

# Right to Food: Women Fight Back

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*Showing remarkable persistence and spirit, the women of Jhikra panchayat, in a never-say-die attitude, continued a ten-month-long struggle to find a solution to the corrupt practices of local PDS dealers and a hand-in-glove administration, to finally be rewarded with access to food that is legally and rightfully theirs...*

## INTRODUCTION

It was an unusual day on the Dumka Pakur highway on a hot, sunny afternoon. One hundred SHG members of Jhikra *panchayat* of Kathikund were sitting silently on the road next to the police station, blocking the highway. The police were there too, threatening to shoot them. The women, undeterred by the threats, remained firm, refusing to step back.

An hour later, the scene changed. The media arrived and a crowd gathered, wanting to know why the women were sitting on the road in the scorching heat. The policemen, who had been pointing the guns at the women, backed off; officers from the police station came to the women and offered to talk on the women's terms and conditions.

For months, the women had been seeking action against the corrupt Public Distribution System (PDS) dealers but all their attempts had failed; as a last resort, they had come to protest at the police station. It was a test of their belief in group strength. And they proved the magic of it. They had heard of the story of how an individual stick could be broken, but a bundle of sticks would be difficult to break. All their lives, these women had been discriminated against in their homes, in their families and in their communities. That day, however, they recognized their strength and shone together.

## BACKGROUND

In Kathikund block of Dumka district, malpractices existed in all the 55 PDS shops. There were constant complaints that the distributors cut down the measure of rations allotted for a family, charged high prices for subsidized rice and kerosene oil, and took signatures for the allotted quantity illegally but gave the cardholders less than what was recorded. There was no proper or transparent measuring system. Ration was distributed using tin containers, the capacity of which was not clear. Dealers hoarded large amounts of rice and kerosene oil, which they distributed at high prices to non-cardholders. There were many murmurs about the widespread irregularities in all the PDS shops in Kathikund. But the corrupt PDS dealers were little affected by these rumblings.

Those who protested did not have enough power to effect change in these malpractices because the general public was largely ignorant about their entitlements. There was great need to collectivize these voices and generate discussions on this issue on a regular basis and to confront the PDS dealers, who were hand in glove with each other and were making huge profits. The beneficiaries of these corrupt practices also included people from the administration. There were claims that PRI members, *panchayat mukhiya*, *panchayat sachiv*, officials from the block, Marketing Officer (MO) and the Ladies Extension Officer (LEO) encouraged such practices because all of them received a share of the profits. The dealers were not accountable or answerable to anyone and there were few people who dared to confront them. This gave the dealers more confidence and they bullied the people.

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Agriculture in the area is rain-fed; the land is undulating and, thus, very little land is available for agriculture. In such conditions, farmers can only cultivate crops and grains that hardly last 6 to 8 months, creating food insecurity for the rest of the year. This has led to increased dependency on the PDS, which is in a pathetic state. The poor and almost negligible transport system in this hilly, remote and inaccessible forest fringe area has only added to the miseries of the people.

The people, therefore, have had to satisfy themselves with what is being provided to them by PDS dealers and distributors.

There are 10 SHGs in Jhikra village and six SHGs in the adjacent village of Lakrapahari. Although SHGs have existed in the village for a while, their role has only been limited to savings and credit. Awareness about village issues is minimal. Although an SHG with 10 to 20 members is large enough to identify the problems of the community and raise its voice on issues, it needs support to address its concerns, generate action and arrive at solutions.

The SHGs of these villages are organized into a bigger forum called the Lilanti Gram Sangathan (Village Organization, VO), which is the second tier of women's institutions at the village level. Lilanti Gram Sangathan in Jhikra was formed in 2014, comprising 155 members from 10 SHGs. Four members from each SHG participated in the VO meeting and discussed issues of their respective SHGs. The larger issues of the village were also discussed in this forum. However, the VO had, so far, not taken any concrete steps to solve the issues raised in the meetings.

Members of Lilanti Gram Sangathan in Jhikra attended a rights-based workshop called the 'Jan Ghoshna Patra' organized by Khushali Mahila Sangh in Saraiyahat block of Dumka district. The basic objective of this workshop was to set up a forum to advocate for economic, social and cultural rights of people across the state and to try to get these points included in the political agenda of the state. The event was attended by activist John Dreze and Mr Balram.

The exposure visit acted as an eye-opener for the members of Lilanti Gram Sangathan. They became aware of what their entitlements were in terms of food security, distribution of mid-day meals in schools, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), PDS, social security pension, Right to Food, and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA). Members could relate to the information easily because the issues were the same as in their own villages. They were gifted a book called *Apna Adhikar Jano*. This gave them valuable information and, more importantly, a roadmap to plan their engagements around their rights.

