

THE LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT MONTHLY

MARCH – APRIL 2010  
Volume 10 Number 3

# NewsReach





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## From the Editor's Desk

The March 2010 special issue of *NewsReach* is devoted to MGNREGA and its planning and implementation facts and concerns. Although each geography and context offers its own advantages and constraints, we hope the present compilation will reflect some of the major issues without undermining the immense opportunity that MGNREGA offers.

If collaboration be taken as the key for the success of NREGS works, Pradan's experiences in West Bengal have certainly set a trend. The efforts of PRADAN's Bankura team have resulted in a convergence of grass roots institutions. A case report from Hirabandh block in Bankura elaborates as to how the provisions of the NREGA have been successfully harnessed to build water harvesting structures on degraded lands belonging to lower caste farmers. Yet another contribution by Sibaji Adak, 'The Mark of New Wheels' explores the accomplishments of the NREGA in the light of the eminent Bangladeshi economist Akbar Ali Khan's work, 'The Economics of Selflessness'.

On the other hand, articles from Khunti, Jharkhand, are more focussed on the difficulties and hardships being encountered by the villagers. Villagers there share about the many difficulties they have faced in exercising their rights under the programme. The apathetic conditions in Khunti find voice in Kandala Singh's article, 'Power Play and NREGS', wherein she highlights the countless humiliations the *mazdoors* experience in the lackadaisical system. Kirti Misra's, 'The Demand and Supply of Employment Guarantee' resounds with the parallel truth that most problems stem from a basic assumption that communities have an apriori 'natural' or maybe 'inborn' understanding of rights. Collaboration, apparently, necessitates awareness building and, at times, a certain amount of activism.

Truly so, the transition from cash transfer employment work initiated by the government during critical times, such as drought or lean agricultural period, to a 'guarantee to wage employment' is a marked one. Such a transition demands continuous efforts to orient and reorient community members to the rights aspect of the programme at hand. The commendable work of the Sahayata Kendra, established as a help centre to facilitate NREGS implementation by Dr. Jean Drèze, makes for a decisive step in the required direction. *Jan Sunwais*, organised and moderated by the Kendra, can act as a powerful means to both apply pressure and forge alliances. Binju Abraham's observations and reflections of a *Jan Sunwai* in Siladon, Khunti, is an illustrative contribution to this assortment of articles on MGNREGA.

# An Effort to Make Water Everybody's Business

VARUN SHARMA, RAJESH MIT AND SUDIP GHOSH

*Introducing the 5% model and constructing happas in the drought-prone, arid uplands and midlands of Molian panchayat in Bankura district has transformed barren tracts into verdant and productive lands, thereby benefiting and empowering the resource-poor occupants of the area.*

## PRADAN AND MGNREGA

Pradan has been working in West Bengal since 1986 and, more specifically, in Bankura district since 2005. Pradan's focus has been on Integrated Natural Resources Management (INRM) for sustainable livelihoods promotion. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has created umpteen opportunities for INRM by ensuring technical and financial support for an array of bio-physical activities. By guaranteeing every rural household 100 days of work a year, MGNREGA has made it possible to drought-proof landscapes and create durable livelihood assets on a massive scale. MGNREGA envisages that plans for village development will be prepared in the highly desirable bottom-up manner, with the *panchayat* playing a crucial role in both planning and implementation. Despite the good intentions, however, the works are largely instigated by a few influential persons at the block level and the rural poor are seldom consulted in the process. Such an approach hardly makes for any change.

In most parts of Bankura district, which is rainfed and dry, the food sufficiency of small and marginal farmers suffers greatly due to lack of assured irrigation for kharif paddy. NREGA funds are available but, as mentioned earlier, the challenge remains in how they can be leveraged and plied through institutional arrangements, and most of all how such arrangements can be fine-tuned to address the real needs of the people. Another pertinent challenge lies in cohering the long standing knowledge and understanding of village communities with the technical and specialized inputs that facilitating agencies are attempting to bring to the fore.

This article looks at Pradan's accomplishment in saturating a smaller sub-watershed that cuts across three village habitations of the Molian panchayat with water harvesting structures. The precise manner in which the intervention was customized to meet the needs of resource-poor farmers, the way in which NREGA funds were efficiently tapped into, and the SHGs were centre-staged to ensure a bottom-up process of planning-cum-implementation are highlighted.

## THE CONTEXT: LOCATION, PEOPLE AND POVERTY

Molian *gram panchayat* falls in one of the western-most blocks of Bankura district, Hirbandh. There are five *panchayats* in Hirbandh block. The block is, by and large, under-developed and characterized by a high SC and ST population of 25% and 29%, respectively. Close to the reported figures at the block level, the SC and ST population in Molian stands at 21% and 33%, respectively. More than 50% of the households live below the poverty line (BPL), and 70% of them are small and marginal farmers. The Molian *panchayat* comprises 26 habitations (*mouza*). These 26 *mouzas* have been organized as 12 *gram sansads*, and they are governed by a Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS) each.

The agro-ecological context of the region is typical. The uplands along the ridge portions, referred to in the local parlance as *tarnd*, are highly degraded and fragmented. They are characterized by high slopes, minimal soil cover and low water-retention capacity. There is no bunding here, and such lands are mostly held by the STs—commonly the *Santhals*, barring a few upper-caste exceptions. Likewise, there are the midlands, or the *baid*. In comparison to the *tarnd*, the midlands are less fragmented and less steep. Erosion being lesser in such reaches, there are fewer gullies and rills in the midlands. The most fertile lands, however, fall in the valley portions and are referred to as *shol*. The *shol* boasts of a superior soil and moisture regime, and comprises large landholdings that are invariably under the ownership of the upper-caste farmers (also referred to as the general caste, or GC farmers).

***The GC farmers prefer to keep their fertile and moisture-rich tracts in the valley portions under agriculture rather than allocate them for less lucrative purposes such as water storage. This has been both strategic and profitable.***

The region records an annual rainfall of 1,330 mm. From figures at the block level, it is approximated that about 89% of the Net Sown Area (NSA) in Molian is rainfed, a negligible 2.5% of the NSA is supported with water from dug wells, and the remaining 8.5% with water from the larger village water bodies called *pukurs*. The *pukurs* are in the nature of dug-out ponds made by the GCs over a hectare or more. The GCs are mostly big farmers.

It is interesting to note that the *pukurs* made and owned by such farmers rarely occur in the more fertile lowlands. The GC farmers prefer to keep their fertile and moisture-rich tracts in the valley portions under agriculture rather than allocate them for 'less lucrative' purposes such as water storage. Owing to this prudence, the *pukurs* have instead been located by the GCs amid the table lands of the upper reaches. This has been both strategic and profitable. The *pukurs* are a rich source of fish produce, which are frequently auctioned by the GC owners to fishing enterprises or entrepreneurs for hefty amounts. In this way, the *pukurs* make for little 'islands of prosperity' in the degraded uplands/midlands, where arable lands are otherwise scant and held by small and marginal lower-caste farmers.

The most fertile lowlands, thus, remain reserved for the bumper crops of the GC farmers, while the scant uplands are made to accommodate the fish-laden *pukurs*, also for the ultimate benefit of the GC farmers. This is not to say that the water of such *pukurs* does not come in handy for the lower-caste households, who frequently avail of it for

domestic purposes such as washing clothes and utensils, and bathing. The *pukurs*, however, do not serve the irrigational needs of the lower-caste farmers in the degraded uplands. Even where they do support agriculture in the uplands, the *pukurs* often fail to deliver the last critical irrigation for paddy—this happens mainly because, with the onset of summer, a *pukur's* receding waters comes under contention for the purpose of fisheries (over which the lower castes have no right).

The *pukurs* have been primarily designed to contain water for fisheries. That these water bodies support the domestic household needs of the poor is incidental; the waters were never intended to irrigate the adjoining degraded lands and support the cultivator-households that live by them.

#### **DESIGN OF INTERVENTION: NEED AND SUITABILITY OF HAPPAS**

The need to decentralize water availability, thus, becomes even more crucial in the uplands and midlands, for reasons that such tracts:

- Are degraded and possess an extremely inferior soil and moisture regime, within the given agro-ecological context.
- Support the subsistence needs of some of the poorest people in the region.
- Are not irrigated by the prevailing system of water management (*pukurs*), which does not ensure water for the crops or livelihoods of poor farmers.

The 5% model, advocated by Pradan, is a practical alternative in such a context. The 5% model is essentially pro-poor in nature,

***The water harvesting structure, called happa, localizes water availability to meet the individual farmer's needs and, when undertaken in large numbers, improves the soil and moisture regime of a landscape.***

and suited to meet the needs of small and marginal farmers in the upper reaches. The water harvesting structure, called *happa*, localizes water availability to meet the individual farmer's needs and, when undertaken in large numbers, improves the soil and moisture regime of a landscape. In the 5% model, a farmer in the uplands/midlands is advised to allocate at least 5% of his/her total

landholding for the construction of a *happa*. A *happa* is technically suited for terrains in which the land slope is under 15%. This assured, it hardly matters if the farmer allocates the most degraded part of his/her plot for the *happa*. A *happa* is usually 10 to 12 ft deep and ideally 50 by 40 ft in length and breadth. However, the length and width varies in proportion to the total landholding of the farmers—24 by 30 ft and 40 by 36 ft are some of the other dimensions adopted where the landholdings are small.

A *happa* is a mud-excavated structure and does not have any cement work or stone revetment. This makes the design easily achievable, within the limited capacities/resources of the local farmers. The sides of a *happa* are stepped in a manner to ensure a slope of 1:1. The steps make it easier for both livestock and humans to access the water of the *happa* once it recedes in summer.

The 5% model is not entirely technical, it involves a social angle as well. Its implementation involves a multi-stakeholder dialogue. In Molian, it has entailed the active involvement of the women SHGs at the grass roots as part of an overall bottom-up process to harness the resources of NREGA.

A pro-poor model when combined with a bottom-up process, as in Molian, is sure to result in the (re)formation of local institutions that are both democratic and inclusive.

### PROCESS: AN INSTANCE OF BOTTOM-UP PLANNING

#### *The Central Role of Women SHGs*

In Hirbandh block, most of the SHGs, being facilitated by Pradan, had been formed earlier by the *panchayats*, as per the norms of the Swarna Grameen Swarozgar Yojna (SGSY). Being the most basic form of social organizing at the village level, Pradan perceived that the enhanced participation of SHGs could very well make the NREGA a programme that is both for and by the people. Pradan was equally aware that women, particularly the SCs, STs and OBCs, share an intimate relationship with nature. They are routinely engaged in identifying appropriate water resources for drinking,

washing clothes and utensils, bathing, etc.; they collect fuel wood and fodder to meet household energy requirements and to stall-feed animals; they also collect Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) where available. They play an equally important role in agriculture as their male counterparts. The knowledge and understanding that the women and their groups have about the natural resources was waiting to be capitalized upon. Bearing in mind the pressing water problem and the simultaneous opportunity offered by NREGA, Pradan decided to facilitate the capacities innate to women's SHG groups for the preparation of INRM-based plans.

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### ***Pradan as Facilitator***

Pradan first began with orienting SHG members and the communities at large, with the provisions of the NREGA and the possibility of harnessing the benefits of the 5% model. That community members will be rewarded with high wages (as a matter of right!) for upgrading their own lands appealed to many. Some, however, felt that allocating land for water conservation would be tantamount to the loss of arable land, which, in any case, is scarce in the uplands. Of all the villages, Kasakendi, Damodarpur and Bada Aral were quick to gauge the benefits in store for them. Owing to the willingness of the eight SHGs in these three village habitations to cooperate and treat the sub-watershed shared by them, these SHGs became the entry point for more serious deliberations.

The farmlands of Kasakendi, an entirely *Santhal* habitation, are situated in the *tarnd*. Damodarpur, which adjoins Kasakendi, is an ST/OBC-dominated habitation, with most of

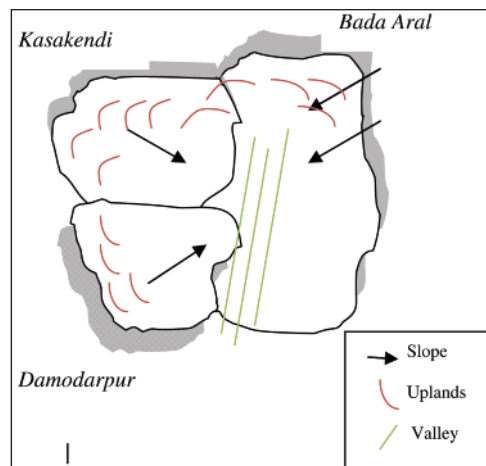
***The initial sessions detailed the broad percepts of INRM and the entire set of activities, including agriculture, timber plantation, fodder development, wasteland development, etc.***

its lands falling in the *tarnd*, and with smaller chunks in the *baid*. Bada Aral is a somewhat more prosperous village, with significant tracts that fall in the *shol*. Nevertheless, the SC/STs and OBCs of Bada Aral also hold lands in the *tarnd* and *baid* portions of the village. A contiguous stretch of *tarnd* and *baid* portions, therefore, is commonly held by the lower

castes of the three village habitations (See Figure 1). The sub-watershed presented above has three *pukurs*, each being located on about 1 to 1.25 ha of land and owned by the GCs. There are also three dug wells, each 30 ft deep and with water only to support 2 to 3 ha beside these.

