

A Tale of an Untold Fight

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Challenging the lobbies of contractors, influential people and others, to break the nexus around MGNREGA, the women's collectives of Barethinbahara persevere, amid great opposition and political muscle, to eventually get the village to work together for its common good and welfare

Ever since its inception in 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has always been the subject of debate over its ineffectiveness, mostly because of rampant corruption in the system. In 2014, the Scheme was publically denounced by the central government and there was serious talk of curtailing the budget for MGNREGA. One of the major arguments raised against it was that MGNREGA had become an inefficient Act and that people were not demanding work from it because the wage rate was much higher in the market and also because the needs of rural India were changing.

However, amidst all these controversies, the women's collectives of Barethinbahara village of Bhansuli *panchayat*, Narharpur block, Chhattisgarh, challenged the lobbies of contractors, influential people and others, to break the nexus around MGNREGA. What became clear from their struggle was that the people need MGNREGA not only as a source of work as labourers but also to build quality assets to increase their livelihood portfolios; they want equal opportunities for poorer families to be able to create their asset base.

Barethinbahara is a backward village. More than one-third of the Narharpur block is covered with forest. Barethinbahara is 15 km from the block headquarters and 46 km from the district headquarters in Kanker. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood and the per capita land-holding of the village is about 2.5 acres with 28 per cent of the households (HHs) having scattered land-holding of less than 2.5 acres. Only 30 per cent of the families manage to have round-the-year food sufficiency in the village.

The rich forest surroundings, however, provide the HHs the second major source of livelihood from Minor Forest Produce (MFP) collection. People also depend on the forest for fuel wood. Migration, after the harvesting of the crop, to the plains of Chhattisgarh is high to sustain family needs and aspirations. Very few irrigation facilities, the undulating land, low productivity, soil run-off and erratic rainfall make these villagers very vulnerable.

In 2014, the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) drafted a Project for the convergence of MGNREGS and National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), with an objective to synergize the functioning of both, so as to substantially enhance the quality of assets being created and, thereby, ensuring better sustainability of rural livelihoods

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After the launch of the CFT-NRLM Convergence Project and under the guidelines specified by MoRD, PRADAN and the members of the women's collectives got a formal space to participate in the MGNREGA programme. Through the CFT/Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) projects, MGNREGA assets such as farm ponds, Azolla tanks, poultry-sheds and cow-sheds were linked to the Department of Animal Husbandry, the Chhattisgarh State Renewable

Energy Development Agency (CREDA) and the Department of Agriculture for income generation activities, drudgery reduction, and productivity enhancement of the villagers. The villagers were, therefore, able to associate with these stakeholders. This provided an opportunity to the community to do the work it envisaged. The villagers were able to focus on quality and needs-based assets creation by planning, monitoring and participating in the process in a more organized manner.

PRADAN initiated a process in Barethinbahara and nearby villages to facilitate a change in the conditions of the disadvantaged communities, especially women. The initiatives would ensure access to and control over improved production technologies and practices. The first step was to form a village-level organization for grass-roots decision-making, with emphasis on women's participation. Regular visits, discussions, rapport-building and screening of video shows in the community helped form seven Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the village. This brought 80 per cent of the HHs under one umbrella. Continuous engagement and trainings (membership training, group process training, visioning exercises, basic accounts maintenance and bank linkage training), helped SHG members and other community members to appreciate and believe in individual, as well as collective, strength.

The second step was to understand the problems of the village and to map out the probable solutions for these problems. After discussions, field visits and interactions with SHG members, it was understood that, round-the-year food sufficiency was the major challenge in the village. This stemmed

from low production and low productivity of the land, which, in turn, were largely due to lack of irrigation options, the undulating land pattern and low residual moisture.

MGNREGA provides for strategic intervention to resolve these issues. It directly promises creation of assets (on individual as well as collective lands) and gives wages to the villagers for working to create these assets in the village. Discussions were initiated in the village about how the INRM-based planning of the village could be carried out and how MGNREGA could support that plan. PRADAN, as the CFT, helped the community to understand its resources (land/water, labour, livestock and forests), its potential and how these were inter-linked. PRADAN helped to build the capacity of Community Resource Persons (CRPs), *gram panchayat* functionaries and SHG members on how the participatory plan of Natural Resource Management (NRM) worked.

