

# JMMS CHAKAI: FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION



Coming face to face with rampant corruption in the implementation of the provisions of MGNREGA, the women of Jivan Marshal Mahila Sangh refuse to buckle down to the local oppressors and an apathetic bureaucracy

“*AAPE TINADHABI HASA LA RIYA MASIN thanate bai idiyada, unadhabi aale log to note se khoy bai ruodah* (We won't leave the police station until you forfeit the JCB machine),” Lalita Hansda declared in Santhali to the police officer, and talking about the JCB machine, which was being used to dig soil at the MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) construction site on the boundary of her village.

## BACKGROUND

Jivan Marshal Mahila Sangh (JMMS), Chakai, is a block-level women's collective with representatives

from the Santhal and the non-tribal region. Formed by PRADAN in 2013, its aim is to inculcate the concept of solidarity among the women in the block. Beginning with 1,500 women, there are now approximately 8,000 women in the Federation, spread over 11 *panchayats* of the Chakai block with more than 700 Self Help Groups (SHGs). JMMS acted not only at the social level but also worked on creating awareness about citizenship and empowering women through that knowledge.

PRADAN started working in Chakai block, Jamui district in Bihar in 2010. The work mainly focussed on savings and credit, water and in-situ management, and livelihood activities (agriculture, tasar). It also worked in the NABARD-TDF-WADI

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project for the creation of irrigation facilities in tribal villages. Owing to the availability of irrigation, the agriculture produce of the farmers had increased substantially. However, the scale was very small because only 1,500 households benefitted from the scheme whereas the number of households in Chakai is 23,000.

In a perspective building meeting in JMMS, Federation members shared that there was a huge demand for irrigation infrastructure in the villages. The members asked if there could be more projects like the NABARD-TDF-WADI project. Members were informed that no project could provide such irrigation infrastructure. There was also a discussion on how the villagers could make their own plan for the village and demand work under MGNREGA. The plans could be based on the Integrated Management of Natural Resources (INRM) through which many water harvesting structures could be developed.

The villagers were also informed that MGNREGA was an Act and not a Scheme so they could unite and arrange their irrigation infrastructure as well as employment simultaneously.

The Federation was convinced about the idea and wanted to work through MGNREGA in their block. They, then, planned to survey the area to understand the current benefits that they were receiving from this Act in their area and how they could make improvements.

JMMS representatives surveyed the SHGs and found that the members had no knowledge about the benefits of MGNREGA or about Panchayati Raj. The representatives also visited the MGNREGA office in the block and found that the average mandays in Dulampur and Nouadih *panchayat*s were 2.17 and 2.34, respectively. As many as 145 SHG members from Badgunda village had no job-cards, and 18 job-card holders from Dulampur said that their job-cards were with the local contractor.

In Nouadih *panchayat*, people shared that the *mukhiya* only received the application of in-situ work, that no *gram sabha* had taken place and that nobody had got work. People were not aware of government policies such as MGNREGA or other social security schemes. They also did not attend the *gram sabhas* regularly. This was detrimental to the survival of the existing

institution and to its relationship with the people. After becoming aware of the ground realities, the Federation and the PRADAN team in Chakai realized that if the people's awareness was not awakened and enhanced, development would not happen.

PRADAN and the Federation organized movie shows (*Swaraj and Well Done Abba*) in Badgunda, Dulampur Kolhariya, Naibadih and Kumbadih villages, and discussed the issues depicted in the movies. The Federation seeded the concept of people working together as a unified entity, demanding their rights. Thus far, the system was working as a supply-driven system whereas it needed to be, instead, demand-driven.

After these activities, the SHGs of Badgunda village gathered together and made their Village Development Plan, based on their common needs and presented the issue to Dulampur Gram Panchayat Federation. The Federation approached the *panchayat*, which began an initiative to address the common needs of the people by organizing a campaign at the *panchayat* level. The SHG members, who had already claimed their job-cards, visited the block MGNREGA

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office and had their cards reissued. In the process, 108 villagers got their job-cards.

The Federation worked at the village level to bridge the gap between the villagers and the local government system. Following this, the SHG members were quite motivated; they realized that if they united and worked for their common needs, they would be successful. The Dulampur *gram panchayat*-level Federation started a movement that created a chain reaction. It motivated neighbouring collectives to take action. This collective action will definitely create large-scale changes in the area.