At the start, there were two SHGs comprising 20 members in Kasakendi, one SHG with 11 members in Damodarpur and another five SHGs in Bada Aral, with a membership of 53 individuals. The above groups were mostly homogenous lower-caste groups, except the two of Bada Aral that comprised a handful of SC and GC members. Once consensus was built among the SHGs, Pradan initiated a series of trainings for the members. The initial sessions detailed the broad percepts of INRM and the entire set of activities, including agriculture, timber plantation, fodder development, wasteland development, etc. The later sessions looked more specifically at the utility of the 5% model in enhancing the soil and moisture regime of the area, and how the provisions of the MGNREGA could be leveraged for the excavation of *happas*. The SHG members were familiarized with the process of obtaining job cards and opening bank accounts, to avail of the full benefit of NREGA. Twelve individuals from the three habitations were identified to act as

**Figure 1:**  
**Rough Representation of the Area**





**Table 1: Demography of the Three Village Habitations**

	Name of Habitation	Number of Households Caste-wise				No. of SHGs	Small and Marginal Farmers (%)	BPL Households (%)	Total Arable Land (ha)
		SC	ST	OBC	GC				
1.	Kasakendi	..	22	...	...	2	100	100	14.8
2.	Damodarpur	...	11	5	..	1	97	95	17
3.	Bada Aral	58	12	12	20	5	80	39	80
	<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>8</b>			<b>112</b>

\*Source: Pradan household survey

community resource persons (CRPs). The CRPs were chosen carefully from among those members at the village level, who were astute yet impartial, and had the capacity to resolve conflicts. The CRPs were trained on intricate details, ranging from quality control to record maintenance and, most importantly, on their all-important role of ensuring social cohesion.

#### ***Mapping and Budgeting Intervention***

Political parties play a vital role in the decision-making processes in these villages; owing to which both the ruling and opposition parties were oriented and taken into confidence for participatory planning with the SHGs in the village. Meanwhile, the SHGs and the CRPs informed the rest of the community and discussed with them the prospects of the new programme. Thereafter, they prepared a comprehensive list of farmers, who were willing to participate in the new activity. The SHG members obtained the revenue cadastral maps from the *tehsildar*. By organizing Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises and land transects, involving representatives from all three habitations, the CRPs and SHG members succeeded in mapping the precise area that would be brought under treatment. Pradan provided the much-required facilitation and technical assistance at this stage. The treatment maps,

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prepared by using the cadastral maps as base maps, were made to indicate topographical features such as agro-ecological zones (*tarnd*, *baid* and *shol*), the gradient and slope of the land, and the location of water bodies and forests. Most important, the maps pinpointed the individual plots of the farmers, who had decided to implement the 5% model on their lands through NREGA. The treatment maps also came in handy later in prioritizing work across different habitations, comparing accomplishments with planned targets, and undertaking inspection visits.

Finally, a decision was taken to excavate 150 *happas* in private lands falling in the *tarnd* areas of these villages. The assistance of the Junior Engineer (*Nirman Sahayak*), appointed at the *panchayat* level, was sought, and detailed estimates were prepared for the *happas*. To speed up the process, Pradan shared a simple yet effective software, using Microsoft excel sheet, with the *Nirman Sahayak*. This helped the *Nirman Sahayak* to prepare estimates in a few hours, saving more than a month's paper work. Thereafter, the SHGs submitted formal requisitions to the GUS for direct implementation of the proposed works under NREGA. The requisitions were grouped together for plots closely adjoining one another, thereby making for patch-wise plans/requisitions. While aggregating individual plans into patch-wise plans/requisitions, care was taken to ensure that none of these exceeded a total value of Rs 2.5 lakhs. This was done primarily because it is beyond the scope of the *gram panchayat* to sanction works in excess of this

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amount. Works above Rs 2.5 lakhs require special permission from the district administration, which would only mean more delay.

#### ***Sanctions at Different Levels***

The requisitions were approved by the GUS. The order in which the works would be undertaken was also decided. The priority was determined, keeping in mind the urgency for wage relief and/or seasonal availability of labour across different habitations. In order to avoid any overlaps, one SHG

each from a village was allocated the responsibility of overseeing the excavation of *happas* in a patch. In accordance with the criteria laid out in NREGA, five paymasters and seven supervisors were selected in this GUS meeting attended by the SHGs. The selection of paymasters and supervisors could have become a serious cause for conflict because political party workers are usually keen to ensure that their members ascend to such posts. Taking cognizance of such politicking at the grass roots, Pradan, the SHGs and the CRPs moderated the selection of paymasters and supervisors in a manner to ensure that all stakeholders—the ruling and the opposition parties, SHGs, landholders, the GUS members—got an equal opportunity to voice their choice.

The supervisors and paymasters were, thereafter, trained. The *Nirman Sahayak*, the pradhan of the *panchayat*, the local leaders, the SHG members and the office bearers at the *panchayat* level were invited to participate in such training sessions. Subjects such as the layout, the measurement and the execution of the *happas*, and the preparation



*The work groups succeeded in excavating an astounding 134 happas in less than 4 months!*

of the muster rolls were discussed in great detail. Besides technical and procedural clarity, the training sessions helped in arriving at a shared and coordinated understanding of the roles the different stakeholders would have to perform. Through one-on-one interactions with the *pradhan*, Pradan was able to establish a healthy rapport and further convince the *sarpanch* of the benefits that would accrue to his 'constituency' from the proposed work. In due course, the plans were first passed by the GUS, then approved by the *gram panchayat* and sent to the BDO for a final approval by mid-July 2008. The sanction orders were passed by the BDO in less than a week. One copy each of the sanction order was handed to the *gram panchayat*, the concerned SHG heads and Pradan. The *sarpanch* passed the work orders to the paymasters, and the work was begun, as per the priority decided upon. The social, economic and political aspects of the process, across different stages, are presented as part of Table 2.

### **Realizing Targets**

The work groups succeeded in excavating an astounding 134 *happas* in less than 4 months! During this period, Pradan carried out weekly monitoring meetings involving the SHGs,

CRPs, supervisors, paymasters and the *Nirman Sahayak*. Work progress was discussed and muster rolls were verified. After making a final verification of the muster rolls, and corroborating entries with the measurement book (M-Book) and the evidence in the field, the *Nirman Sahayak* paved the way for payments to be made. The *gram panchayats*, then, released the cheques to the SHG paymasters, to be credited into the accounts of the beneficiary households.

A phenomenal Rs 39 lakhs were distributed as wages, and no less than 48,180 employment days were generated for the communities of these village habitations (Table 3). But more than the monetary gain, 134 technically sound water-harvesting structures were pitted across the terrain. These structures are a vital contribution to the asset base of the region and bear the promise of steady returns over the years to come.

### **IMPACT: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF BENEFITS**

Since the primary impact is in terms of supplementary irrigation, it would be best to affect a before-after comparison. The figures in Table 4 were arrived at in the Focused Group Discussion (FGD)

**Table 2: Different Dimensions of the Process**

Dimensions Stages		Social	Economic	Political
Idea Sharing		Exposure and idea sharing with community members  Elaborating key features of the 5% model/Advantages of <i>happas</i>	Sharing of opportunities available under NREGA	Generating awareness of rights under NREGA  Co-opting local leaders, especially party workers
Pre-Planning	Review and Reflection	Securing partnership of SHGs  Building consensus	Assisting community members to open bank accounts and avail job cards under NREGA	
Planning		Identifying CRPs, paymasters and supervisors  Technical assistance/training for plan preparation  Capacity building for stakeholders	Drawing plans for intervention, estimate preparation  Obtaining work orders through sanctions at different levels (GUS, <i>panchayat</i> and the Block Development Office)	Engaging with GUS and the <i>gram panchayat</i> /Building a working relationship with such bodies
Implementation		Mobilizing labour at worksites  Ensuring quality of work through a system of checks and balances	Excavation of <i>happas</i>  Monitoring, record maintenance and payments	Inviting block-level administration to visit works  Exploring opportunities of replication along with the BDO and neighbouring <i>gram panchayats</i>
<b>Measuring Impact</b>				

attended by community members, NREGS supervisors, CRPs and Pradan staff working in the area.

The *happas* assured three complete irrigation cycles for paddy over a minimum of 65 ha of land in the kharif season of 2009. This was in addition to 17 ha that were being irrigated by the older structures. Many farmers report that they were able to sail past the drought of 2009 with the aid of water from the *happas* alone. This was particularly true of the

farmers, who had undertaken long-duration paddy. Some of the farmers report that where they were accustomed to harvests of 2 to 3 tonnes per ha in times of poor rains, the assured irrigation from the *happas* had ensured yields of 3 to 5 tonnes per ha in similar rainfall conditions. Such farmers opted to sell at least 30% of their produce in the local market. Crop residue is a potential source of fodder for work animals and the increased yields have resulted in fodder security at the household level. The *happas*

**Table 3: Material and Monetary Accomplishments under NREGS**

No.	Name of Habitation	Households Holding Job Cards	Area Treated (ha)	Total <i>Happas</i>	Employment Days Generated
1	Kasakendi	22	14.8	24	8,025
2	Damodarapur	16	17	19	6,457
3	Bada Aral	75	80	91	33,704
	<b>Total</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>111.8</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>48,186</b>

\*Source: Pradan household survey

have also met the water needs of livestock, especially in habitations that are distant from village water bodies.

Whereas 5.5 ha were being brought under vegetable cultivation during the rabi season earlier, now 18 ha have been added to this. These 18 ha mainly comprise plots beside the *happas* and their bunds. Radish, cauliflower, cabbage, potatoes and tomatoes are also being cultivated now by the farmers. Most of the vegetables are being retained for household consumption, with reasonable quantities being sold in the market place. The small-scale propagation of fisheries and duck rearing in the *happas* have similarly become a source of healthy diet and revenue in recent times. Farmers have earned anything between Rs 4,000 and 15,000 from the sale of vegetables and fish in the local markets. Farmers now feel more secure; the present diversification of local livelihoods into fisheries and vegetable growing has reduced the risks they faced earlier of depending on a single kharif crop of paddy. The benefits have also paved the way for farmers to step into market spaces with increased confidence.

Although it is still too early to suggest the ecological benefits, in select cases these are more than visible. For one, the intervention has drastically reduced run-off and soil erosion. A number of farmers are startled by the amount of silt (approximately a foot!) the farm ponds have trapped in just one

monsoon. Farmers are aware of the losses and benefits that accompanied degradation. Saroja *didi*, a farmer, explained how, earlier, the accumulation of valuable silt in the lower reaches through erosion resulted in the concentration of viable farming opportunities for an elite few, namely the GC farmers holding lands in the *shol*. Farmers now are more than willing to remove the silt that accumulates in the *happas* and apply it to their farmlands, in a bid to improve their yields.

The *happas* exert a positive influence on the adjoining waste and scrub lands too. The water of one *happa* has rejuvenated a bamboo grove on an adjoining wasteland. The farmer now uses the bamboo in the grove to make stilts for his tomato crop, which also is being supported with the water of the *happa*.

The owners report a marked increase in water levels in the dug out ponds after the excavation of *happas*. Though this is merely an ocular estimate at this stage, it remains a confirmed indicator of the ground water recharge being affected by the newly excavated structures.

On the social front, the present effort has a gendered dimension. The *happas* have made water available for household purposes such as washing clothes, cleaning of utensils, bathing, etc. All these activities are

**Table 4: Additional Facility Created by *Happas***

Source	No.	Description	Area Serviced Kharif (ha)	Area Serviced Rabi (ha)	Source	No.	Description	Area Serviced Kharif (ha)	Area Serviced Rabi (ha)
<i>Pukurs</i> Dug well	3	Traditional village water bodies that are in the nature of dug out ponds spread over 1 to 1.25 ha.	10 ha of paddy ( <i>approx</i> ) assured 3 complete irrigation cycles  Another 15 ha forego last or last two irrigation cycles	3 ha (by way of small patches near <i>pukurs</i> ) brought under vegetable cultivation	<i>Happas</i>	134	Water harvesting structures made as part of the 5% model	65 ha assured irrigation till the last and final stage	13 ha brought under vegetables
	3	About 30 ft in depth and 10 ft in diameter	6 ha of paddy assured 3 complete irrigation cycles	2.5 ha under vegetables					
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>5.5</b>		<b>134</b>		<b>65</b>	<b>18</b>

customarily performed by women. The ready availability of water in a *happa* next to their habitation (or even their homes) has reduced the drudgery otherwise involved in getting water from a distant *pukur* for all such purposes.

On the institutional front, the effort has resulted in the convergence of grass roots institutions. Institutions, particularly the *gram sabha* and the GUS, are now characterized by greater participation of lower-caste farmers, who hold lands in the upper reaches. Likewise, negotiations at the village level have resulted in a fruitful working relationship between different stakeholders—community based groups (SHGs), traditional institutions (GUS and *panchayat*) and the bureaucracy (block-level authorities). The alliance built with mainstream political parties such as CPI (M) is a significant contribution to the political

capital of beneficiary communities. Also, the processes of planning and implementation have resulted in the enhancement of capacities, be it in terms of knowhow to ensure the technical soundness of works or record maintenance to ensure timely disbursement of funds. Today, the supervisors, paymasters and CRPs make for a cadre of well-trained village youth. Although a fair amount of politicking is involved in the recruitment of supervisors and paymasters, as mentioned earlier, Pradan has oriented the people and selected representatives in a way that they uphold the interests of village communities above all else.