Silvanti Besra, a member of the Sirmai Epil Mahila Mandal and a member of the Adhikar Sub-committee of Lilanti VO shares, "We attended the Jan Ghoshna Patra event, where we discussed issues of the *aanganwadis*, mid-day meals, PDS, MGNREGA, and pension. We learned that we, the tribals of Santhal Pargana, had certain basic rights and entitlements."

After the event, a discussion about the proceedings was held at the Lilanti VO meeting in December 2014. The inspired members chalked out an action plan in January

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2015. The plan was to visit public service institutions such as schools to talk with the teachers regarding the functioning of the school, the attendance and the mid-day meals; the *aanganwadi* to become familiar with the services provided and its regularity; the PDS shops to check whether these were functioning properly or not and to ask about the entitlements of the people. The women decided to visit all such government

institutions in the periphery of their village and hold a dialogue with the persons responsible for the issues they faced. The purpose of the visits was to understand their entitlements, to check the functioning of these institutions and to extend help to sort out any problem that existed.

The members of Adhikar Samiti in Lilanti VO, which included Silvanti didi, Premshila Hembram, Komishila Marandi, visited the PDS shop and asked some basic questions such as, "How many cardholders are there under this PDS shop? How many cardholders get regular benefit? On what day is the PDS shop open? Does it follow government norms? What is the subsidized price of rations that cardholders are paying? How is the ration measured? What is the exact measure allotted to different people belonging to the various social categories such as Below Poverty Line (BPL), Antyodaya, primitive tribes, etc.?" They also questioned why, at times, the correct amount of ration was not being distributed and whether the women could collectively help the dealer sort out the issue.

The dealer did not respond to their questions. When questioned repeatedly, he mocked them saying, "*Badi laat saahab ban kar aayi ho tum log, jao jakar MO se jankari lo, lena hai to* (You

have come here like officers: go ask the Marketing Officer for the information, if you want to)."

But this did not discourage the women from persisting. In fact, they increased the number of visits to his shop. This irritated the dealer.

Premshila *didid* shares, "When we asked him to give us the details of the cardholders and asked how much ration they were getting, the dealer became very irritated and told us to ask the individual families or go to the block for the answers to these questions."

The members of the SHG had heard that this dealer was not supplying rice in the correct quantity and that he was distributing fewer rations at higher prices. He was distributing 25 kg of rice at Rs 30 to BPL families and 30 kg at Rs 35 to Antyodaya whereas the correct ration for rice was 31.5 kg at Re 1 per kg for BPL families and 35 kg of rice at Re 1 for Antyodaya families. Thus, he was cutting down 5 kg each from every beneficiary. The women demanded that he provide the correct quantity of rations at the correct weight and price to all cardholders. They told him that they had not come for a fight and just needed his co-operation. But he was not willing to co-operate and said that they could take their complaint to anyone but he would not give any information.

Premshila adds, "He was very confident and said in a sarcastic way that we could go to any place; he had money circulated everywhere so he need not worry about the consequences." This incident fuelled the movement. The women, then, visited the next village.

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Along with the other women, they visited Kairasol village, where they found that there too rice was being measured in a container, the quantity of which was not known. The dealer habitually gave approximately 5 kg less rice to everyone. They went to the villagers and asked many cardholders not to accept the rice if it were not measured correctly. They went to the PDS shop on the day of the distribution. The dealer told them, "You have come to enquire about the measure. You can check it but if you do not find any discrepancy in the weight, I will take the equivalent amount of rice from each household."

Seeing that the villagers could not afford food other than from the dealer, the women decided to find a way to counter this malpractice. The dealers, however, were enraged about being questioned and started fighting with one of the group members (finding her alone). All the members rushed to help her. They heard the dealer using very bad language and demanding that all the villagers sign the register in which he had written the inflated amounts of rice. When one of the SHG members refused to sign, he scolded and insulted her. The other women came to her support and refused to sign the register. Seeing so many women, he left threatening to take revenge.

The women took the issue up with their *upmukhiya* Emanuel Murmu, who did not take any action. He just gave date after date, to hear the issue. This incident shook the women's belief in PDS and the local authority. They were abused and challenged when they raised their voices against this corruption. At the same time, this incident strengthened their

will to fight injustice and inspired them to take a pledge to do whatever they could. This was an opportunity to put to test whatever they had learned till now about self-help and collective strength.

