



From Playgrounds to Possibilities



How the Community Cricket Program helped Puja build confidence, leadership, and challenge gender barriers

Bhubaneswar, Odisha, April 2026

Traditional gender norms continue to shape how girls and young women engage with sports and public spaces, especially in marginalized communities. These norms often limit their participation, reinforcing the idea that certain spaces, including sports like cricket, are more suited for boys. As a result, many girls grow up with limited exposure to sports, reduced confidence, and fewer opportunities to express themselves freely.

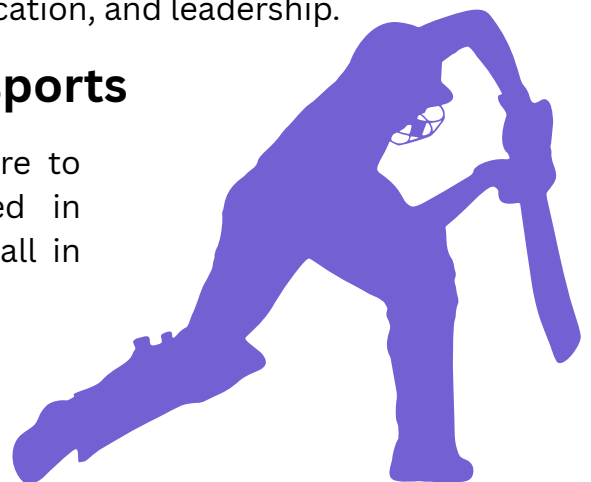
However, sports can serve as a powerful tool to challenge these barriers. By creating inclusive and supportive environments, they can enable young people to develop confidence, leadership, and a deeper understanding of equality and rights.

In this context, Pro Sport Development (PSD), with support from The Upamanyu Mallik Initiatives (TUMI), implements the Community Cricket Program (CCP), which works with young people from marginalized communities in the city of Bhubaneswar in Odisha. The program provides a safe and inclusive space for adolescents to participate in mixed-gender cricket while building awareness around life skills, gender, and child rights.

Puja Jani, a 16-year-old from the Bharatpur Community, has been part of the CCP for the past year and will be continuing for a second year. Having recently completed her final year of school, Puja's journey through the program reflects a significant transformation in confidence, communication, and leadership.

Exploring opportunities through sports

Before joining the CCP, Puja had limited exposure to sports like cricket. While she had participated in activities such as skipping, kabaddi, and basketball in school, cricket was entirely new to her.



Her introduction to the program came through a peer from her community who encouraged her to attend a few sessions. What began as a trial soon turned into a sustained engagement, as Puja found herself drawn to both the sport and the environment created by the program.

Puja describes herself as “ambitious,” someone always willing to try new things. Yet, despite this ambition, she had never experienced playing in mixed-gender spaces before.

She shares that prior to the CCP, she had never played with boys. The program’s structure, which encourages boys and girls to play together, initially introduced her to an unfamiliar environment but eventually helped her develop a sense of comfort and teamwork across genders.

Learning beyond the game

For Puja, the CCP sessions offered much more than just cricket. She particularly enjoyed practice matches and interactive activities, along with the life skills sessions that followed. These sessions introduced her to important concepts such as teamwork, decision-making, and communication.

Additionally, the program deepened her understanding of child rights. While she was aware that such rights existed, she had never explored them in detail before. Through the CCP, she learned about rights such as the Right to Development and the Right to Health, gaining a clearer understanding of their importance in everyday life.

The program also held discussions on health, hygiene, and gender, including topics such as menstruation, which helped normalize conversations that are often stigmatized within communities.



“I spoke on stage for the first time after a match, and it made me feel very confident and proud of myself.”

Finding her voice

One of the most significant changes in Puja’s journey has been the development of her confidence and communication skills. Earlier, she describes herself as someone who preferred to stay quiet and had very few friends.