An enhanced sense of awareness, of rights under NREGA in particular, and the increased participation of women SHGs in local decision-making are reflective of some of the important social and political transitions the area is undergoing.



*The ready availability of water in a happa next to their habitation (or even their homes) has reduced the drudgery otherwise involved in getting water from a distant pukur for all such purposes*

The many ways in which the present intervention has contributed to diverse benefits is evident in the following three cases, namely, of Bodon *da*, Parangope and Uttam Bauri.

**Case 1: Bodon *da*, Kasakendi**

Bodon *da* is an ST farmer in Kasakendi. He owns about 3 *bighas* (0.50 ha) of land in two patches—one of 1 *bigha* and the other 2 *bighas*. He has excavated two *happas* in his plot of 2 *bighas*. One of the *happas* measures 50 by 60 ft and the other is 30 by 24 ft, thus amounting to about 5% of the total land owned by Bodon *da*. The two *happas* on his farmland generated about 50 days of employment for the household. This saved the household the need to migrate in summer. Prior to the construction of the two *happas*, Bodon *da* used to cultivate short-duration paddy on about 1 *bigha* of this plot, and the remaining land would most often go

unutilized. He would get anything between 3 and 4 quintals of paddy and this was almost always retained for household consumption.

The *happa* came as a timely intervention. Bodon *da* says that with the water from the smaller pond (30 by 24 ft), he was able to salvage his paddy crop despite the drought (2009, kharif). The assured irrigation yielded a commendable 5 quintals of paddy despite vagaries. The water from the larger *happa* (50 by 60) helped him cultivate maize and bitter gourd in the initial rabi months. This was followed by the cultivation of other vegetables such as radish, tomatoes, cabbage, cauliflower and greens. Bodon *da* was also able to prepare Jeevamrita—an organic supplement made of cow urine, jaggery and water. The application of Jeevamrita to the radish crop yielded a prize winning size. Radishes from Bodon *da*'s fields weigh anything between 3 to 5 kg each!

**Table 5: Accomplishments at a Glance**

No.	Dimension	Accomplishments
1.	Economic	Drought proofing through <i>happas</i> Sale of excess grain/vegetables in local markets Fodder security through enhanced crop yields Water for work animals/livestock Small-scale fisheries and duck rearing made possible Wage relief and employment generated through NREGA
2.	Social/ Institutional	Bottom-up planning of development works Convergence of different institutions—SHGs, GUS and <i>panchayat</i> Capacity building of CRPs, supervisors, paymasters, etc. Food and nutritional security enhanced at the household level Easy access to water for domestic household needs Reduced drudgery for women
3.	Political	Awareness of rights under MGNREGA Greater role for women in decision-making Working partnership with mainstream political parties at the grass roots
4.	Ecological	Reduced run-off Groundwater recharge Improved soil and moisture regime Biomass enhancement Agro-biodiversity

Bodon *da* was able to sell a significant quantity of his vegetables in the local market. He also undertook fish propagation in the *happa* and has sold about 5 kg of fish in the first year. Bodon *da* estimates that he has been able to make a profit of at least Rs 30,000 from vegetable and fish sales in the local market. The surplus grain that he has been able to store, after household use, is no less than Rs. 7,000 in value. Bodon *da* is enthusiastic about deepening the *happas* on his land by another couple of feet. He says that he would “rather get busy deepening the *happa* than merely wait for the clouds!”

#### **Case 2: Parangope, Damodarpur**

Parangope is a GC farmer in Damodarpur. He holds about three-fourth of a hectare across two separate plots. Parangope has made a

*happa* that measures 36 by 40 ft on one of the plots that measures nearly half a hectare. He says that he saved his kharif paddy last year with the water in the *happa*. Keeping the better portion of his lands reserved for cultivation under conventional methods, Parangope allocated a small degraded patch on his plot for experimenting with the System of Rice Intensification (SRI). He found that the degraded patch under SRI yielded the best results. Parangope is now convinced that a combination of SRI methods with the 5% model is sure to double his yields. It is also bound to create a surplus of water for the cultivation of vegetables during rabi.

Parangope has laid a trellis on top of his *happa*, with the aid of bamboo poles and GI wire. Creepers that have been allowed to



*The happas have now made it possible for many farmers to grow and sell vegetables during rabi.*



grow on the grill provide fresh vegetables and gourds for household consumption. These also shade the water beneath and reduce the loss of water through evaporation. Parangope cultivates small quantities of cabbage, cauliflower and potatoes on his farm land adjoining the *happa*. He has made a profit of Rs 2,000 from the sale of these vegetables.

Parangope released 3 kg of fingerlings in the *happa*. Although the fish was mainly for household consumption, small quantities of fish were also sold in the market. This earned him Rs 1,200. The water in Parangope's *happa* is likely to last only for a few weeks more; he plans to connect the surplus of a nearby village tank (*pukur*) to his *happa*, with the aid of a diesel pump. This will save the last remaining fish in his *happa* that are under threat on account of the receding waters. Parangope estimates that he will earn another

Rs 2,000 from the sale of the remaining fish in the *happa*. Parangope says that he has also been able to save sufficient amount of grain. The total value of the grain is no less than Rs 5,500. Being close to the beginning of the academic year, he says he will use his additional earnings to pay for his children's school fees.

### **Case 3: Uttam Bauri, Bada Aral**

Uttam Bauri is an SC farmer in Bada Aral. He owns a small plot of land, measuring about three-quarters of a hectare at a distance of about 500 ft from the village *pukur*. Uttam Bauri says that, in the past, it was only possible for the farmers holding lands near the *pukur* to undertake the cultivation of vegetables during rabi. The *happas* have made it possible now for many farmers, like him, to grow vegetables during rabi. Uttam Bauri excavated a *happa* measuring 36 by 40

ft, and with the water from the *happa*, he cultivated vegetables such as tomatoes, cabbage, brinjals, radish and cauliflowers. Uttam Bauri estimates that he expended about Rs 200 as input cost in growing the vegetables. Sometimes he relied on a diesel pump to lift water from the *happa* to the vegetable plots. Considering these expenses, Uttam Bauri estimates that he has made a profit of Rs 5,000 to 6,000 from the sale of vegetables. Significant quantities of vegetables were also retained for household consumption.

Uttam Bauri says that the water of the *happa* saved his kharif crop of rice. He would have otherwise lost his standard crop of 4 quintals to the drought. His additional earnings because of the *happa* are as much as Rs 11,000—this includes both money from small-time sales and savings on account of food sufficiency. Uttam Bauri also released fingerlings in the *happa*. Unfortunately, the fish was stolen. Uttam Bauri says that unlike the bigger structures and water bodies, in which fisheries are promoted on a commercial basis, the smaller *happas* remain unguarded at night. Besides, Uttam Bauri's plot is flanked by a wasteland on one side. This makes it easier for thieves to steal the produce at night. Nevertheless, the cattle which grazes on this adjoining wasteland avails of the water in Uttam Bauri's *happa* during the day. Uttam Bauri is fine with cattle belonging to others benefiting from his *happa* because, on many occasions, his own work animals drank water from some other farmer's *happa*.

### ***Critical Overview and Way Forward***

Despite these achievements, some issues remain to be addressed. There is the fundamental need to combine the structures (*happas*) with other bio-physical measures and watershed activities such as field

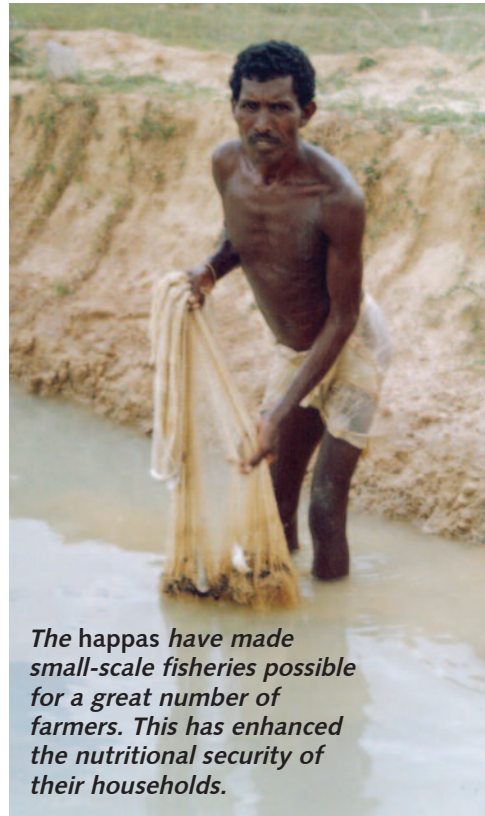
bunding, networking and supply channels. At a socio-economic level, the programme favours those who hold lands, even small and marginal, in the upper reaches. In certain instances, the landholding is so small—a mere cent or two—that even the 5% model cannot be implemented in the limited space. A common *happa* that services the needs of a group of small landholders remains to be contemplated. Similarly, the landless do not stand to benefit from the construction of *happas*, except by way of temporary wage relief under NREGS works. Likewise, in terms of gender equity, it needs to be ensured that the economic benefits from the programme flow back to the women SHGs. In the current scheme of things, there is greater likelihood that returns will, once again, percolate to the men—the owners of the *happas*. As important as the need to ensure the participation of women in development processes, is the need to ensure that they also partake in equal measure in the benefits. Modalities need to be conceived for the same.

As part of a continuous cycle of self-improvement, Pradan is exploring new ways to address some of the above issues and to improvise interventions. At the same time, opportunities for replication of established benefits are coming Pradan's way with increased recognition of its efforts by the district level administration. As part of the latest developments, the district administration has finalized a Memorandum of Association with the Pradan team, designating it as a facilitating agency for the replication of the present effort at the district level.

The strong features of the present model are that it is both replicable and sustainable—key ingredients of any model. Within Molian

*gram panchayat*, similar plans are now being prepared to treat the contiguous tracts shared between the village habitations of Brahmo Danga, Chapsaol and Nodia. Community members are equally interested that the adjoining tracts shared by Chapsol, Nodia and Banguria be brought under the intervention. Pradan is hopeful that such efforts at the level of village habitations will culminate in a superior soil and moisture regime across the entire landscape. *Happas*, being in the nature of private assets of the farmers, are more likely to be maintained. The fact that such structures are low-cost makes maintenance affordable. The sustainability aspect of the present model can be attributed to both the above facts, that is, the incentive to maintain the *happas* because they are in the nature of private assets, and the affordability of maintenance on account of design advantages. Another strength of the programme is the manner in which people's knowledge, particularly that of women, has been knitted with the technical inputs offered by Pradan and other facilitating agencies.

More than anything, the model achieved by the resident communities, with assistance from Pradan, is superlative for its bottom-



***The happas have made small-scale fisheries possible for a great number of farmers. This has enhanced the nutritional security of their households.***

up planning and the many ways in which economic opportunities have been enhanced by building the resource base of marginalized communities.

# The Marks of New Wheels

SIBAJI ADAK

*Utilizing the provisions under MGNREGA to generate wages and, more important, create assets such as farm ponds that will support their agriculture, the villagers of Hirbandh and adjoining areas have been able to fight abject poverty, make informed choices and take charge of their own activities.*

Some time back, I had the good fortune of reading a treatise by the eminent economist Akbar Ali Khan of Bangladesh. The book, *The Economics of Selflessness*, is a gleaming example of how a complex subject such as economics becomes a plaything in the hands of an accomplished intellectual and how the subject loses its elusiveness and retains its relevance. Khan has demystified the intricate theories of the subject with a studied nonchalance and has made it accessible to the commoner. Like a master chef, he processed, combined and manipulated the seemingly convoluted concepts and served up a simple yet tasty meal. The secret of his flair probably lies in yet another achievement of his—he was a longstanding trainer in a renowned training institution in Bangladesh. Well, let that matter rest, let us get back to the narrative in hand.

The book from beginning to end is an exposition of the different thoughts and ideas in development economics. Each of these thought-streams have been titled interestingly: 'Economics of Selflessness', 'Economics of Mulla Nasiruddin', 'Economics of open manholes' and so on. In 'Economics of open manholes', he unfolds a precise indicator of development. It is possible to assess how developed or not a nation is just by looking at its manholes. The extent of development of a country is directly proportional to the number of covered manholes, the more the lids, the more the progress. The more the lids have been stolen, the lesser the progress. I played with the idea in my mind and have to admit that it turned out to be true in most cases. I was struck by the logic and admired the creativity of the writer. Who could have ever imagined that something as commonplace as the lid of a manhole could be a proxy indicator of development!

I remembered the book recently during a routine meeting on NREGA that I was conducting with my supervisors. Out of pure curiosity, I had asked the young supervisors as to what NREGA workers did with the money they earned. One of them gave me a response that was quite unlike the rest. He said, when you are sitting at a tea stall, having tea, and happen to notice the colour of the tyres of bicycles passing by, should they be jet black then you can be rest assured that the cycle belongs to a NREGA worker. Everyone in the village knows that a new tyre

retains its blackness for the first few days, and then it gradually loses its sheen and fades. That the colour of the wheels of bicycles could be a proxy for the effectiveness of NREGA was something that had not occurred to me even in my wildest thoughts. Nor had I read about it in any document on poverty and development. This is when I was reminded of the open manhole theory of Akbar Ali Khan.

