much that I can ideate and put plans into action as well. I was

“Women are now opening up to us. They even talk openly with their husbands and understand the need to talk to children, too.”

able to contribute to the SRH-themed football tournament in Khunti, a tribal-dominated area in Jharkhand, and explain to young women why certain issues deserved importance.”

Since 2018, Kriti and others have organised football matches for young mothers, fostering community bonding and breaking barriers. This year’s tournament in Ranchi and Khunti focuses on SRH. Between matches, young mothers take a pre-test on SRH components, discuss family planning with partners, and create educational videos with their husbands. This novel idea by Kriti and her team is a testament to the positive impact of the initiative.

“Their husbands and adolescents are also being engaged, and the changes are visible. Women are now opening up to us. They even talk openly with their husbands and understand the need to talk to children, too,” she says with a smile. ■





# Empowering the youth to make better life choices

## Prachi Tiwari

YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP MEMBER, LUCKNOW

A snake catcher who ventured into engaging with issues surrounding Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), Prachi is currently part of the Youth Advisory Group (YAG), a cohort of young leaders who advise and strategise the 'Youth Ke Bol' (YKB) initiative. Prone to asking questions, Prachi brings a unfettered enthusiasm to YKB.

Born in Lucknow, animal rights and their welfare formed a large part of Prachi's growing-up years. She has been associated with an animal welfare organisation that has rescued over 2,500 snakes and reptiles since the last decade. Prachi's association with YKB has led her to understand how seemingly diverse issues like climate change and SRH are interlinked. "Through a roundtable I attended for YKB, I learnt about and interacted with stakeholders that manufactured disposable sanitary pads," she says.

Already an active campaigner, she continued her work on the United Nations- Sustainable Development Goals. Her work brought her closer to her

local community with active conversations with stakeholders.

Prachi began her journey with YKB in 2023. As part of the YAG, she says her first session was "heartwarming" as she got to engage with so many other young people her age. Being a lone ranger for most of her life, she admits to having learned a lot about teamwork from her fellow cohorts. "It has changed the way I look at problems. There is a sense

of confidence and voice that young people are given here," she says about the initiative.

In October last year, Prachi attended the annual meetup of Youth Leaders titled 'YouVaani', hosted by the YP Foundation. The event focused on advancing conversations around healthcare for adolescents and youth and had representatives from the government, multilateral agencies, civil society and other



"I am not only targeting other people but the stigma in my mind too."



Youth ke Bol is creating young people who are able to represent what quality of life means to them and their peers.”

youth organisations. Dr Zoya Ali Rizvi, Deputy Commissioner (Adolescent Health) at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, commended YKB for improving young people’s understanding of SRH. Prachi says attending the event inspired her; she came into contact with a number of her cohorts “who are already those versions of themselves that I want to be”.

The same month, she represented YKB at the Girl Up Summit, a leadership development initiative, in New Delhi. Prachi helmed the YKB booth at the event, spreading awareness about the project and interacting with the 400 young attendees. “As a

representative, I expanded my knowledge about the program I was a part of, which served as a reminder of our responsibilities as youth in the world. Because YKB is a youth-led coalition, which is for the youth, by the youth; it brought a feeling of being ‘important’ in the society that often ignores our role and goes deaf when our voices are raised,” she says.

The experience of working on the issues related to SRH has been a learning curve for Prachi, and she has taken it in her stride. “The important thing is for us to be able to carry out our ideas,” she says. As part of YAG, she has fulfilled several roles, including strategising on external

communication frameworks and articles to amplify the message of SRH on social media.

“YKB is creating young people who can represent what quality of life means to them and their peers,” she says of her experience. “It has expanded my perception, and I am able to connect with youth-based issues better. I feel this will help me contribute to policy making in the long run,” she says.

One of Prachi’s biggest learnings from YKB has been eliminating stigma, not just in society, but within her as well. “I am not only targeting other people but the stigma in my mind too,” she says. ■

# Silent witness to vocal champion

**Saumya Rai**

YOUTH LEADER, VARANASI

“**I**nformation and education on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) is a fundamental right, and everyone should gain access to it,” says Saumya, a 22-year-old student of social work at Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith University in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.

Saumya’s path to social activism was ignited when one of her classmates was forced to quit her studies due to an unintended pregnancy. That incident made Saumya realise how knowledge about SRH is intrinsically related to quality of life. This sparked a passion within her to champion SRH education as a crucial foundation to empower young girls to have agency over their bodies and life choices.

Harrowing experiences closer to home further sharpened her resolve. Her cousin’s sexual assault and a friend’s marital rape fueled a burning desire to support and heal survivors. But it wasn’t just pain that shaped her – it was hope.

Saumya came across ‘Youth Ke Bol’ (YKB) through a professor during an internship program

and was instantly drawn to it. “Finally,” she recalls, “I found a home and a cause - one which resonated with my vision to educate and create awareness among young girls.”