Awareness was generated in the community through mass campaigning at the village level, and exposure visits to already developed areas for *panchayat* representatives, villagers and SHG members. Community meetings were held to create awareness about the CFT Project guidelines, and in-house knowledge building workshops were also organized.

The women's collectives provided strong leadership in IPPE. With the help of CRPs, SHG members prepared a social and resource map of the village and became actively involved in site selection, and technical supervision of activities such as constructing water harvesting structures and supervising soil conservation measures. With the help of the elderly and other villagers, resource mapping was done to assess

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the available natural resources. Resource mapping helped the community understand the physical resources in the village.

From the resource map, an up-land patch was selected for a transact walk and for INRM treatment. Taking into account the slope and continuity (INRM-based), a plan was made, with the help of CFT members and

the Technical Assistant, and presented before everyone in the village. A seasonality mapping was also done, in order to estimate the work openings in the *panchayat* versus the labour availability in the community. There was a special focus on involving women in the work.

Earlier, the process was different. All the decisions, then, were taken by the cartel group (*panch* and some government officials) and the implementation was monopolized. There was no patch selection nor were there any field visits or transact walks. Plans came to the *panchayat* from different patches of the village and were forwarded to the block without any discussion by the villagers. The villagers were not even aware about the work sanctioned or who the beneficiaries were for that financial year. They usually came to know about it while working at the worksites. No one was able to challenge those systems and women were more vulnerable due to the social structure. Transparency was low at the *panchayat* level and only some *panchayat* members took the decision to implement the MGNREGA programme. In the process, they took bribes from the tribal community for planning assets and for sanctioning them under MGNREGA.

According to Category IV of MGNREGA, tribals are entitled to have individual assets (ponds, wells, land-levelling, cow-sheds, NADEP, etc.) from the Scheme without any

charge. However, in the name of documentation, the tribals were asked to submit an average of Rs 300 to 1,000 per person to the *panchayat* to prepare their file for MGNREGA work. They were not given a receipt that their file had been submitted and also there was no guarantee that the file would go to the block for approval.

The tribals also had to bribe the officials (*sarpanch*, *gram rozgar sahayak*—GRS, Technical Assistant—TA) to approve the plans within the same financial year. The rate of the bribe was fixed at 2 per cent of the work sanctioned. Moreover, a powerful person's plans were sanctioned every year whereas a marginalized, poor person's files were lost in the offices. If the work was sanctioned, it usually did not pertain to the watershed approach. Assets created under MGNREGA could also not be utilized optimally due to the kind of assets created and, sometimes, because of the sporadic construction.

Over time, and after continuous involvement with the *panchayat*, through meetings and trainings and simultaneously conducting awareness activities with SHGs, an environment was created at the grass roots in which agencies could work together, to identify the bottlenecks that existed in the planning and implementation of the MGNREGA programme. Action was then taken to bring transparency and equity in the village.

The major bottlenecks identified by the SHGs were:

1. The planning of works was not participatory and was not discussed in the *gram sabha*.

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A group of four or five (usually the *panch*-Ward members) made a resolution on behalf of the *panachyat* and approved the work and sent it to the block for further action.

2. Some influential people had their plans sanctioned every year by improper means whereas many people in need were excluded, even after submission of all valid documents.
3. Payments were not regular. The major reasons for this were discrepancies in the account numbers of the beneficiaries and delays in the submission of muster

rolls. The delay in payments varied from one month to six months. In some cases, payment was delayed for more than one year. This happened because the Account number of the person was not registered in the MIS, and the Mates entered it in the muster roll manually, which led to errors. Approximately 30 to 40 per cent of the problems in payments were due to wrong Account numbers, leading to the whole fund transfer order (FTO) being rejected.