Some of the Federation members of the area participated in the Kaam Mango Abhiyaan, Katihar (Bihar). It gave them an

exposure to MGNREGA and how to demand their rights under the Act. Further, they planned to build a team of such people, who had had some training in MGNREGA and had collaborated with GPLFs, so that it could create awareness among the people of the *panchayats*.

The Dulampur GPLF organized the first Rojgar Mela on 22 August 2014, and people from all the villages participated and enquired about how to get a job-card and demand work. The villagers submitted 316 job-card applications and 51 work demand forms; they received acknowledgements for the same. However, even after 15 days, the villagers received no job-cards. Seeing the rule violation, the Dulampur GPLF decided to visit the Programme Officer (PO) of MGNREGA in Chakai block, to

talk about the system and not specifically about the job-cards.

The women's initiative of visiting the MGNREGA office was supported by their husbands and other villagers. On 10 September 2014, around 60 women went to the block office and placed their agenda peacefully before the PO, Mr Sushil Kumar. The PO promised to issue all the job-cards within the next 10 days. The incident was also reported in the Hindi newspaper '*Hindustan*'. Ten days passed; the villagers did not get their job-cards. The SHG members complained to the Block Development Officer (BDO), Chakai, and the District Magistrate (DM), Jamui, but no action was taken. The *mukhiya's* explanation about lack of labour was easily accepted by the administration. The villagers did not get what they had demanded.

#### **MGNREGA SAYS:**

- Rural families have a right to 100 days of employment in a year.
- For getting employment, the family needs to apply for a job-card.
- The job-card will be provided within 15 days of application.
- Once a family gets a job-card, they are entitled to demand work any time in a year.
- When the demand for work is made by a worker, it is the responsibility of the *panchayat* or MGNREGA functionaries to provide work within 15 days of the demand.
- If work is not provided within 15 days, the worker is entitled for an unemployment allowance.
- On completion of the work, the worker has to be paid within 15 days. Otherwise, the worker is entitled to a compensation for delayed payment.

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One day, while members were being trained on how to surf the MGNREGA website, they found that job-card holders' accounts in their names had been opened in the Bank of India, Dumri, Sono block, located almost 90 km away from Dulampur and Nauadih *panchayats*

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The block officials continued to dilly-dally. The SHG members were frustrated and did not know how to claim their rights.

One day, while members were being trained on how to surf the MGNREGA website, they found that job-card holders' accounts in their names had been opened in the Bank of India, Dumri, Sono block, located almost 90 km away from Dulampur and Nauadih *panchayats*, whereas, there was a Grameen Bank (Kiyajori) and

Post Office (Dulampur), located within 5 km, and many banks located in their own block, only 20 km away. The trainers and the GP Federation members further searched the MGNREGA website and got to know that these accounts had money received as remuneration for work done. They then found that the money from all these accounts was withdrawn after a few days and the accounts were empty. None of the account holders was aware that they had bank accounts and

none of them had done any work under MGNREGA either.

They were puzzled. If the *mukhiya* had said that there was no work happening in the area, how were the structures being made and how was money being added and withdrawn from their accounts? Who had opened those accounts? Nobody had a clue. Both the GPLFs (Dulampur and Nauadih) informed all the account holders about the corruption taking place. The Federation members,



**Members of JMMS with the confiscated JCB Machine**

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along with the account holders visited the Bank of India, Dumri, Sono block, and asked the Bank Manager about their accounts.

Surajmuni Murmu (GPLF representative) asked the Bank Manager, “*Ki dada ji, tab hum logon ke paiswa kaun nikalko?* (Sir, who has withdrawn our money)?” The Manager clarified that those accounts were opened by the Customer Service Point (CSP) of the Chakai area and he had no information about them. He told them that the accounts were mostly operated by the CSP, Panchayat Rojgar Sewak of Chakai and other staff of the Panchayati Raj Institution.

After this discussion with the Bank Manager, all the women went to the MGNREGA office in Chakai and lodged a complaint. Nothing happened. No initiative was taken by the government officials of the block. The women even met the DM, Jamui, but nothing happened.

The people were disappointed and disturbed for the next two years. And on the night of 15 February 2017, when they heard the mechanical sound of the JCB machine roaring in the field of Badgunda, their disappointment exploded into anger. A pond was being constructed in Dhab

Tola. The construction was sanctioned by MGNREGA (ढाब में मोरजोर आहार का निर्माण – 0550002020/WC/20177347 – 2015-2016), to be constructed by manual workers. Instead of giving employment to MGNREGA card holders, the *mukhiya* of Dulampur was using a JCB machine and tractors to construct the pond in the middle of the night.