My questions brought forth 16 more ways in which the NREGA workers spend their money. That is something I would like to share at some other point of time. Today I want to share with you the saga of Hirbandh.

### HIRBANDH

Hirbandh borders Purulia in the south of Bankura. The Purulia border is just 8 km from the Hirbandh block office. The rolling terrain

*That the colour of the wheels of bicycles could be a proxy for the effectiveness of NREGA was something that had not occurred to me even in my wildest thoughts.*



of the Chhotanagpur plateau culminates here in Hirbandh. The hills and mountains lie across the block from end to end like lines on a ruled paper. It is difficult to find large stretches of plain land. Within 200 to 300 ft another steep hill starts. The countless undulations have resulted in the formation of two rivers—Shilavati and Kumari—surrounding the block, and the Mukutmanipur lake. Every drop of rain that falls runs off soon to these rivers, taking with it the precious soil of Hirbandh, the mother earth. The soil is carried by these rivers to the plains downstream. The plains become fertile and produce gold. The people of Hirbandh weep—for water and for crops. They quietly wipe their tears, bid good bye to their little ones and board a bus to the plains of Hooghly, Bardhaman and Midnapore to work in the fields of the big farmers. I have heard somewhere that it takes about 200 years for an inch of soil to form from the weathering of stones by rainwater; and it takes no time to wash away.

Here are some facts about Hirbandh. The total area of the block is 215 sq km. The population, as per the 2001 census, is 72,502 and female literacy is 38.5%. The population of the SC community is 17,807 and the ST is 20,691. The SCs, STs and OBCs comprise 75% of the population. In the rural BPL survey in 2006, the number of families that got 33 points (as per the evaluation criteria) or below was 8,064. The total number of families in the block is 14,899, and the percentage of BPL families is 54%.

A few years ago, a human development report was prepared for Bankura district, and in that report, Hirbandh was ranked the last out of 22 blocks in the district. More facts: of the 121 revenue villages in the block, 51 revenue villages are tribal dominated and fall under the Tribal Development Plan villages.

Another 36 have been named as backward villages. This is Hirbandh.

### THE LORE OF ELLORA

Just as the central and state governments are engaged with the issue of alleviating human suffering, there are many NGOs working towards the same goal. Pradan is one of them. Pradan worked in the Gopalpur *gram panchayat* (GP). The GP has been known for its enterprising ways. In 2007, the GP received the President's award for exemplary work on soil and water conservation. Pradan started its work here with the promotion of women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Gradually, it started supporting many programmes of the GP. Pradan had already demonstrated excellent work on soil and water conservation in Purulia and in Saltora block of Bankura with its own funds. The 5% model and the 30 x 40 model of in-situ soil-moisture conservation are notable among these. The then BDO of Hirbandh sent functionaries and office bearers of Gopalpur GP to visit these locations, which in turn highly enthused them. After the visit, they realized that they had substantive amounts of money available to them under NREGA but their soil and moisture conservation ideas were limited to the time-tested pond-renovation. They had no idea how to improve crop productivity with rain water. Pradan had the knowledge but did not have access to adequate funds.

We started our work as per the 2006 Annual Report of Pradan, which talked about its ideas on soil and moisture conservation. In January 2007, small farm ponds as per the 5% model were dug in Ellora village and arjun plantations on the uplands along with the

***Pradan started its work here with the promotion of women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Gradually, it started supporting the programmes of the gram panchayat. Pradan had already demonstrated excellent work on soil and water conservation in Purulia and in Saltora block of Bankura with its own funds.***

30 x 40 model of in-situ moisture harvesting were created. These emerged as a result of a combination of the financial resources of the GP and the knowhow of the NGO. This story appeared in their next Annual Report as 'Ellora Shows the Way'.

### REPLICATION STARTS

West Bengal held its panchayat polls in 2008. Conducting elections is a mammoth and important task in a democracy. During the polls, as the Code of Conduct sets in, not much developmental work happens. The block staff also gets embroiled in the task of conducting the polls.

The expenditure statement of Molian GP under NREGA for the first five months of the financial year 2008–2009 reached the block office at the end of August. The amount spent was Rs 3,91,000. No new payments, they were all payments for complete works. No new works had been initiated either.

Elections to the GP do get a wee bit chaotic. From morning to evening the *panchayat* office remains crowded with the villagers thronging in with complaints and demands. There is a shortage of everything suddenly—mini kits, blankets, other relief material and jobs. The pitch gets shriller by the day. This obviously was not the best time to introduce new developmental ideas, yet the Molian GP kept exploring new options under NREGA. The idea occurred to them to try out the farm ponds that had proved successful in Ellora. The Ellora farm ponds were brimming with water. Subsequent to paddy, the farmers could grow mustard quite easily.

The staff was convinced. But the community did not readily believe the idea. Who would provide funds for developing private land? What needed to be done for getting such works? A simple application on a plain piece of paper, we declared. Yet the reservations continued. Will such a small farm pond hold enough water for my winter crops? A small number of farmers came forward with their applications, primarily those farmers who had some land to spare. They were the ones who could afford a little risk. Work started. The expense per pond varied from Rs 13,000 to Rs 22,000, as per size. We made estimates for 17–18 ponds at a time, amounting to less than Rs 2.5 lakhs. Even if a couple of ponds were less, it did not matter, the block could make the payments. We could sanction as many schemes as we wanted; we had an open hand. (Estimates less than Rs 2.5 lakhs could be sanctioned at the level of the block, otherwise it would have to go to the district for sanction.)

We selected supervisors from each village, and made the SHGs the paymasters. Work started in Molian *panchayat* in mid-November. In a period of about one-and-a-half months, work started in all the villages. The villagers observed that the GP allowed them to dig farm ponds at will; their trust in the GP grew. Applications started pouring in. The number of works-in-progress multiplied. Keeping pace, the number of supervisors and paymasters also increased.

The GP took another wise step. Members of the opposition party were also roped in as supervisors (those who are aware of the seemingly irreparable political fault-lines in This automatically opened up the pool of the

***The GP took another wise step. Members of the opposition party were also roped in as supervisors. Those who are aware of the seemingly irreparable political fault-lines in West Bengal will appreciate the significance of this step.***





***Baharamuri has understood that out of all the ideas for wage employment generation, the one of farm ponds is the best. The GP, which spend about Rs 41 lakhs in 2008–09, has already made plans for spending Rs 1 crore the next year.***

applicants also. More and more applications started coming in from around the GP. Work started on all applications. At this point of time, there were about 80 supervisors being paid skilled labour wages under NREGA. They met every Wednesday for a review and planning of their work. Watching the meeting, one can never make out who owed loyalty to which political dispensation. As a result of this upsurge of works, the expenditure statement of Molian *panchayat*, which had no new planned works on August 31, showed an expense of Rs 42 lakhs on March 31, 2009. Due to cash flow problems, payments of about Rs 17 lakhs were pending. Three hundred and forty farm ponds had been constructed. And work was in progress on 125 ponds. About 500 families had earned a total of 18,883 days of wage labour. More than 200 families had earned more than 100 days of wages in less than 4 months. The

workers gleefully went about replacing their bicycle tyres, and also the hay roofs of their huts with tin sheets.

#### **REPLICATION IN MOSHIARA**

The political dynamics in Moshiara *panchayat* flipped after elections because the ruling party was routed and a new dispensation took over. But that did not change the NREGA dynamics because the programme had been careful to include everyone. About 120 farm ponds were dug here. The *panchayat* had also taken up other works such as road construction, large pond renovation, etc. By March 31, 2009, the expenditure stood at Rs 48 lakhs. Gopalpur GP had shown the path for digging farm ponds. The success of Ellora encouraged many more villages to take up the activity of digging farm ponds. The GP spent Rs 1 crore 1 lakh under NREGA by the end



### Achievements in 2008–09

<i>Gram Panchayat</i>	<b>Amount Spent</b>	<b>Labour Component</b>	<b>% Labour Component</b>	<b>No of Families Benefited</b>
Gopalpur	10,100,000	7,100,000	70	1,189
Hirbandh	6,216,000	4,200,000	69	2,535
Moshiara	4,844,000	3,000,000	61	445
Molian	4,211,000	3,950,000	94	514
Baharamuri	4,197,000	3,500,000	83	1,459

### No. of families that got wages for more than 100 days in 2008–09

<i>Gram Panchayat</i>	<b>No of Families</b>
Gopalpur	437
Hirbandh	285
Moshiara	217
Molian	49
Baharamuri	14

### Advantages of farm pond works

- Possible to work, based on a model estimate. If there is computer facility, the time taken to prepare estimates for farm ponds worth Rs 2.5 lakhs is 15 minutes.
- A big works project, in this case, is actually a summation of a large number of small discrete units. Thus, it is possible to make payments in small doses. One can make payments for the farm ponds that are complete.
- The landowners have a stake in ensuring that the works get completed soon because these are private assets that are getting created.
- If works happen at quick pace, a family of two can easily get wages for 100 days or more in just about 2 months.
- Measurement is easy because of clear dimensions. The dimensions and the volume of earth to be excavated are clear right from beginning.
- Muster rolls are easy to prepare and there is also no complexity in payment.

## Disadvantages

1. Because these are small discrete works on individual private plots, works will start at the same time in a large number of plots. Keeping pace with the work for the supervisors is an extremely difficult.
2. Establishing the ownership of a plot is a complex process.
3. Earth work is hard work. Many labourers do not prefer such hard work. They would rather do soft works such as spreading morrum on roads.
4. Vested interests spread stories that small farm ponds do not hold water.
5. The estimates and payments are for totally new farm ponds. The workers might touch up old farm ponds and ask for full wages. This phenomenon has to be closely watched against.

of the financial year. This was the highest in Hirbandh block that year. The total number of wage days generated was 90,421 and 437 families received more than 100 days of labour.

The stories of Hirbandh and Baharamuri are slightly different. These GPs had mainly taken up pond renovation and road construction works under NREGA. They started farm pond digging related works only after February 2009. In about 1½ months, Hirbandh managed to spend about Rs 12 lakhs. Baharamuri has understood that out of all the ideas for wage employment generation, the one of farm ponds is the best. The GP, which spent about Rs 41 lakhs in 2008–09, has already made plans for spending Rs 1 crore the next year.

### WHAT WE COULD NOT DO

A very large number of works on a very large number of plots started off together in the past 4–5 months. We have not been able to put tight monitoring systems in place. We have not been able to carry out social audits. Moreover, we have not been able to reach out to a large number of potential workers out there, who do not trust us to provide them with 100 days wages.

Let me conclude with a small anecdote. Lutia is a small village in Moshiara GP. There are 30 very poor tribal families in that village. The number of job cards total 29. Till the end of January, we could not provide them with any work. On February 15, we started farm pond digging works in the village. By March 31, one of the families had already got 70 days of wages. Three of the families worked only on their own lands and they got 7 days each. Rest of the families on an average got 30 to 40 days of wages each. The village averaged 34 days. The total water harvesting capacity we created was 100,000 cubic feet, which is roughly equivalent to the water required for cultivating mustard on 200 bighas of land! As I write, the total water harvesting capacity created in Hirbandh block is about 10 million cubic feet!

How much of mustard can be grown with all that water? Maybe we will leave that to the experts to calculate. But my friends... are you able to see new wheels and their marks on the road?

*Article reproduced with permission. Courtesy: West Bengal Panchayat and Gram Unnayan Newsletter, May 2009, 11 Year, 6<sup>th</sup> volume, (pp. 17 - 20). The article has been translated from Bengali by D. Narendranath.*

# Power Play and the MGNREGA: Impressions from Khunti—1

KANDALA SINGH

*Despite the conflict and power politics that come into play, there is tremendous scope for collective action through collaboration with the government, unions, people's movements and gram sabhas to ensure effective implementation of NREGA*

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been hailed as a landmark legislation in India because it places the concept of rights at the centre stage of the processes of the Act's implementation. A rights-based approach to development seeks to empower people themselves, especially the most marginalized, and to hold accountable those who have a duty to act (UNHCHR, 2006). This people-centred approach is reflected in several measures of the NREGA, for example, in the vesting of power and responsibility of planning with the *gram sabha*, whereby people come together as a community to plan for their collective development. Another example is the demand-based approach to work, whereby individual workers and households have to seek work actively by demanding it from the government.

In other words, the rights-based approach incorporated in the NREGA focuses on people as individuals being active agents of their own development. Taking this as the point of departure, this article explores stories of the agents of development—individuals and communities—that the NREGA seeks to activate through empowerment. These stories were gathered during a three-day visit to Khunti block in Jharkhand in February 2010. Though the instances cited later in this article may be nothing more than context-specific impressions, the larger picture they paint is more universal/general in nature. By 'universal/general', I do not mean that these are representative of larger trends in the implementation of the NREGA in Jharkhand but that these reflect concerns and sentiments, and highlight problems of power and agency on the ground faced by several 'agents of development' that the Act seeks to employ. Before delving into these stories, I am going to outline the context in which these have been gathered.

## THE CONTEXT

The purpose of our visit to Khunti in February 2010 was to understand how NREGA works on the ground and how NGOs such as Pradan can play an active role in strengthening the implementation of the Act. We interacted extensively with the staff of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra in Khunti, a centre that provides support to *mazdoors* (labourers) seeking employment under the Act.