Komisila *didi*, an SHG member, said, "We decided that we would go to the block headquarters, which is 37 km away from our village. There is no transport facility to get there. But nothing could stop us from reaching there, even if we had to walk. Also, the dealer had challenged us to go to the block, and we wanted to take him up on his challenge."

### MASS-LEVEL ACTION

The members of various SHGs in Jhikra told us that the struggle that started in January continued for the whole month. They said, "We collected money from all the SHG members of our village, booked a vehicle and went to meet the Block Development Officer (BDO). There were 70 SHG members who went to the block. We pushed ourselves inside the chamber of the BDO; the officer asked us who we were and what we had come for in such huge numbers. We told him we are having problems with PDS in our village, about how the dealer had misbehaved with us and how he had rebuked us. We, then, asked the BDO to tell us how much ration we were entitled to get because the dealer was not willing to share the details with us. The BDO seemed afraid and wanted to know who we were and who had sent us. We explained that we had come to complain and that no one had sent us. He then asked us to give him the complaint in writing, signed by all the cardholders. We asked for an appointment with the BDO so as to submit our complaint and were asked us to meet him on the 10th of February. Until then, no action was taken."

"Once again, 90 to 100 SHG members booked a vehicle and went early in the morning to the block office (BO). The BDO was not in the office in the morning and we sat in the veranda in front of his cabin. The staff of the block came and questioned us about our purpose. They asked us to give our problem in writing and not to make a scene there. But we did not move. We had also called the reporters of *Dainik Jagran* and *Hindustan*, who advised us to wait till the BDO came and not to leave without meeting him. After some time, the Ladies Extension officer (LEO) came and listened to our problem. We told her that the block office was not looking into our problems, and that although the dealers were allotted by the BO, it did not supervise their work. The LEO assured us that she would look into the matter. But we refused; we were determined to meet the BDO. When the BDO came in the afternoon, we gave him the application and took the receipt. We asked the BDO what action would be taken. He told us that he would send the enquiry within one month. We went back with an assurance from the BDO. In the meantime, the news reached the *pramukh* and the *mukhiya*, who were also told by the administration to look into the matter, but nothing happened."

Two months passed but no action was taken. The women again went to the BDO in March. He told them that he would definitely take action this time. Again, nothing happened. The members, however, did not give up. They went to meet the BDO again and were determined to get some concrete answers from him. They asked him why he had been assuring them and yet had done nothing in the matter. In the village, the dealer and the others had started mocking the SHG members and the people were beginning to think that nothing could change. The dealer was now

becoming more corrupt and told the women, "Go to the BDO. He will give you ration." The BDO called up the MO, asked him about the matter and told him to take action.

Silvanti *didì* said, "It was now mid-March. Three months had passed; we had made several visits to the BO. It seemed to us that somehow the BDO was unable to resolve the issue or was incapable of doing so. The next place to expect some action was the police station. But a mere two or three people going to the police station would not have made a difference. Around 100 of us villagers, including men and women, again booked a small bus and headed to the police station. Since everyone was not allowed to enter, a few of us went inside. The dealers of two villages Jhikra and Kairasol were also present there. We narrated all our complaints once again. The policemen questioned the dealers about the quantity of rice being distributed. The dealers lied denying all allegations. The villagers began shouting when they heard this. The dealer, then, talked to the Officer-in-charge of the police station and several rounds of negotiations started. Some local leaders joined the negotiations, to cash in on the situation. No one seemed to be talking on our behalf. The dealers took the In-charge of the police station aside and explained to him that it was not possible to disburse the correct measure; that the material was being wasted in transportation; and that they do not get any benefit. The police officer told us to negotiate with the dealer and sort out the matter with him. But this was not at all acceptable to us. We could not lose the battle so easily. We demanded the correct measure, provisioned by the government, be distributed but the Officer In-charge did not listen and told us to accept the deal because we had no other option. Seeing that no acceptable solution was

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being offered, we walked out of police station."

"All our attempts to move the administration and the law had failed. We were mocked at and cheated, as if there was no law in the land and that everything was fake and false. The fervour

and zeal to move the police station with our collective strength had been so high that we had not taken a drop of water since the morning. When we failed, all the strength seemed to drain out of us and we felt very miserable. We left the police station and as we were crossing the highway, we realized that even the heavy vehicles and trucks had to stop so that our crowd could cross the road. Seeing the trucks, standing and waiting, reminded us that even when we feel low and discouraged, our numbers always have the strength to cause an impact. It was time to test our strength. We all stopped crossing the road and sat down in the scorching heat, on the burning ground.