Having experienced all these hurdles, SHG members decided to take action to implement the programme better. The first point of action to be taken was that families that had not got any individual work benefit for individual asset creation since the inception of the programme would be given a chance first. The second was that those families that had received repeated benefits from MGNREGA would be given less priority and their works could be considered in subsequent years. The third point of action was that one family could take only one benefit in

one year. They could avail of another work the following year.

These restrictions were only on the asset creation of an individual tribal family and not on working as a labour or Mate for MGNREGA work. The logic behind these action points was to provide the benefits of the entitlement to the marginalized and the most vulnerable, taking into consideration the labour budget (the maximum cap of the labour budget for one *panchayat* is fixed based on the number of job cards multiplied by the number of days (150) multiplied by the wage rate) and the funds available for the *panchayat*.

The fourth point was that all the Account numbers would be registered with the help of the GRS and the Block Programme Officer. It was also decided that all the plans would be forwarded to the block after discussion and being passed by the *gram sabha*. The *gram sabha* resolution would be attached to each file (instead of the *panch* resolution) for technical sanction (TS) and administrative sanction (AS).

Earlier, the *sarpanch* and the *panch* would pass the resolution and forward only prioritized files to the block; in other words, they forwarded files in which they had a vested interest or where the tribals had paid a bribe. All decisions were taken behind closed doors and the process was not at all transparent. Following the involvement of women's collectives and CFT members, there has been a shift and decisions have begun to be taken with all the villagers present, including PRI representatives, MGNREGA officials, TA, Mates, *sarpanch*, *sachiv* and GRS. Plans are now prioritized and passed in the *gram sabha* by the community and are sent to the block for TS and AS from the *zilla panchayat*.

CFT-NRLM Project guidelines clearly mention that all plans will be sanctioned, in totality, within one month from the date of submission,

if the *gram sabha* has passed them. This year, SHG members and CRPs submitted all the plans in the prescribed format by 24 January 2015, and were passed in the *gram sabha* with the help of the CFT. Unfortunately, however, no action took place and TS and AS were received for six months.

Meanwhile, in May 2015, MGNREGA works were opened once again, and its cell decided to complete the spillover works of the previous year. If any work had been sanctioned and had not been completed, it was given priority. And in those *panchayats* where there was no pending work, 30 per cent new files, planned and submitted through the CFT were sanctioned, thereby generating work for the labourers. SHG members and the villagers participated with great enthusiasm in the works that were started.

SHG members started monitoring the works. When they found a violation in work implementation at the worksite, they brought it to the notice of the PRI members. The violation was mainly in two people's work—Jagnu Ram Tekam and Gandeo Tekam, who had initiated work on their land without consulting the villagers. They had had work done on their land for three consecutive years (making a pond, land-levelling and bunding) under various schemes (twice MGNREGA and once IWMP and MGNREGA convergence). The SHG members had passed a resolution not to include the plans of those who had already benefitted in the last couple of years; they were, naturally, unhappy with the situation.

Every year, Gandeo Tekam, Jagnu Ram and their relatives used to get their work sanctioned and executed by using political power and unfair practices. SHG members demanded that their works be stopped because it was not aligned with the very first point of action decided upon during the IPPE planning at the worksite.

Gandeo Tekam and Jagnu Ram Tekam were politically backed and had bribed some of the stakeholders (the GRS, TA and PRI members), the local administration was afraid to take any action against them. The authorities played their role diplomatically and decided that silence was the best policy.

SHG members of the village, however, were determined to oppose the matter strongly. Jagnu Ram and Gandeo Tekam told the SHG members categorically that they would not abide by any decision taken by the SHG members or the villagers. They also misguided the villagers through various means (liquor, rumours) and also spoke ill of the SHG members. They filled a demand form and started work on the disputed worksite, without taking the consent of the villagers and, particularly, the SHG members. They threatened the villagers working for them that if they did not continue working with them, their earlier payments would not be made, their job cards would be cancelled and they would not get any further entitlements.