This action by the local authorities became a trigger for the anger and frustration of the people in the area. When the villagers came forward to stop the work, the *mukhiya* called the police and tried to threaten the villagers. The villagers immediately called the JMMS representative and sought their help.

The next morning, the women from JMMS and other women gathered at the construction site to oppose the construction. One of the Federation representatives, Fatima Biwi stood on a bucket of the JCB and said, “*Gari chalana hain to pehle mere upar chalo.* (If you want to continue the work, first you have to run the JCB over me).” The leaders of JMMS took control of the JCB machine and demanded that the police act immediately. The women also called the DM of Jamui and even informed him through

WhatsApp. The *mukhiya* then apologized to the villagers and asked for a compromise, which the villagers refused.

The *mukhiya* said, “*Is baar ke liye didi maaf kar do, haat jorte hain, aur naa karbo.*” (I beg you to forgive me this time, I will never do this again). When no one from the administration gave any satisfactory response till the evening of 16 February, the women and other villagers decided to take the JCB machine to the police station in Chakai on their own. The *mukhiya*, with the help of his goons, tried to stop the JCB machine, multiple times. The goons of local *mukhiya* came and threatened the villagers, including the children, of dire consequences.

The women informed the police station and the DM of Jamui of the threats. They also informed the nearby Gajhi *panchayat's* Federation members. Within one hour, all the Federation members of Gajhi *panchayat* came to their support and went with them to the nearby Binjha village, where almost 200 women were waiting to express solidarity with them.

After repeated phone calls to the police station and the DM of Jamui, and waiting for more than two hours, a police van came



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“It is not power that corrupts, but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it,”

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and accompanied the women with the JCB machine till Chakai police station. The SHO at Chakai agreed to give them a receipt of their complaint but without the stamp of the police station. And he absolutely refused to give any receipt for the JCB machine they had brought to the police station.

The 150 women and villagers, who went to the police station, were so scared of the threats that they decided to spend the night in Chakai. Surajmuni Murmu, Chhutki Hembhram and Sushita Soren continuously reassured the women that all women of Jivan Marshal are together and no one can do any harm to them. Anisha Devi firmly said, “*Uh 10–12 log kitna dabangai dikhayega, humlog hazargo didi bhi saath hain.* (These 15–20 goons cannot withstand the strength of thousands of women who are together).”

No threat could shake the faith that these women had developed in themselves. The name Jivan Marshal Mahila Sangh became the identity of all the women protesting outside the police station. It was like the Swaraj Abhiyan of this era, diffusing all the opposition that came from the corrupt. They didn’t know

about the fight for independence and had no idea about freedom fighters but they were behaving like freedom fighters, fighting corruption and for their rights. They returned to their village and were not subjected to any violence.

The *mukhiya* and the block officers used the political mileage they had to get away in this case. After one month, the JCB machine was released without the Federation being informed. Due to lack of funds, the Federation could not afford any legal action; this event, however, gave them confidence and strength. Radhiya Devi (Federation representative) smiled and said, “*Barbar nehi chhorto, humni abhi sab samajhto.* (Now we have the knowledge, so won’t let go again).”

The sight of a JCB in Chakai is now rare. If and when a JCB is spotted, the alert villagers question its presence. What was earlier going on uninhibited in the area is now challenged; the corrupt *mukhiya* and his associates live under a cloud of fear and doubt. The JCB in this story is the symbol of corruption and oppression. JMMS, by acting courageously, has managed to roll

the powerful machine back and has instilled fear in the corrupt intentions of the local officials.

“It is not power that corrupts, but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it,” says Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese pro-democracy leader, in her book *Freedom from Fear*.

The women of the Federation have proved this through their actions. The fight has begun and these women will uphold the flag against corruption in Chakai. Following this incident, the work by the JCB machine was stopped in every *panchayat*. The BDO, Chakai, now directly handles JMMS issues concerning MGNREGA. Panchayati Raj Representatives have begun to treat Federation members with respect. There is a change in the hegemonic thought that women are not capable of handling such socio-political issues. In the words of the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, “Neither the chains of dictatorship nor the fetters of oppression can keep down the forces of freedom for long.”

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