As one of close to 800 Youth Leaders at YKB, Saumya, along with five other members, played a pivotal role in conceptualising, designing, and implementing a project named “Yuti”, which aims to bring awareness about various dimensions of SRH, including consent, pleasure, masculinity, healthy relationship, and contraception.

Saumya’s ability to connect with her peers ultimately led

“Information and education on SRH is a fundamental right, and everyone should gain access to it.”



Sexual pleasure is not an arena that I feel is ethically wrong. Instead, knowledge of the same gives us the liberty to lead our life healthily.”



her to spearhead a ‘Change Action Project’ (CAP), along with other youth leaders, under YKB. In December 2023, Saumya conducted two sessions with 40 young people on consent, pleasure, and body mapping- a practice that helps an individual become more aware of one’s body parts and physical sensations, relationships, menstrual hygiene, safe sex, and contraception. She credits YKB for equipping her with the knowledge and confidence to speak to her peers on matters that are often considered taboo.

Driving the initiative forward, she actively partnered with the University to obtain approvals for scheduling and securing appropriate venues for the sessions. She ensured that both young men and women formed

part of the sessions for a holistic experience.

Saumya highlights how important it is for boys to be sensitised about fostering healthy and respectful partnerships. “Generally, in relationships, boys assume they have the right to do anything to their partners without their consent,” she says.

Saumya’s deep empathy surfaces when she speaks of the societal stigma surrounding sexual violence, highlighting how “only the physical scars reflect the fear of victim blaming and ostracization.” She adds, “There is not only stigma around sexual violence but sex in general.” However, her transformation offers a beacon of hope. “Now,” she declares, “sexual pleasure is not an arena that I feel is ethically

wrong. Instead, knowledge of the same gives us the liberty to lead our life healthily.”

Saumya dreams of opening her own organisation that would contribute to shaping the future of children and youths by addressing the education and health needs of people, especially in hard-to-reach areas.

Saumya’s story is one of unwavering commitment, born from personal hardship and nurtured by a burning desire to empower others. As she embarks on the path of building her organisation, one can only imagine the ripples of positive change she will set in motion, ensuring that young girls, like her classmates and friends, are never again silenced or robbed of their agency. ■

# Finding her voice to help others discover theirs

**Shivangi Bhardwaj**

YOUTH LEADER, VARANASI

For 25-year-old Shivangi, the journey of finding her voice has been a lifelong quest. However, a transformative chapter unfolded when she joined the 'Youth Ke Bol' (YKB) initiative as a Youth Leader. In this role, she not only discovered newfound confidence but also found the courage to voice issues close to her heart.

Today, Shivangi actively engages with communities and adolescents, counselling them on

Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH). Reflecting on her journey, she says, "YKB has helped me fill my knowledge gaps and also given me a sense of confidence."

The one time Shivangi still regrets not speaking up was when her eldest sister was getting married when she was only 23 years old. "She was the most capable of us all. She didn't want to get married



YKB has helped me fill my knowledge gaps and also given me a sense of confidence."



SHIVANGI



but couldn't say much either. It still irks me that we didn't say anything. She had dreamt of being a teacher, and we wanted her to finish her education," she says.

Shivangi's world changed when she went to college. Initially nervous, her willingness to learn enabled her to find safe spaces in college. However, even after graduating, she struggled to find an outlet to make a difference. "I had not learned anything whereby I could question society," she explains.

Shivangi learned about YKB when she overheard a session conducted by a YKB member in college. For a relatively coy Shivangi, the challenge of working in sex education, especially SRH, piqued her interest. The issues being addressed, like SRH, gender, and consent further resonated with her, and she applied for

the YKB initiative.

She was already conducting sessions on gender and had bonded well with the school children she engaged with. "They had a lot of questions but no one to answer them. When they are not informed, they may end up on the wrong path, it is risky. They make better decisions when they can think for themselves," she says. The capacity-building sessions that followed helped her gain a deeper understanding of interlinked problems in society and filled a void that on-ground experience had left.

Shivangi has been working with the communities she has cultivated over time, counselling and guiding them to make more informed decisions about their lives. As part of her 'Change Action Project' (CAP) under YKB, she worked on gender equality in six government and private schools in Varanasi. She says her interactions with teachers on the ground made her understand how

"We need to break the binaries of society and create a new world. As I met more people I came to understand and learn what I have to say and how to put my points across,"

far society needed to push itself. "These topics are still considered taboo. We need to break the binaries of society and create a new world. As I met more people I came to understand and learn what I have to say and how to put my points across," she adds.

"I learned about the LGBTQIA+ community. Earlier I only knew about trans people, and that too not so much. I came to know about other identities and how I needed to broaden my thinking," Shivangi says. Her work among the lesser privileged communities continues. "Change is an enduring process, it can never be stopped," she says. ■



## Acknowledgements

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