Many villagers stepped back. They did not want to take the risk of fighting with these powerful men when their livelihood as wage-labour was under threat. The SHG members and CRPs brought the issue to the notice of the PRADAN CFT team. PRADAN professionals and the SHG members organized a meeting in the village to discuss this issue. The initial discussions were attended by only a few participants. People hesitated to raise their voice against such influential persons.

The women, however, were determined to take action. If they had not, they would have lost confidence and self-esteem. The SHG members and CFT raised the issue with the Programme Officer (PO)-MGNREGA at the block Level. The PO assured them that he would look into the matter and promised to

stop the work. Even after one week, however, no affirmative action was taken. Again the Mates and the GRS demanded work on the same people's disputed land.

Gradually, this impacted the SHG members. Some of the families advised their wives and daughters-in-law not to participate in SHG meetings. Many SHG members began behaving defensively due to family pressure. Things became very complex. Two SHG members, Sashikala Markam and Sita Netam, took the lead and, with the help of the CFT members, decided to fight against the unjustified actions of the influential people of the village. They started organizing the SHG members again. They visited each household and knocked at each door. They spread awareness and educated the villagers about MGNREGA. Sashikala said, "We women labourers will not go to work in the field of those people who are not abiding by the resolutions made in the *gram sabha*." In spite of these efforts, some SHG members were unable to take a stance, fearing repercussions from their families.

Simultaneously, the CFT worked on influencing other stakeholders in the village such as the *ex-sarpanch*, the village Headman or Patel, the Sians (the respected members in the tribal Gondwana *sama*) and a group of active youth. They were made aware of the purpose and realities associated with the Scheme and its violation by some people, including the GRS, the Mate and some PRI members. They were informed about the communication about this to the PO.

These efforts paid off and another village-level meeting was organized on 2 June 2015; all the villagers were invited. However, owing to their apprehensions, fears and nervousness, only half the village turned up. The SHG leaders and PRADAN-CFT explained the issue to the villagers and assured them that such rumours

were baseless. This meeting had one good result. The SHG members again became united and decided to take this matter to a higher level. They mobilized 100 women workers and formed pressure groups. Some were members of the SHG and some were not.

They decided to take the issue to the PO and the CEO of the block (*Janpad panchayat*, Narharpur). Their efforts paid off. SHG members submitted the application to the *panchayat* and the *Janpad panchayat* office, to stop assigning works to the politically powerful persons. They wrote in their application about the violation of the *gram sabha* consensus.

"We are demanding proper distribution of sanctioned work in the village, as per the resolutions agreed upon in the *gram sabha*," said Sashikala. She told them that it had been decided in the *gram sabha* that the benefit of creating assets should reach the persons, who have had less opportunities in the Scheme, and that those who had received the benefits the previous year should be given less priority.

After conducting an inquiry and assessing the facts, the CEO of the Narharpur block, Kanker district, issued an order to stop the work on 3rd June 2015. Even after getting the order from the CEO, the GRS and the *sachiv* did not stop the work. Instead, they claimed that they had not yet received any letter in this regard. The SHG members showed them the letter and had the work stopped by agitating at the worksite.

However, the real test was yet to come. The beneficiaries, whose work had been stopped, began creating more problems. They influenced the labour as well as other powerful persons against this movement. The *sarpanch* of the *panchayat* also took this issue negatively. The *sarpanch*, the *sachiv* and the

GRS became very disturbed by this movement led by women. The order sent by the CEO of the *Janpad panchayat* (Block) was directed in favour of the SHG members. The CEO's orders to stop the work not only created a legal barrier but also questioned the *panchayat*'s monopoly. Other PRI members were also misled by the *sarpanch* and the *sachiv*, and said that the women's SHGs were challenging the decisions of the *panchayats*. The *sarpanch* and the *sachiv* along with other influential people started a campaign against the SHG-led movement.

Gradually, it became a matter of prestige between members of the PRI and the women's collectives. The labourers were told by the GRS that they would not get wages owed to them for the work that had been stopped by the SHGs.

This created chaos and more than 100 male labourers started shouting at the SHG members because they were worried about the payment for the work they had already done. Those labourers were the husbands and relatives/family members of the women from the SHGs. The men began to shout at their women and started controlling their movements. They had more faith in the *panchayat* functionaries' statements than the voice of the women's collectives.