*In other words, the rights-based approach incorporated in NREGA focuses on people as individuals being active agents of their own development.*



Our field trips included visits to three different villages in Siladon *panchayat*, and to a cluster-level meeting of Pradan's women self help groups (SHGs). Pradan supports 270 women SHGs, or *mahila mandals*, in Jharkhand. All the villages we visited had more than one *mahila mandal*.

The villages to be visited were selected by the NREGA Sahayata Kendra; these were villages in which the Kendra is currently working. Thus, the stories that emerge from these villages do not represent the situation of NREGA in all the villages in Jharkhand, or even Khunti.

### **SULHE**

Sulhe village has a mixed population of both Sadans (Other Backward Classes—OBCs) and

Mundas (a tribal group), with the majority being the Mundas. There was an open construction site—a road—when we visited the village. Sulhe is one of the success stories of Siladon because it is one of the few villages in which worksite facilities have been provided, thanks to the efforts of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra. These include a shade to provide respite from the sun, a person to provide drinking water to the workers and a caregiver for the children of workers. On the other hand, there are several lapses and complaints in the implementation of the NREGA in the village; workers complained about the long distances and the expense involved in getting to the bank, and the fact that the soil they work on is extremely hard and filled with stones. The attitude of the bank workers was another grievance.

### SARIDKHEL

We got the opportunity to attend a meeting of cluster leaders of women SHGs from ten different villages. When the issue of NREGA was probed, the women said that although they know that the issue is relevant because it concerns their daily wages, they do not know how to go about accessing their rights under the Act. Our attempt to discuss the concept of rights (*hak* or *adhikaar*) was met with silence and blank stares, and it took us some time to explain what rights mean.

### BELAHATHI

Belahathi's population comprises 150 Sadan families. The people of Belahathi came across as far more aware and vocal as compared to the residents of the other villages we visited. The fact that eight *mahila mandals* are active in this village testifies to this. This village was considered one of the 'better NREGA villages' by the Sahayata Kendra. In June 2009, some labourers from Belahathi were granted compensation for late payments by the district authorities.

Despite this, the average man days available to each job-card holder amount to an average of a mere 20–40 per year. The women said that they are not well versed with the NREGA processes and its nitty-gritties, and that the implementation of the scheme in the village does not figure as a topic of discussion in the weekly meetings of the *mahila mandal*.

### IRUD

Irud village has a mixed population. Clearly, the NREGA Sahayata Kendra has been active there; one of the worksite supervisors is a *sathi* of the Sahayata Kendra and thanks to whom worksite facilities (crèche, shade, first-aid kit and drinking water) are all in place. Some labourers from Irud received compensation for delayed payments from the

state last year. At the time of our visit, work on a road was underway. However, the soil that was to be worked on was extremely stony, which should ideally have been noted so that the piece rate to be paid to the *mazdoors* could be doubled. Worksite supervisors are not trained to know the difference because this assessment must be made by junior engineers, who rarely show up in the villages, the *mazdoors* were forced to labour on the stony soil for low wages.

Our visits to these multiple locations revealed different facets of the dynamics of how NREGA plays out in the village. As stated earlier, the implementation of NREGA in the villages that the Kendra has worked in (Sulhe, Irud and Belahathi) is not necessarily representative of the situation of Khunti block as a whole. The Kendra's efforts have ensured that these are some of the better NREGA villages. Indeed, the blank responses of the

*The soil that was to be worked on was extremely stony, which should ideally have been noted so that the piece rate to be paid to the mazdoors could be doubled.*



women (who hail from villages where the Kendra hasn't worked) in the meeting in Saridkhel seem to suggest the same. When viewed from a more general level, the myriad problems surrounding the implementation of the NREGA are rooted in the same theme: inequalities of power and the lack of agency on the ground. These power dynamics include inequalities of knowledge, agency and the concept of rights. What follows is an articulation of the nature and implications of power play from the perspective of the agents of development, that is, the *mazdoors*.

### POWER DYNAMICS

The power dynamics in the implementation of an Act such as the NREGA operate at multiple levels, starting from the individual to the interaction between *mazdoors* and formal institutions such as banks and agents of the government.

At a micro level, that is, the level of the individual, the demand-based approach inculcated in the NREGA is hard to implement because of the lack of awareness of, confidence in and information available to the average labourer. These complexities are further compounded in the face of authoritative institutions such as the government. In other words, individuals on the ground are not equipped with the power and agency required to play the role of active agents of social change. The blank stares we received at the meeting in Belahathi served as a reminder that the concept of rights is imposed from the top, and does not strike a chord on the ground. If one is to advocate a rights-based approach, it needs to be discussed, advocated and inculcated on the ground beyond the parameters of merely the NREGA. This is especially true for areas such as Khunti, where a strong people's *sangathan* (union) does not exist. At another level, there are power inequalities

within the village that hinder the effective implementation of an Act like NREGA. Sulhe village, where Champa *didi* is a worksite supervisor, or mate, is an illustration of this. The main job of mates is to record attendance in the muster rolls, and ensure that worksite facilities such as crèche and shade, water and medicine are in place. The *mazdoors* of Sulhe complained that Champa *didi* did not update muster rolls regularly, which meant that several *mazdoors* have not been paid for the work they have done. One labourer has as many as Rs 4,100 in dues, which he has not received because of Champa *didi's* carelessness. When asked why they did not complain about her in the *gram sabha*, the *mazdoors* said that they were scared to say anything against her because she is the *gram pradhan's* wife. When we spoke to Champa *didi*, she seemed shy and reclusive and hesitant to answer even simple questions about her day-to-day life in the village. Her husband sat with us and dominated the conversation. The idea behind appointing women as mates was to empower them to play a proactive role in implementing the Act. This has not worked in Champa *didi's* case because her husband is the *gram pradhan*. The staff of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra informed us that women, who attend the sabha or work as mates, often end up acting as proxy mates for their husbands.

Thus, the power dynamics in the *gram sabha* and gender inequalities in the village play a role in hindering the effective implementation of an Act that places everyone at par.

The most obvious power inequalities function at yet another level—that of interaction between the villagers and formal institutions such as banks and agents of the government. The dominant approach/attitude of these power structures towards the *mazdoors* is

indifferent, even hostile. There is a systematic cycle of subversion of the NREGA at every step of the Act, right from the time the *mazdoor* files a job application and does not receive a receipt to when the banks refuse to update his/her passbook. The labourers' lack of knowledge power/ignorance of the details of how the entire cycle is supposed to function coupled with low confidence to challenge authority compounds their inability to demand their rights.

The intention here is not to paint an entirely dark picture of government agents; without a doubt, there are several examples of government agents trying their best to ensure that the Act is implemented smoothly. Government agents, in charge of NREGA work, often have other responsibilities as well and are overworked. Nevertheless, the *mazdoor* faces hostility and apathy, rooted in the deep-seated class biases of our society.

Another area where *mazdoors* encounter hostile attitudes is the bank timings. Banks often entertain *mazdoors* only for a short while in the afternoon, which is too short a time for all the *mazdoors* to be attended to by the bank staff. The long distance to the bank combined with this unsuitable timing results in the loss of a working day for the *mazdoors* because they cannot carry out NREGA work either in the morning or in the second half of the day.

Thus, hostility and indifference dominate interactions between the government and its citizens. For the *mazdoor* at the receiving end, these attitudes compound his/her lack of faith in the government and the system.

***At a micro level, that is, the level of the individual, the demand-based approach inculcated in the NREGA is hard to implement because of the lack of awareness of, confidence in and information available to the average labourer.***

The humiliation that the *mazdoors* experience at the hands of such a system often borders on dehumanization. Workers who complained about being humiliated said, "*Hum bhi to insaan hi hain na* (We too are humans)."

Such power play at multiple levels—from the *gram pradhan* to the junior engineer and banks—creates a deadlock in which the *mazdoor* is trapped

and is confronted with an endless circle of power structures that he/she mostly does not even dare to attempt to penetrate because of his/her ignorance and diffidence.

In spite of these problems on the ground, the NREGA Sahayata Kendra's efforts have borne fruit. Following their efforts, 262 labourers were granted compensation for late payment last year and worksite facilities have been constructed. Most important, the four mates or *sathis*, who work for the Sahayata Kendra, are drawn from these villages themselves, which means that the Kendra has been successful in activating the agency of some people, who are beneficiaries of the Act. This is a small but significant step towards achieving the ideal of a demand-based approach for implementing the Act.

There are other heartening facts that indicate that there is great scope for collective action in Khunti. NREGS and the wage incentives it provides for each individual household have not managed to disrupt traditional working relations and practices such as *shramdaan*, which have close bearings on a sense of community ownership. Irud, for example, has retained the minimal wages (Rs 21–40) that the villagers demand to work on

each other's lands. These wages are kept deliberately low to ensure that even the poorer farmers are able to pay these. Barring occasional exceptions, the *gram sabha* is sensitive to requests by marginal farmers, who do not want their minimal land to be used for NREGA work. The *sathis* of the Sahayata Kendra inform us that the villagers have a high level of consideration for each other. There is an unspoken understanding in each village that NREGA work should be carried out for six months so that the rest of the year can be utilized to work on the fields, so that no individual farmer's crop suffers. All these factors indicate that whereas village society is by no means bereft of conflict and power politics, there is tremendous scope for collective action. This can be tapped.

*Pradan's widespread institutional network—the 270 mahila mandals it has initiated in Jharkhand—is an ideal platform to broach the topic of rights and the awareness of rights.*

#### A WAY FORWARD—POSSIBLE APPROACHES AND ROLES FOR PRADAN

The above stories demonstrate that the cycles of systematic subversion and exploitation of the NREGA reflect deep-seated inequalities of power: lack of knowledge and confidence. How is one to challenge these inequalities and transform the equations? The work of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra has made a dent in the existing power structures and thus represents a step towards the goal. Pradan and other voluntary sector organizations that have the potential to influence change in this area can learn a few lessons from the work of the Sahayata Kendra.

#### COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Mihir Shah (2007), in his article titled 'Employment Guarantee, Civil Society and Indian Democracy', which appeared in the November issue of *Economic and Political Weekly* (pp. 43–51), argues that the most suitable approach to implement NREGA effectively is one of collaboration and working with the government. The work of





the NREGA Sahayata Kendra and the change it has managed to effect serves testimony to the validity of such an approach.

Anisha from the Sahayata Kendra spoke about her struggle in getting the agents of the government to do their bit to ensure the effective implementation of the Act. When the initial attempts at persuasion failed, the Sahayata Kendra undertook a PR exercise.

Week after week, Anisha recalled, they would walk into the District Collector's office and other government agents and make casual conversation with them. This helped in turning around the government's otherwise hostile and defensive attitude towards the Kendra, and several of them gradually came to see that the Kendra wanted to work with, and not against, them. The Kendra has a much smoother working relationship with the government agents now, thanks to which they have managed to make some amount of change.

Further, the benefits of collaboration for the Sahayata Kendra are not limited to working with the government alone. Collaborations with other unions/people's movements have helped the Kendras in other locations in Jharkhand. In the absence of such a network in Khunti, the Sahayata Kendra here has had to start from scratch, which has limited its outreach. In this light, collaboration between Pradan and the Sahayata Kendra in Khunti could go a long way in facilitating a smoother implementation of the Act. Pradan's widespread institutional network—the 270 *mahila mandals* it has initiated in Jharkhand—is an ideal platform to broach the topic of rights and the awareness

***NREGS and the wage incentives it provides for each individual household have not managed to disrupt traditional working relations and practices such as shramdaan, which have close bearings on a sense of community ownership.***

of rights. The sheer scale and numbers of the women involved can ensure widespread dissemination and discussion of rights and procedures of the NREGA, which will be a step forward in activating the agency of the *mazdoors* and creating a demand on their part for the fulfillment of their rights.

#### **PLANNING**

Another level at which Pradan can intervene effectively is by

working with *gram sabhas* to build their capacities in village planning. Village planning is Pradan's strength and is an effective point of intervention because it addresses the root cause of a lot of lapses in the implementation of the NREGA. This could be done either in collaboration with the government or by working with Pradan's SHGs. Working with the women SHGs could also help address the gender inequalities in the *gram sabha*.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The struggle to ensure the effective implementation of NREGA entails a series of micro endeavours to change attitudes. Whether one talks about addressing power imbalances within the village between the *gram pradhan* and the *mazdoors* and between the men and the women, or about holding the agents of government accountable to the *mazdoors*, the effort is to change attitudes and perceptions about 'the self' and 'the other', transform relationships and enhance the agency of the most powerless to reclaim power for themselves. Our visit exposed us to how the work of one NREGA Sahayata Kendra has taken significant steps in this direction. Pradan can make a significant contribution towards this.

# The Demand and Supply of Employment Guarantee: Impressions from Khunti—2

KIRTI MISRA

## INTRODUCTION

MGNREGA calls for a radical shift in the perspective of the State vis a vis the rural workforce in its territory. From being a beneficiary in anti-poverty programmes, rural labour is now to be recognized as a citizen, who can exercise his/her right to guaranteed and favourable employment. In doing so, s/he can become agents of her/his own development. The rural citizen, armed with the guarantee of employment and wage, has a choice to prioritize and fulfill felt needs at any point in time and enhance his/her life opportunities. The Act has made it legally binding on the State, as the duty bearer, to set up systems for actualizing this economic right as well as provide mechanisms to prevent its violation.