Everything around us came to a standstill and all eyes were on us. The traffic was blocked. There were many military vehicles waiting to enter the city, but we had blocked their way also. The para-military in uniform came with guns to force us away and to clear the path. But we did not move. It was a testing time; they pushed us with their rifles and even threatened to shoot us. The next moment we were surrounded by a crowd and the media. Everyone wanted to know what the matter was. We stood firm. In an hour or so, all the police station staff came out, trying to bully us. But soon, they understood that the situation was not so easy to control. They asked us why we were blocking the road. We replied that it was because they were unwilling to look for a solution to our problem and, therefore, we were left with no choice but to protest. They immediately began giving us assurances that



they would make the dealers use the correct measure. It was matter of shame for them that the road in front of the police station was blocked and they could not clear the way. They requested us to come to the police station. We demanded that the dealers give it to us in writing that they would distribute rations honestly. The dealers admitted in writing that they had been giving wrong quantities earlier but, henceforth, they would give the correct measure, that is, 35 kg to Antyodaya families and 32 kg to BPL families. The written and signed document was given to us with the assurance that if this failed, strict action would be taken against the dealers. We came back rejoicing in victory, satisfied that finally our demands would be met and that our fight would be over."

### NO END TO PROBLEMS

However, our struggle did not end there. Premshila *didi* shares, "The dealer in Kairasol village distributed the correct measure of ration for the next two months after the incident at the police station. Soon, however, the dealers of Jhikra and the other places contacted him and asked him why he was distributing the correct measure, and that if he continued this practice all the other dealers in the block would also be forced to do so and they would not be able to make large profits out of PDS. In the face of such consistent pressure, the Kairasol dealer resumed his corrupt practices. The problem was not so simple that it could be handled at the block level and, therefore, we went to the district headquarters to meet the District Collector (DC). We were told to come on the day when the DC met the general public, which we did. We submitted our complaint letter, enclosing photocopies of our application to the BDO, the CO and the

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Police Station, as well as the paper cuttings of all the events. The Collector talked to us and said that he would enquire into the situation. He also added that from July 2015, the new distribution system of 5 kg of

rice per member of the family would come into force; thus, we should not drag this issue. His answers were not satisfactory but we had no option but to go back."

### TRYING A DIFFERENT ROUTE

The members of the SHGs knocked at every possible door, to resolve their problem but there was no change in the situation. Silvanti *didi* says, "Although we were being continuously put down wherever we went, we were ready to go to any place and reach all levels of the administration with our applications and complaints. Our belief, our strength and our hopes were still alive. We had heard about the Right to Food Campaign in Ranchi from PRADAN *dada* (professional working in PRADAN). He provided us with the numbers of activists such as Balram (Advisor to the Supreme Court in the Right to Food Case) and other people active in this campaign. We talked to them, and they asked us to send all the copies of our applications and paper cuttings to Ranchi. This was the first time that we heard of the word 'Internet' and learned that there was a way in which documents can also be sent to far-off places without being posted! With the help of PRADAN *dada*, all the documents were sent by Internet to Mr Balram. He then told us that he would visit Kathikund. He said that he would give us a date on which all the SHG members should assemble for a *Jan Sunwai* (Public Hearing) in the village. Mr. Balram said that he would convince the state food minister or the DC/ SDO of the district to attend the *Jan Sunwai*."

## REGULAR FOLLOW-UP

"Days passed," Salvanti *didisaid*, "and it was the beginning of August. Nothing had happened and the dealer again mocked us saying he had distributed money even in Ranchi. We called up the people in the Right to Food campaign in Ranchi regularly. Mr. Balram informed us that he

was reminding the DC in Dumka regularly of the issue. Twice we were given dates when he would be coming to meet the villagers; twice he did not come because the government officials were unwilling or unavailable to visit the village. As time passed, we were not sure whether we would get any support from Ranchi through the Right to Food campaign.

"It was early September, when one of the representatives from Right to Food, Dhiraj, visited us and talked to us. We explained all our problems and narrated our story. He asked for some time so that he could check the status of the complaint at the district and block levels. He then met with the BDO at the BO. The BDO claimed that he had done his investigations and his enquiry team had found no discrepancy in the distribution. According to him, some cunning women of the village were conspiring against the dealer, to take his place. Mr Dhiraj, then, went to the District Supply Officer (DSO), who heads several blocks in the district and was responsible for distribution of rations through PDS and *aanganwadis*. The officer was very co-operative and was astonished to hear of such corruption under his nose. He promised to take action as soon as a written complaint was provided to him. The SHG members then approached the DSO, giving him the complaint in writing and attaching all the earlier applications. They also marked a copy to the Advisor, Supreme Court, Right to Food Case, Ranchi."

