

# Lead Me From Darkness TO LIGHT



*A young girl's aspirations were about to get trampled under child/early marriage, just when Umang came as a ray of hope and strengthened her mother to confront the social evil. This is the story of emancipation of both mother and her daughter*

ISweetie Das comes across as a bright, ambitious girl with a promising future. At a young age of 20, she is already financially independent, working with an IT company in Ranchi, Jharkhand. She holds a diploma in computer science engineering and aspires to study B-Tech with her own hard-earned money. Along with being self-reliant, she is also supporting her family, comprising her parents and a younger sister, who live in Kundangal village in Jamtara district of the state.

However, this was not the case three years ago when Sweetie was being forced into an early marriage by her family. Her father Porimal Das, who runs a small grocery shop in the village had succumbed to societal pressure, where child/early/forced marriage (CEFM) of daughters is a social norm and had started looking for matrimonial match for his eldest daughter. Subsequently, Sweetie was forced to discontinue her schooling at 11th grade. This was especially heart-breaking for the girl who had always been a meritorious student and had dreamed of having a career.

## Umang Brings Hope

Sweetie had been a school topper in her 10th boards exams (Deoleshwar High School, Bhandarbera village, Jamtara) and was preparing dedicatedly to score well in her 12th grade as well when her education was suddenly stopped. "That was the lowest point for me. It seemed as if my life was over," recalls Sweetie. Just then, as a ray of hope, her aunt who had recently got associated

with a new project called 'Umang' as a Master Book Keeper (MBK) resisted the idea of Sweetie's marriage. Being implemented by JSLPS with technical support from PCI India since 2019, Umang has been working towards prevention of CEFM and promotion of girls' education in Jamtara and Godda districts of Jharkhand.

It was this aunt who explained Sweetie's mother, Jharna Das, about the ill-impact of child marriage on Sweetie's health and future. She also encouraged Jharna to start attending Umang sessions during Self-Help Group (SHG) meetings (Jharna was member of Jai Maa Kali SHG, Kundangal). The sessions made her aware about the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POSCO) Act, 2012. They also made her realise the significance of girls' education and the power & influence she possessed as a mother in shaping the future of her daughters.

Apart from imparting awareness, Umang sessions also capacitated the mother with communication & negotiation skills offering alternative narratives against child marriage, which empowered her to convince her husband to delay Sweetie's marriage for the time being and focus on her education instead.

Jharna Das says: "Convincing my in-laws against child marriage wasn't easy initially. This is because child marriage is deeply engrained in our community. We have all grown up witnessing



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this practice as a social norm, so much so that many of us could never question it or realise its ill-effects despite being victims of it ourselves.” Jharna had been a child bride too as she had been married off at 14 years of age, owing to poverty. “However, things are changing now. Umang sessions were an eye-opener for me. They also helped me gather courage to speak against the system,” adds the 35-year-old mother of two daughters.

## Road to Liberation

It took Jharna many rounds of discussions with her husband before the latter got thoroughly convinced in averting Sweety’s early marriage. The next challenge was arranging finances for Sweety’s higher education who had competed entrance exam for diploma in computer science engineering and wanted to pursue the course from polytechnic in Dumka, which is 80-90 km away from their village. Jharna was barely able to make ends meet with the dismal income from their shop. Hence, she took loan of around INR 50,000 from the SHG twice (INR 17,000 & INR 30,000) to pay for Sweety’s fee. “Luckily, accommodation was free for Sweety at the polytechnic,” says Jharna.

“We faced a lot of resistance from family and community against the idea of me going out to study. As my parents didn’t have a male child and we had a poor financial status, my mother’s bold steps that were challenging social norms triggered hostility from community. However, I am immensely grateful that she trusted me thoroughly and stood by me throughout,” says Sweety.

Maintaining her good academic record, Sweety completed her diploma as a top ranker among girls and secured a job with an IT company in Ranchi during campus placement. She has been working since August 2022 and is now paying back the loan that her mother had taken for her education

## Counselling Service

Meanwhile, during one of her holidays Sweety also received career counselling from **Kishori Help Desk** – a component introduced under Project Umang that offers counselling to adolescent girls and their parents on educational pathways, career choices, life skills and SRHR (Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights). “The counselling gave me clarity on how to grow further after my diploma. Based on the guidance from help desk, I have decided to pursue B-tech,” informs Sweety. She has also recently secured a job as computer science teacher at Jharkhand Aawasiya Balika Vidyalaya under Jharkhand Education Project Council.

## Ripple Effect

Sweety’s journey of empowerment has started to show a ripple effect in the form of an attitudinal shift among community members towards child marriage and girls’ education. “There has been a big difference in the mindset of people in the last three years. The very same people who would taunt my parents now consider me as a role model for other adolescent girls in my village,” says Sweety. This has also paved an educational pathway for her younger sister, Suman Das, who is now in 11th grade and is free from the pressure of CEFM.

Parallely, Jharna has grown in her own capacity under Project Umang from an SHG member to VO (Village Organisation) member and now as a SAC (Social Action Committee) member of her CLF (Kundangal Ajeevika Mahila Sankul Sangathan) where she has been working since June 2022. She now helps strengthen capacities of other mothers in nurturing their daughters’ aspirations at household level and addresses social issues such as gender-based violence, child marriage, etc at community level.

The mother-daughter duo is considered as an inspiration in Kundangal. “I owe all my independence & success to Project Umang that instilled courage & skills in my mother to confront the social evil of child marriage. Had she not stood up for me, I would have been married off at 17 and ended up as a young bride and probably as an adolescent mother too,” says Sweety.

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