The following article is based on a recent visit to Tirla (Belahati and Saridkel) and Siladon (Irud and Sulhe) *panchayats* of Khunti block in Jharkhand, to understand the implementation of the programme through the experiences of the workers and the NREGA Sahayata Kendra set up by researchers from the Centre for Development Economics at the Delhi School of Economics and with support from the district administration. The Sahayata Kendra is mainly the brainchild of Dr. Jean Drèze, the chief architect of MGNREGA. It was conceived as a help centre for the implementation of NREGS and is run by a team of four people, of whom three belong to the local community. The Sahayata Kendra helps workers claim their right to work and puts in place favourable workplace conditions. The article looks at the issues from a demand-and-supply perspective and identifies the areas of engagement of civil society, at large, and Pradan, in particular.

## STRENGTHENING THE DEMAND FRONT

NREGS is a demand-based programme, implying that people's demand for work that determines how much work is sanctioned, when it is sanctioned and the kind of work that should be taken up. As a resident of a village, any worker can suggest work to a *gram panchayat/gram sabha* member. Unlike other programmes, the work is not allocation-based and the state cannot stop it at will.

According to the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), "Employment is dependent upon the worker exercising the choice to apply for registration and obtain a Job card, and then to exercise a choice to seek employment through a written application for the time and duration that the worker wants." It becomes

the State's responsibility then to make the work available within 15 days of demand for work; if that does not *happen*, the onus rests on the State to provide daily unemployment allowance to the worker whose demand for work was not honoured. This allowance is based on the entitlement of the household, at a rate specified by the State government, which should not be less than one-fourth of the wage rate for the first 30 days and not less than half the wage rate for the remaining period of the financial year. These provisions rest on three key assumptions.

1. That the rural workforce is aware of and understands its 'rights' in the context of 'employment', which is coming through a government scheme. For years, people have seen and worked on the cash-transfer employment work of the government, started during critical times such as drought and lean agricultural periods. A recent example is the drought of 2001 in Jharkhand, after which the digging of small wells was taken up in selected *panchayats*. In 2002–03, a scheme was launched to dig one pond in each village of Palamu and Santhal Parganas. In 2004, around Rs 800 million was allotted from the Calamity Relief Fund. However, the shift from this form of short-term social safety net to a 'guarantee to wage employment' and 'employment on demand' has not been communicated effectively at the village level, to begin with.
2. That the worker is equipped with information about the provisions of NREGA, the process of seeking a job

***It becomes the State's responsibility then to make the work available within 15 days of demand for work; if that does not happen, the onus rests on the State to provide daily unemployment allowance to the worker whose demand for work was not honoured.***

card, whom to contact and for what purpose. Also that the worker will demand employment and that he can then exercise his 'choice', depending on his needs. Additionally, it is assumed that the worker can, at ease, reach out to people, who manage these works, namely, the *Rozgar Sahayak* and the *Panchayat Sewak* at the *gram panchayat* level; the BDO/ Programme Officer and the technical staff at the block level; and the District Programme Coordinator at the district level.

3. That the *gram sabha* (and by implication, the *gram panchayat*) espouses democratic values and it is easy for the poor and marginalized to influence decision-making.

An interview with one of the work supervisors/mates revealed that when a project starts, the workers with job cards go to the site straightaway. She stated, "*Jab kaam aata hai to sab chaley jatey hain* (when work is available, we go directly to the site)." The *Rozgar Sahayak* or the *Panchayat Sewak* are not informed/approached for applications; it is mainly the mate, who interacts with workers, maybe even turning a few of them away. It is, however, the *Rozgar Sahayak's* or the *Panchayat Sewak's* responsibility to respond to the demand for employment. The absence of a written application (and dated receipt as proof) and the lack of a system of record keeping as to who demanded work informally and was turned away, implies that locating violators and fixing accountability will be difficult.

An NREGS survey conducted in six states of North India, including Jharkhand, in 2008



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revealed that 65% of the workers interviewed had never applied for work and 71% of these stated ignorance of the need to apply as the main reason for not filing an application. (For more details, see Jean Drèze, January 2009, 'The Battle for Employment Guarantee', *Frontline*, Vol. 26, Issue 1, ) Mr. Balram of the NREGA Watch Forum in Jharkhand says that very few households manage to avail of 100 days of guaranteed employment, and those certainly are the better informed and smart people of the community.

In Khunti block, only 143 households with job cards have completed 100 days of work this financial year, that is, until February 2010. The Government of India MGNREGA website declares that, of the panchayats visited, nine households in Tirla and eight households in Siladon, have exhausted 100 days of work. In Belahati village, an OBC-dominated village that falls under Tirla *panchayat*, of the 150 households with job cards, not more than six have completed 100 days of work. During a discussion with the men, a senior Pradan team member found that whereas the total person work days should have been 15,000, it was actually 3,520, with the average

person work days being 23.4. People were united in expressing their desire for more work but did not know how to go about achieving it.

Essential, therefore, is the need to make the workers understand how they as citizens should relate to the State and why the State, as duty bearer, is to be held accountable. Here, 'State' refers to *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) at the village, intermediate and district levels. These are non-existent in Jharkhand; it is, therefore, the local administration and people entrusted with NREGS-related responsibilities that become an extension of the State. Addressing the information gap is an important step towards strengthening the demand base of the NREGS.

- The number of days of guaranteed wage employment for a household in a financial year and the kind of work on offer.
- The purpose of the job card and related details such as its validity, and the need to be proactive in getting job cards, applying for work, finding out whether work has been allotted and following up on the unemployment allowance when no work is provided within 15 days.

- The fact that the job cards must be kept with them and not with anyone else.
- The fact that there is reservation for women workers and that both men and women are entitled to equal wages.
- The fact that work needs to be made available within a 5-km radius of a village.
- The fact that a worker is entitled to worksite facilities.
- The provision of medical facilities in case of accident and the compensation.
- The existence of a grievance redressal mechanism (who is to be contacted, for what, at what level and the time period within which it will be addressed).
- The right to scrutinize NREGS documents (all accounts and records, muster rolls of each scheme, and annual report on the scheme implemented by District Programme Coordinator/PO/*gram panchayat*).
- The fact that there are no contractors in this system.
- The fact that attendance is to be recorded daily only in a *pucca* muster roll, which has to be kept at worksite for anybody to see.
- The statutory minimum wage entitlement and time period within which work payment should be made.
- The fact that the payment has to be made directly into their bank account.
- The responsibility of the block in implementing the Act.
- The institutions and the agencies that execute work.
- The way in which a project should be decided.
- The agreed labour-material ratio in a project.
- The fact that the use of machines is not permitted in NREGS works.
- The practices that are illegal under the Act and need to be reported.

Awareness of all these is essential to make the programme pro-worker in Jharkhand. An enhanced understanding of how the Act should be implemented is necessary for the workers to exercise their rights as well as articulate concerns against malpractices.

This is one key area for civil society engagement. It is a massive work in itself, requiring an organization with specialized skills in training and building the capacity of the workers to take up their own cases. Awareness building, however, has been a weak area of engagement, restricted to one-off activities; there is limited understanding of how awareness can be built in a sustained manner. One of the suggestions is to distribute radios to poor SCs/STs and the landless in rural areas, so that they may assist in information dissemination.

#### **NEED TO STRENGTHEN PLANNING IN GRAM SABHAS**

A *gram sabha* is the primary communication link between village and the local bureaucracy in Jharkhand, considering that *gram panchayats* are non-existent. For rural workers, a *gram sabha* could become a space for articulating concerns, proposing possible works and building consensus among villagers. It also is a forum for estimating how many days of work can be generated for a household through a particular work, and for proposing when it should be taken up. The more detailed is the proposed work/shelf of works, the lesser is the likelihood of misinterpretation by the technical and sanctioning authority and of mismatch between what the villagers propose and what is sanctioned and started. If people with technical expertise help the villagers design the projects in detail, it will ensure, to some extent, that the projects are accepted at the block level.

A technical person's involvement at the block level in NREGS work as such is low despite it being one of his/her key responsibility areas. This indifference is a problem. Perhaps, having the Junior Engineer (JE) attend a *gram sabha* meeting and engaging him in the process could help in ensuring that the project is accepted later at the block level.

***The creation of common assets at the village level requires knowing the felt needs as well as the nuts and bolts of how to go about building it (technical feasibility) and ensuring its long-term maintenance.***

### **NEED FOR INCLUSIVE PLANNING IN THE GRAM SABHA**

Whereas this visit did not study the level of participation of men and women in the *gram sabha*, inference has been drawn based on observations in the collective meeting of both women and men in Belahati. Men and women were hesitant to sit together; women did not speak

The second issue is about coming up with technically sound plans at the *gram sabha*-level for improved projects. At present, no technical support is available at the community level to help it identify the creation of productive assets and to discuss the preliminary rough design. The creation of common assets at the village level requires knowing the felt needs as well as the nuts and bolts of how to go about building it (technical feasibility) and ensuring its long-term maintenance. Several times, a particular NREGS work is taken up simply because it is convenient to implement as well as to measure (for example, road construction). Whereas wages are created under such work, the absence of technical support could give rise to the possibility of assets going wasted and not contributing to strengthening livelihoods in the long run. An abandoned pond in Sulhe is a case in point.

With its expertise in integrated natural resource management (INRM), Pradan can play a role in helping people make more informed decisions with regard to assets that are created through NREGS work. Considering its knowledge of various government schemes, Pradan can also propose the pooling of resources for a work. Further, it could extend help in suggesting the sequencing of the works.

In Sulhe village of Siladon *panchayat*, a pond development work under NREGS was started in 2007 and abandoned by workers in 2008. According to the Sahayata Kendra, hard soil at the project site made earth-cutting work difficult and it was, therefore, abandoned after a point. By this time, Rs 75,000 of the estimated Rs 1,62,000 had been already spent. Had there been some technical input on planning and site selection, during the preliminary discussions in the *gram sabha* (i) a more suitable site could have been identified where excavation work would have been relatively easier and the supply of water to agricultural fields better planned, and (ii) a better design could have been developed taking into consideration the topography and soil quality.



up much until they were split into smaller groups; they seemed more comfortable talking in separate small groups. Thus, women's involvement in discussions on NREGS (and in proposing work) in the *gram sabha* seems to be low. It could mean that, as workers, they do not have a say in (i) what kind of projects are started (whether that takes into account their differential physical abilities compared to male workers) and (ii) what kind of productive assets are created in the village.

Pradan could facilitate a more inclusive planning process at the village level, given its outreach among women workers (many of who are also Pradan's SHG members). Planning at the *gram sabha* level is the foundation on which, ideally, the *gram panchayat*/block/district levels are developed. Needs-identification at the *gram sabha* can itself be problematic, becoming merely an exercise carried out by men, reflecting their concerns. By bringing in the woman's perspective, Pradan's SHGs would make needs-identification for common assets more balanced. This assumption is based on the knowledge that the SHG women are confident about articulating concerns, are aware of issues and can manoeuvre discussions to their advantage, despite conflicting interests. Needs-identification and planning are not apolitical exercises and have to be steered sensitively, with an awareness of local power dynamics and at the same time ensuring that the weakest are not left behind. Within Pradan's interactions with SHGs, this is one area in which more mentoring may be undertaken.

#### **NEED TO ENCOURAGE THE ASKING OF QUESTIONS AND THE DEMANDING OF ANSWERS**

Low awareness, distance from the power centres—the district and the block headquarters—low literacy levels and the

daily struggle for survival pose serious challenges to realizing the economic right of the workers. Traversing the distance from awareness of rights to practising and exercising these is a challenge that requires a lot of confidence building and handholding support from civil society. Despite being aware, one may not be able to voice concerns/ask questions to the relevant authorities. At the village level, people stay silent to avoid confrontation with those who have power, and at the block level and in relation to institutions such as banks, they are not capable of exerting pressure. Here, an NGO could step in to (i) help the workers access relevant documents from the block office, facilitate the social audit at the *gram-sabha* level and ensure that all parties responsible for NREGS are present, (ii) take up issues concerning banks (opening of bank accounts, lack of cooperation in updating passbooks and withdrawal of wages) and (iii) inform block and district authorities about workers' problems and work out a reliable and fast track solutions where possible.

The Act directs the Block Programme Officer to ensure that a regular social audit of all works within the jurisdiction of the *gram panchayat* are carried out by the *gram sabha* and that prompt action is taken on the objections raised during the social audit. Furthermore, the Joint Commissioner's order states that social audit should be undertaken once a month in every *panchayat* in Jharkhand. So, a favourable policy environment does exist and it needs to be tapped. The need is also to communicate to the administration and the intermediary institutions such as banks and post offices that the workers have civil society backing and handholding support when they demand answers.

The Sahayata Kendra has taken a lead in five blocks in Jharkhand and has been successful in raising issues that come up during the NREGS surveys, conducted every year. These issues are taken up in a public hearing and the relevant authorities are made to respond to the queries and provide a deadline for action plan.

On 29 December 2009, the Sahayata Kendra conducted a public hearing in Siladon. It was decided to hold it on a market day so that a large number of villagers become aware of the event and participate. This event was preceded by a survey of 18 villages to find out NREGS-related issues. At the end of the public hearing, a charter of demands was given to the NREGS-related officials (Block Programme officer, JE, *Panchayat Sewak* and *Gram Rozgar Sahayak*) present in the meeting, for follow up.