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For the first time, the villagers realized that it was important to mark a copy to the relevant stakeholders when writing an application, so that the follow-up of the application could be done. They got a receipt for the application from the DSO and gave it to the representative of the Right to Food campaign. The

SHG members recalled, "This time, it seemed that something concrete had been done. But, we did not have any great expectations after so many failures. We just waited."

Yamni Devi, one of the members from Jhikra VO, says, "It was in October 2015 that we noticed that the ration was not being distributed by the earlier dealers and that the PDS shop was not being run by them. The same happened the next month too. We had some signals but no direct confirmation of any action. Slowly, the news spread all over the block that the two miscreant dealers had been taken off their duties, and their PDS shop registration had been cancelled."

## LEARNINGS

The struggle lasted for 10 long months. The women agreed that the culprit was given the right judgement but there was little excitement over their victory. Their expressions showed they were not at all astonished by their victory because they had a firm belief that they would one day win the battle, and their collective and continuous efforts would definitely bear fruit. It was not the victory but the fight they fought together that gave them happiness and satisfaction, and a sense that they had achieved something. They say that they are now hearing from all over the Federation and from various places that they have done a wonderful job. The SHG members say that they just stood up for their Right to Food and raised



their voice against the insult and disrespect to womanhood. They were asked, in one of the exposure meetings, where they had got the strength to fight. They replied that the abusive tone that the dealer had adopted with them had ignited a fire within them and they had become determined to show him what women could do. The knowledge they gathered in the process helped them, and they are now sure of how to handle similar situations. This movement had turned out to be a great learning for other village-level organizations, which discussed their issues on a monthly basis. It provided them a role model. They had a clear and successful model of a public service grievance redressal mechanism. The actions of the women can now be categorized into a step-wise process, which includes:

- A. Dialoguing with the people connected with the problem, without fighting.
- B. Submitting signed applications at each level, starting from the village, *panchayat*, block, district and state.
- C. Attaching copies of all efforts made, all applications submitted at the lower levels, and paper cuttings of all the action at all levels.
- D. Submitting applications in a smarter way by copying it to the higher authorities and writing the word 'COPY TO:' in the end.
- E. Increasing the knowledge base by keeping the media into the loop. This is the best way to make the problem known to everyone and to create pressure.
- F. Taking a receipt of all applications at every level.

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- G. Following-up regularly by calling over the phone and meeting officials.
- H. Having more than one single leader for the movement so that people are not cornered.

- I. Approaching the correct and relevant levels of the departments for the concerned issue.

### SUCCESS REPLICATED

The structured protest set an example for the locals and guided one such VO in Kathikund. The VO in Budhidangall village named Naya Jiwan Mahila Gram Sangathan, comprising 12 SHG groups of the Bichhiyapahari *panchayat* started monitoring an *aanganwadi*, which was not functional. When the issue was not resolved by talking to the *sevika* of the *aanganwadi*, the whole village signed an application and complained about its poor condition and sent it to the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) by following the proper process. The CDPO was not immediately available; they submitted the application signed by 155 members from three villages. The BDO responded by advising the villagers to elect a new *sevika*. The villagers completed their responsibility of electing the new *sevika* by holding a meeting of the *gram sabha*, and informed the CDPO. The new *sevika* is now serving as an *aanganwadi* worker and running the institution as per her job requirements. The members of the VO, who belong to Adhikar Samiti, are responsible for monitoring the working of these institutions and helping solve village-level issues.

## CONCLUSION

The women in Jhikra may have reached a milestone in their journey in the SHG and the VO but many challenges remain. The new ration card has now been introduced all over Jharkhand by the government and a new distribution system is also functional. There are many families at many places, however, that have not yet received their new ration cards. Many SHG members have not got their ration cards and their names are missing in the survey list. The missing names are not a mere co-incidence. This may have come about as retaliation to the mass action of SHG members of Jhikra against PDS dealers. People in the BO and the field (such as PRI members and block officials), who had been benefitting by getting

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a share from the old corrupt system, may be responsible for the omission of the names. Nonetheless, the picture is changing rapidly; members of the SHG are now fighting neck-to-neck with competitors in the *panchayat* election and are registering their presence in the public administration too as *mukhiyas* and Ward Members. They have the confidence now to enter the mainstream without any hesitation. They do not waste time now with the agents and brokers; instead they talk directly to the officers such as the BDO and the CO. Today, the story of the women from Jhikra is being shared in various trainings of VOs across Kathikund and at Federations too, thereby helping women to recognize their own potential.