She was hesitant to interact with others and uncomfortable speaking in group settings. Her turning point came after a cricket match during the CCP, when she spoke on stage for the first time. This experience stayed with her. Later, during her involvement with another organization, she was again encouraged to speak publicly. Drawing from her earlier experience, she overcame her hesitation and delivered her speech confidently, receiving appreciation for both her speaking and her cricket skills.

Over time, Puja became more comfortable interacting with peers, facilitators, and others around her. She began to express her opinions openly and engage more actively in group settings.



“I used to not like talking much before, but now I can speak easily with others and share my thoughts.”

Developing leadership and teamwork

Another key aspect of Puja’s growth has been her development as a leader. Initially hesitant about taking on responsibilities, Puja recalls that she “hated captaincy.” However, her facilitators intentionally encouraged her to step into leadership roles within the team.

Through this experience, she learned how to guide her team, give instructions, and make decisions under pressure. With support from both her facilitators and teammates, she gradually became more confident in leading others.

This exposure helped her understand the importance of teamwork, problem-solving, and mutual support. Whether deciding team strategies or supporting fellow players, Puja began to actively contribute to the group dynamic. She reflects on how the program taught her that asking for help is not a weakness, but an important part of learning and growing.

Challenging gender norms and building inclusivity

Puja’s experience in mixed-gender sports spaces significantly influenced her perspective on gender equality. She shares that in her community, people often claim that girls are progressing, but in reality, equal opportunities are still limited.

Through the CCP, playing alongside boys helped break these barriers. It created a sense of comfort and mutual understanding between genders, enabling both boys and girls to better understand each other’s challenges and responsibilities.



“People say that girls are moving ahead, but in reality, it is only in words and they are not given with equal opprotunities to move ahead.”

She believes that such shared spaces foster respect, belonging, and equality. Pragatee Sethy, PSD's Community Sports Coordinator, believes that her evolving perspective on gender stands out:

“She has become more inclusive and supportive of her female teammates, encouraging them and helping them improve. Her contribution to the group has been invaluable.”

Extending impact beyond the field

The changes in Puja's confidence and awareness have extended beyond the cricket field. At home and within her social circles, she has begun sharing what she has learned about child rights, health, and hygiene. She has become more socially active, stepping out more often and engaging with people confidently. Her improved communication skills have helped her build stronger relationships and participate more actively in her community.

Her father, Pandab Jani, reflects on this transformation:

“Since joining the CCP, she has shown remarkable improvement in her cricket skills, teamwork, and confidence. She's become more disciplined, and her communication has improved significantly. She has also developed a strong passion for the sport and is eager to continue learning and growing as a player.”

He further adds that he fully supports her continued participation in the program, recognizing its role in her overall development.

Recognized growth by mentors

Puja's progress has been closely observed by her facilitator, Pragatee Sethy, Community Sports Coordinator at Pro Sport Development who highlights her consistent growth across multiple areas.

“As her facilitator, I've seen remarkable growth in Puja. Her confidence has increased significantly, and she has become more outgoing, actively sharing her ideas and participating in school and college events, including public speaking. Initially, she was hesitant to take on leadership roles, but over time she has become more confident and assertive, taking responsibility within the team.”

The facilitator further notes her increasing involvement beyond the program, including participation in debates and other extracurricular activities, reflecting her growing self-assurance.

Looking ahead

One of Puja's most memorable experiences from the program has been participating in matches with teams from different cities, including interactions with players from places like Kolkata. These experiences broadened her perspective and gave her a sense of connection beyond her immediate community.

Today, Puja stands as a confident and self-assured individual who is not afraid to express herself, and is able to take on leadership roles, and challenge societal norms.

Her journey highlights how structured sports-based interventions like the Community Cricket Program can create meaningful change in the lives of young people. By combining sport with life skills and awareness building, such programs not only support individual growth but also contribute to building more inclusive and equitable communities.



“Do what you want to do. Don't be afraid of people. Work together and support each other.”

By: Puja Jani