In another instance, after the Sahayata Kendra's intervention, in a camp court held by Assistant Labour Commissioner in June 2009, 265 NREGS workers were each given Rs 2,000 as compensation for delayed payment. The people responsible for the delay were fined under Payment of Wages Act 1936.

#### **MAKING THE SUPPLY SIDE RESPONSIVE**

Several cases came up during the field visit, which need the attention of the local bureaucracy, in order to help workers secure their legal entitlement.

#### ***Fixing payment delay in banks***

One of the main issues was how the wages reach the workers. Whereas separating the implementing agency from the payment

agency is a thoughtful effort to curb corruption, it has its own set of problems. The moot question is was any kind of initial assessment made to measure the banks' existing workload and strength to service new clients? What level of support has been provided to facilitate a dialogue between the banks and the NREGS workers? The workers have articulated the following problems:

1. Payments are not made on the day people go to the bank. In Sulhe, for example, people have to spend Rs 30 to travel to the bank and spend an entire day in the bank in Khunti block, only to often return empty-handed. Banking hours with regard to NREGS workers is restricted to one hour in the afternoon.
2. Updating of passbooks does not happen; as a result, workers are denied the right to know how much money was transferred to their account and on which date. The Act states that payment should not be delayed by more than a fortnight but, given the current situation, it is difficult to assess whether or not the wage transfer to workers' accounts meets this deadline. It, therefore, cannot be contested. Bank staff usually say, "The machine is not working." Several times, one of the *Sahayaks* from NREGA Sahayata Kendra has to visit the bank to get the passbooks updated.
3. Not all workers who worked on a project in Belahati have their accounts with the bank. Since the cheque from block office, which is deposited in the bank, is a consolidated one for all workers the bank states that only after all the workers have opened accounts will they transfer the wages to them. The workers, therefore, do not have access to their own income when they need it.



Several suggestions have been made for making payments efficient such as making the local community responsible, making the SHGs the paymasters, invoking the recent provision in RBI whereby a bank outreach system may be set up for a population of over 2000. Which of these will be most effective in naxal-affected Jharkhand is yet to be tested.

### NEED FOR PROJECT SEQUENCING

NREGS work has relevance for the rural workforce. According to a young worker from Irud, it is better than the works initiated under the MLA Local Area Development Fund, in which contractors charge commission to employ labour. The women workers in Belahati say NREGS work is convenient because they are able to fulfil family responsibilities, take care of children and earn an income of Rs 99 within the village. Earlier, around 30 of these women worked in a lac factory from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and earned Rs 65 per day. They wonder if there is any more NREGS work.

Rather than the awareness of their right to work, their livelihoods and survival concerns impel them to seek NREGS work. The crux of the problem in Belahati, as Binju Abraham, a senior Pradan team member identifies it, is a gross miscalculation in sanctioning works in a manner that would reasonably absorb the workforce. This problem is also connected with the way in which the administration makes its labour demand projection to the Centre, based on which funds are released.

This was not, however, explored in this visit. Belahati is a labour surplus village, where the recent NREGS work of land development has failed to absorb the labour adequately. According to the Sahayata Kendra, every able and willing body flocked to the single site that opened and the project was completed within six days, leaving everyone dissatisfied. The

problem, suggests Binju, could have been tackled if two or more medium projects had been planned and implemented around the same time.

The Sahayata Kendra informed the block office about the problem but it is not clear how the block administration decided to tackle it. Meanwhile, people express their anguish—February and March are months when their need for cash is high; yet these are the months when they have no guarantee about employment or wages to meet their needs.

### NEED TO MAKE PLANS TO MEET LOCAL NEEDS

The Act has designated the *panchayats* (district, intermediate and village levels) as the principal authorities for planning and implementing NREGS. The village *panchayat* is responsible for (i) identifying of projects (based on the recommendation of the *gram sabha*) and executing/supervising work, (ii) preparing the development plan and maintaining a shelf of possible work to be taken up when the demand for work arises, and (iii) forwarding the proposal for projects in the order of priority to the Block Programme Officer for scrutiny and approval, before the commencement of the year of execution.

In Jharkhand, however, there is an institutional gap with respect to NREGS implementation because the third stratum of governance does not exist at all (the last *panchayat* election in undivided Bihar took place in 1978). As an alternative organizational arrangement to PRIs, the *gram pradhan* has been notified and a *gram koshadhyaksh* (treasurer) has been selected by the *gram sabha* to support the implementation of NREGS. The services of these people are being utilized to register workers and distribute job cards.

The block administration (and BPO) has emerged as the key decision-maker, with regard to planning. Whereas the *gram sabha* recommends its list of projects, the sanctioning of work—what project comes to the village and when—happens at the level of the BDO/BPO. At the village level, the *gram sabha* needs to come up with a technically sound plan, which cannot be rubbished by the block. It will also help to have a civil society organization as intermediary, and working with the block administration, to put forward a strong case for people's plan. Pradan could play this role. According to D. Narendranath, Project Director, Pradan, even where PRIs exist, there is legitimate need for the engagement of civil society organizations to mitigate the technical gap in developing a robust shelf of works, which reflect people's livelihood aspirations.

#### **ADDRESSING NREGS STAFF-RELATED PROBLEMS**

Given the absence of formal local governance institutions, at the *gram panchayat* level, there is a vacuum in terms of who can take up the responsibilities stated in the Act. In Khunti block, there are 12 *gram panchayats* and a reasonable number of trained *Gram Rozgar Sahayaks*, who only look after NREGS work and reach out to people. The *Panchayat Sewak* has key responsibilities; he is entrusted with all NREGS-related documents, including the muster rolls for the sanctioned work, allocating employment opportunities to applicants and asking them to report for work. He is, however, multitasking and manages other government schemes too. Most *panchayats* do not have offices and, earlier, there was no independent person in the panchayat office, who was in-charge for even receiving the registration form for job cards. To address these problems, the Centre has raised the payment

of the administrative costs from 4 to 6%, the results of which are yet to be implemented (circular of March 2009).

The involvement of the JE, who is a block-level staff, has also been disappointing. Ideally, the measurement of work should be done within six days of completion. Workers complain that neither does the JE visit the worksites regularly to measure the work, causing delay in the payment of wages, nor does s/he guide the mates/supervisors on how to take measurements.

During the Siladon public hearing, it was suggested that the JE should be made accountable for any delays in the measurement of work. In a circular of the MoRD, dated 16 February 2010, States have been advised to seek technical expertise by constituting panel of accredited engineers at the district and block levels for (i) preparing estimates, (ii) measuring work, and (iii) auditing the quality of the initiative. The Sahayata Kendra will advocate with the block and district administration to implement this. Alternatively, an organization such as Pradan, which believes in building local capacities and leadership, can train up a cadre of barefoot engineers, who can do the work of the JE.

***Addressing the Training Needs of Mates***  
Worksite supervisors/mates are responsible for making entries in the job card, maintaining attendance in the muster rolls, measuring the work and ensuring on-site facilities. The placement of mates at the worksite is considered particularly important in the context of Jharkhand where, in the absence of a functioning *gram panchayat*, an *Abhikarta Samiti* is made responsible for the implementation of the scheme. It comprises the traditional *gram pradhan*

and *gram koshadhyaksh* selected by the *gram sabha*. Past audits have highlighted the perils of entrusting this entity with all the responsibilities and powers at the village level. In an audit of the Birhu *gram panchayat*, the *Abhikarta Samiti* admitted to fudging the muster rolls. Earlier, funds were transferred from the block directly to the Samiti and there was no institutional mechanism to check whether the workers got their dues. The Samiti, on the other hand, was lower in the power hierarchy *vis a vis* the block administration and this led to corruption and blame games.

Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera, in articulating some major concerns regarding the implementation of NREGS in Jharkhand (May 2007), suggest that a well functioning mate system would reduce the concentration of power and management in a single entity such as the Abhikarta Samiti. So far, however, the functioning of mate system is basic. The mates have not received any training with regard to their responsibilities. The JEs, with whom the mates are supposed to work closely, have also not made efforts to share his/her knowledge (for example, on the System of Rates provisions) or skills. The sufferers are the workers, who, despite putting in the labour, do not always get the right wages within the payment deadline. This is an area that the Sahayata Kendra has the knowledge and the resources (in terms of network with NREGS advocates and acceptance of district administration), to enhance the skills and knowledge of mates.

## CONCLUSION

There is need for civil society organizations to engage with issues on both sides—strengthening the demand as well as making the system responsive—depending on their

At the Saridkel cluster meeting of SHGs, an issue was raised. In Marangatu village, the JE came for measurement of the completed work, in the absence of the workers. The Sahayata Kendra *Sahayak* said that this is a violation of the rule and what was measured should have been verbally announced. Anisha from the Sahayata Kendra states that a serious flaw in standard practice is that in case of a mismatch between the muster roll maintained at the workers' level and the measurement book of the JE, the latter prevails.

In both Sulhe and Irud, workers have complained that due to the hard soil, a worker cannot dig a *chowka* (pit) in a day and, therefore, cannot earn the stipulated minimum wage. The JE had not informed the mate about the provision laid out in Schedule of Rates, which states that in case of hard soil, half *chowka* should be considered equivalent to one *chowka* dug in soft soil, and payments must be made accordingly.

In Irud, there are families in which 3–4 members manage to cut one *chowka* in a day. A few of them, despite being poor, do not have BPL cards and have to buy essentials such as rice for Rs 20 per kg from private shops. In Sulhe, Junas Pahan Munda, a disabled caregiver for the children of the workers and who too does not have a BPL card, explained that indicators of the BPL survey conducted in 2002 have largely benefited migrant communities, who though well-off, have less land and, therefore, conveniently fall in the less-than-one-acre-land criterion, which is used to determine who is poor.

Also in Irud, when a worker, who was apparently resting at the site, was asked why he was not working, he replied that he was not well, "*Matti katne ka takat nahin milta* (I do not have the strength to cut the earth)." Meanwhile, his son, not more than 6–7 years old, was working in his father's *chowka*.

niche areas. For Pradan, prior to making an intervention, it would be a useful exercise to map the existing resources of the various civil society actors (such as educational institutions that conduct NREGS surveys, networks such as MGNREGA Watch that articulate labour rights concerns at various fora and have the ability to influence policy making, set-ups such as the NREGA Sahayata Kendra that has the support of the bureaucracy, and other NGOs) and assess where it can add value in this collaboration.

Pradan has had sustained engagement with the rural communities for the last two

decades, having been involved in building the livelihoods of the poor and community institutions such as women's SHGs. To involve the SHGs in NREGS, Pradan has to first groom the members, arm them with information and build their awareness of rights and confidence in their strength as a collective instead of pushing them to challenge the unequal power relations at the community level or in relation to the local bureaucracy. The agenda, ultimately, has to emerge from these collectives, that is, how they would like to engage with the issue of securing their economic rights and make the state accountable.

# Reflections on a *Jan Sunwai* on MGNREGA

BINJU ABRAHAM

*Airing grievances and raising issues regarding the implementation of MGNREGA, the stakeholders utilize the forum of the Jan Sunwai to come face-to-face with each other on a single platform to discuss and learn about the shortcomings and problems that each of them face.*

On 29 December 2009, I happened to witness a *Jan Sunwai* (public hearing) in the nature of a social audit conducted by Jean Drèze and his team of students in Siladon *panchayat* in Khunti district. Jean Drèze is an Indian development economist of Belgian origin. He is currently Professor at the G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, and honorary Professor, Delhi School of Economics. He is a member of the National Advisory Council of India.

This is a brief report on the event and my thoughts thereafter. John Drèze and his co-worker, Reetika Khera, were in Khunti reviewing the implementation of the MGNREGS programme. They had a team of young college students/graduates to assist them in this. These students were also assisting villagers through the NREGA Sahayata Kendra (NREGA Assistance Centre), located at the district headquarters. This report is adapted from the official minutes of this event, recorded by NREGA Sahayata Kendra.

John Drèze and the NREGA Sahayata Kendra in Khunti organized a *Jan Sunwai* to discuss NREGA-related issues in Siladon *gram panchayat*. It was attended by Amaresh Sinha (Block Programme Officer, Khunti), the Block Statistical Officer and the Block Supply Officer (BSO). *Gram panchayat* officials—Fateh Narayan Singh (Junior Engineer), Manga Ram (*Panchayat Sewak*) and Manoj (*Gram Rozgar Sewak*)—were also present. The meeting was also attended by Balam, Commissioner of Food Security for the state, appointed by the Supreme Court and a few media persons.

The meeting began at around 1 p.m. and lasted for two-and-a-half hours. It took place near the marketplace on a Tuesday, which happens to be market day in Siladon; the location was probably chosen keeping the convenience for the villagers in mind. Jean Drèze, Reetika Khera and few local cadres used a market plinth under a huge tamarind tree as the podium, and the villagers and the university students sat scattered in semi-circular fashion. Some of the government officials sat on the plinth whereas some sat on chairs to the left of the podium. The media persons (as is usual in rural Jharkhand!) came late and recorded the meeting on video. There were hardly any village women for three-fourths of the meeting. Towards the end, a few women came and were invited to sit in the centre.

This hearing was not a discrete event. Preparatory work, conducted by the NREGA Sahayata Kendra team between 22 and 28 December, involved a survey of the NREGS work that was carried out in 18 villages. The team would follow-up the issues that were raised in the hearing.

The *Jan Sunwai* began with an introduction by Reetika Khera, who explained its purpose and introduced the NREGA Sahayata Kendra team. She opined that whereas there had been major improvements in Siladon *gram panchayat*, much remained to be done. She then invited a village member of the local cadre built by the Sahayata Kendra to share the salient features of the NREGS programme, which he did brilliantly in the local language, Mundari.

Jean Drèze then presented the main findings of the NREGS survey conducted between 22 and 28 December. He first shared the positive aspects—positive in comparison to the past. An earlier survey of NREGS was conducted in this area in May–June 2009. At that time, NREGS was on the verge of collapse, not only in Siladon but in all of Khunti block. Because of long delays in wage payments, the workers had lost interest in NREGS and most of the worksites had been closed. Drèze said that the latest survey had recorded a major increase in the scale of work. Many worksites were opened after the villagers applied for work. Also, many worksites had facilities such as shade, drinking water, first aid, and even, in one case, child care. The team had also observed several instances of well-designed works, such as a 3-km approach road to Irud village, highlighting the remarkable skill and motivation of the NREGS workers. The team,

***The latest survey had recorded a major increase in the scale of work. Many worksites were opened after the villagers applied for work. Also, many worksites had facilities such as shade, drinking water, first aid, and even, in one case, child care.***

however, had found many irregularities in the implementation of NREGS. For example, many villagers had bank-related problems such as being unable to obtain a passbook or getting inadequate attention from the bank staff. Delays in wage payments persisted, and the Junior Engineers often failed to measure people's work in time.

There was then a lively discussion of the problems faced

by NREGS workers, beginning with the delays in wage payments. About 10 workers from Taro village said that, even after several months, they had not been paid their full wages. Jamal Khan, one of the workers, claimed that they had been told to sign the muster roll before being paid. The *abhiakarta* told them that he had forwarded the muster rolls to the block office. When Manoj, the *Gram Rozgar Sevak*, was asked why the wages had not been paid, he replied that the block had completed all pending payments in Taro. It was decided that a full audit of this particular work would be conducted on 10 January in the presence of the *Gram Rozgar Sevak*, *Panchayat Sevak* and Block Programme Officer. In another case of delayed payments, Phagu Singh Munda of Chukru village said that NREGS work on his land had stopped because the wages had not been paid on time.

### **BANK-RELATED ISSUES**

Several bank-related problems faced by NREGS workers came up for discussion. The manager of the local branch of Indian Overseas Bank, Dipankar Tudu, was present. To start with, the fact that many account holders had not been issued passbooks was raised. Some NREGS workers, such as Soma

Munda from Sodag village, were still waiting to open a bank account; it was not clear how he had been paid without a bank account. The issue of incomplete or incorrect passbook entries was also raised. Reetika Khara stressed the importance of accurate entries in the passbooks. Rajendra from Irud village, among others, said that his passbook was not being updated regularly. This complaint had been received from many villagers.

Another issue was that separate passbooks had not been issued for women. Many women were being paid through their husband's accounts because they did not have accounts of their own. The survey team demanded that passbooks should be issued immediately to all NREGS workers, with special attention to women. Complete and correct entries should also be made in the passbooks. Next, it was reported that NREGS workers were not treated with adequate respect by the bank staff. For instance, they were told that they could access their accounts only from 12 to 3 p.m. Another common problem was that the bank had held up payments to NREGS workers until after the 5th of every month.

Mr. Tudu, explained that the bank had been constrained because it had to open many NREGS accounts, making it difficult to issue passbooks in some cases. He said that problems with the passbook entries would be resolved, and that he would speak to the bank staff to ensure better service to the NREGS workers. Regarding the suspension of NREGS payments until 5 January, he said it was because many of the bank staff were on

***Many women were being paid through their husband's accounts because they did not have accounts of their own. The survey team demanded that passbooks should be issued immediately to all NREGS workers, with special attention to women.***

holiday. As for asking workers to come after 12 p.m., he explained that a separate counter for NREGS workers had been opened from 12 to 3 p.m. He was requested to ensure that when this counter is not open, NREGS workers have access to the main counter.

### **COMPLAINTS AGAINST JUNIOR ENGINEERS**

There were several complaints against the Junior Engineers, including the fact that they do

not visit worksites or measure people's work, and that the schedule of rates is not followed when *chowkas* (pits) are measured. Mahendra Munda from Alaundi village said that even in rocky soil, labourers were asked to dig pits, as per norms that apply to soft soil. As a result, the labourers had stopped working and the work had come to a standstill.

### **MATE-RELATED PROBLEMS**

An encouraging finding of the survey was that mates had been posted at every worksite for the purpose of worksite management, including the maintenance of muster rolls, arranging worksite facilities and measuring *chowkas*. Because some mates thought that they were not adequately trained, they requested Mr. Amaresh Sinha to arrange for further training for mates.

Another complaint of the mates was that they are not allowed to enter the date of work on the muster roll. Mr. Amaresh Sinha acknowledged that this was a serious issue and promised to ensure that this practice is corrected.

Mangal Singh Pahan, who works as an NREGS mate in Chitramu village, said that mates were not paid Rs 103 per day, as was

the norm laid down, and were, therefore, digging pits along with the labourers in order to earn at least Rs 99 per day.

### OTHER ISSUES

When the public hearing was opened for other issues, several people from Remta village came forward to testify that they had been given only 29 kg of wheat and rice by the PDS ration dealer instead of the 35 kg to which they are entitled. This created a flutter in the audience and some people from other villages said that they had the same complaint. In fact, in a surprise visit by NREGA Sahayata Kendra team to the PDS ration shop at Dabgana village on 27 December, the survey team found that the dealer was entering 35 kg in the records but only giving people 29 to 32 kg of grain.

The BSO assured the gathering that he would take action if he were given a written complaint. Mr. Balram pointed out that, in fact, it was the BSO's responsibility to conduct spot checks without waiting for complaints. He said that the theft of PDS grain was particularly shameful at the time of drought. The BSO agreed to conduct immediate enquiries in the area (including Dabgana and Jikki villages) and prepare action-taken reports within a month.

### DEMANDS OF THE GATHERING

A summary of the Charter of Demands that was placed before the local administration is as follows:

#### 1. OPENING OF NREGS WORKS

- NREGS worksites should be kept open until June 2011 so that people have recourse to local employment during the drought year. Work should be implemented at the worksites as per the law.

#### 2. BANK-RELATED DEMANDS

- The opening of accounts for NREGS workers, especially female workers, should be expedited.
- All NREGS workers should be issued bank passbooks without any further delay or excuses.
- The passbooks of NREGS workers should be updated regularly and accurately.
- NREGS workers should be treated with respect like other bank customers.

#### 3. DEMANDS RELATING TO ENGINEERS

- Junior Engineers should be made accountable for any delay in measuring *chowkas*, leading to delays in wage payments.
- They should measure the *chowkas*, in accordance with the norms laid out in the Schedule of Rates. In particular, the wage norms for rocky soils should be different from those for soft soils.

#### 4. MATE-RELATED DEMANDS

- Regular training of mates should be conducted by the district administration.
- Mates should be allowed to enter the dates on the muster rolls, which they maintain.
- They should be paid the wages due to them.

#### 5. OTHER DEMANDS

- Keeping in mind the cheating in the distribution of PDS rations, the BSO should take immediate action against the concerned ration dealers.

### REFLECTIONS

The testimonies of the wage earners indicate that corruption has been countered at the cost of their convenience: whereas bank payments of wages make it much harder to embezzle NREGA funds, the new system





**Regular training of mates should be conducted by the district administration.**

also means that workers have to make long trips to the bank to collect their wages. The bank in Khunti is about 14 km from the nearest village in Siladon *panchayat* and 26 km from the farthest! At the bank, the villagers are often not treated with the respect shown to other customers. Their passbooks are also not properly updated, making it difficult for them to ascertain if they have received their dues. They often have to queue in front of a separate counter, which is open for specified hours on specified days. One reason given for such laxity by banks is that they are overstressed by their normal business operations, and that their officers have to attend election duty as well. Banks, perhaps, are worried about the small and insignificant volume of transactions conducted by a large number of the poor wage earners. This only means added burden for the bank without any significant returns in terms of long-term deposits, fixed deposits, safe credit arrangements, etc.

Several times in the *Jan Sunwai*, the government functionaries and bankers either evaded the issues/queries raised by NREGS workers or made unrealistic promises. The Junior Engineer, for example, repeatedly

said that he was ignorant of these anomalies and that he would not repeat these mistakes in the future. The hearing should, ideally, have focused on action to be taken against careless officials. The IOB bank official even committed to opening a new branch of IOB when requested by the public; this is an impractical solution because a branch had been recently closed in Siladon because of the lack of business. Such meetings will not be taken seriously by the public if no action is taken on the aberrations exposed.

Surveys and the presence of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra and Jean Dreze in the past year or so seem to have enhanced the implementation quality of the NREGA. The survey (held again after six months), in December 2009 revealed encouraging changes. Through the *gram panchayat*, it was found that MGNREGA worksites had been reactivated and that work had been provided to those who had applied for work. At many worksites, the mandatory facilities (shade, water and first-aid) were in place—a rare sight six months earlier. At one worksite, the investigators even found child-care facilities. In Irud village, for instance, there is a beautiful approach road, 3 km long, reflecting the remarkable motivation of NREGS workers. Verification of electronic Job Cards (downloaded from the Internet) by the NREGA team and a comparison with the Bank passbooks uncovered no evidence of major fraud—another positive finding, compared to the situation that prevailed two years ago when a social audit of NREGS in this area exposed rampant corruption.

These positive experiences, shared by the NREGS team in Khunti, demonstrate the possibility of significant improvements in the implementation of NREGS in Jharkhand through public vigilance.

The discussions revealed the gaps in the villagers' understanding and response towards NREGS implementation. There are shortcomings from the government officials' side as well. The problems faced by villagers relate to lack of awareness and motivation to work. The gaps on the government's part are of three kinds: one relates to the nature of operational difficulty amounting to managing a large number of accounts and making recurrent payments to a great number of beneficiaries on short notice, the second to the lack of technical know-how of land and water activity and the third to the unethical behaviour that they engage in, taking advantage of labourers' ignorance. Clearly, a case for civil society intervention. Just like Pradan intervened with SHGs as well as bankers to make credit available to rural households, there is a transformative role to play here as well. SHGs might be the best platform to do this.

The social audit method addresses only a part of the issues of implementation, mainly of the moral hazard nature, and to some extent creates 'dialoguing', which bridges the issues related to communication gap. The social audit methodology needs to be compounded with (i) awareness generation programme, (ii) understanding operational difficulties of government officials and sensitizing them (iii) helping govt officials and communities to generate better work plans and (iv) community rooted systems to track violations of rights and entitlements.

This *Jan Sunwai* was attended by government officials primarily because Jean Drèze was anchoring the event, and not because the community has a 'say' in what is happening around or can habitually question officials

(though this event surely shed light on what the format for such an exercise should be). This model of social audit is perhaps not sustainable in areas like Khunti! We need to create a model, in which the community itself is prepared to raise its voice, demand rights and entitlements, and (even if it is not heard) question irregularities.

The methodology of social audit can be carried out by SHGs, its clusters and federations. Some quick arithmetic would tell us that, by using this methodology, we may influence NREGS, PDS, health and other social sector programmes, and impact livelihoods in greater numbers than what we do by direct economic activity. However, by no means, should the latter approach be stopped.

Now that we have a better legal framework—MGNREGA, RTI, Forest Rights 2006, PESA, etc.—to claim rights and entitlements, can we have a prototype whereby our SHGs take up the responsibility to track the extent and reach of entitlement to its members? It could be a weekly non-financial documentation by SHGs, like the Regular Meeting Transaction Statements (RMTS, which detail weekly financial transactions). SHGs could then take action on some issues in their meetings, and forward the issues they cannot handle to the cluster bodies. Similarly, recording can be done at the cluster level and pending matters can be relayed to the federation. Federations could be widely networked to many government and non-government agencies and could influence local public representatives by calling them to *Jan Sunwais* and demanding that action be taken by the system to deliver services at the grass roots.



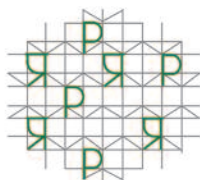
Local innovativeness lends itself freely to technologies introduced from the 'outside'. Here, a trellis has been placed on a *happa* as part of the 5% model, with the aid of bamboo poles and GI wire. Creepers will be allowed to grow on the grill to make up for the paucity of land, and will provide fresh vegetables and gourds for household consumption. The creepers will also shade and conserve water to support small-scale fisheries.



Pradan is a voluntary organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. Pradan works through small teams of professionals in selected villages across eight states. The focus of Pradan's work is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organizing the poor, enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their income and linking them to banks, markets and other economic services. The professionals work directly with the poor, using their knowledge and skills to help remove poverty. NewsReach, Pradan's monthly journal, is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas in the field. NewsReach helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

NewsReach is published by the National Resource Centre for Rural Livelihoods, housed in the Pradan Research and Resource Centre.

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AGA KHAN FOUNDATION

Supported by the Aga Khan Foundation through the European Union co-financed SCALE Programme