Rumours were spread that the CFT Project was only for a year, and that the villagers would have to go back to the earlier system after that. The villagers were threatened that the next year the *panchayat* would restrict the demand of those families supporting these women-led activities. They were also told that the files would not be forwarded to the *Janpad Panchayat* and the *Zilla parishad* for sanction. The Mates would refuse to take the demand from the HHs supporting the movement.

The issue created disturbance in the village politics, in families and among relatives. The women were vulnerable because they had a limited role in decision-making. They also had restricted mobility and most suffered from low self-esteem, making it even more difficult for the women. The problem lay on the intersection of class, gender and politics. This time, however, the women were not deterred. They started creating awareness, with the support of the CFT, about the rights, entitlements and benefits available to villagers under the Scheme. They visited the block office and discussed the issue with the MGNREGA-PO and the CEO of the *Janpad Panchayat*. The block officials assured them about the demand rules and the payment systems.

SHG members then visited each household again and called a meeting of all the SHG members in the village. They visited all the Ward *panchs* and convinced them about the rules listed in MGNREGA. They were able to convince them and show them how to demand jobs under MGNREGA, which guarantees 100 days of unskilled wage work to every village household.

Again a meeting date was fixed with all the villagers, PRI members, GRS and *sachiv*. Before the meeting, the SHG collectives asked the block CEO, the concerned site engineer and the *panchayat* functionaries to be present at the meeting.

On the scheduled date (8 June 2015), the participation of the villagers in the meeting was quite high. The SHG leaders explained the problems, the possibilities and the importance of transparency and accountability. All the members present in the meeting became convinced and showed faith in the SHG collective and appreciated its efforts. The social capital, thus generated, resulted in enhanced knowledge development of its members.

Each rumour related to payment, to starting new work, to cancellation of job cards, etc., was discussed and the problem analyzed. After much debate, confrontation and negotiation, many villagers recognized the value of collective movement. The politically powerful persons, who had created all the problems, were absent from the meeting. The GRS was also not present in the village meeting, for which his credibility was questioned. This created a favourable ambience for the women's collectives. The matter was resolved and it was decided that no work would be done if the beneficiary's land development work had already been done the previous year. Those who had not got any benefit would be given work on priority.

After this meeting, the labourers who had done the work for Jagnu Ram Tekam and Gandeo Tekam received their wages, even though the work had been stopped. Work on others' lands was initiated.

SHG members are now fighting a new battle, which is to resolve the issue of delayed payments from MGNREGA in their village. Thus, women's participation brought about a double benefit. Whereas it has made for greater transparency and accountability in the running of government programmes, it has also transformed the women and given them a stake in the future. The bribe system, for sanctioning the work in the *panchayat*, has stopped completely.

MGNREGA is designed to increase the access of the villagers to quality assets and to take care of the livelihood needs of the community. The reality, however, is that often, the poorest are unable to derive the benefits meant for them because of their own illiteracy and lack of information as well a corrupt system. Times are changing, however, thanks to the tireless efforts of the SHG members, like those in

Barethinbahara village, where the women have spread awareness about schemes and have stood up against corruption in their village.

Systemic arrangements such as the CFT and the IPPE help women bring their issues to the fore and encourage them to find solutions to it and act upon them. The participatory planning exercise has given the villagers confidence and has brought about a sense of equality amongst them; as a result, most of the vulnerable section have got work. Women look at this opportunity as economic freedom. More than wage parity, women's collectives have focussed on land and water conservation, and farm improvement. It allows the communities belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to take up work in their own fields and get paid for the assets created. Women participating in the programme are making their degraded farms suitable for farming, which is ultimately helping create round-the-year food sufficiency.

Increasing women's participation in MGNREGA can lead to a more effective implementation of the programmes, which will then create quality assets for long-term sustainability. Programmes such as CFT and IPPE ensure participation of the villagers in the development of their lands and their community. They lead to capacity building amongst them and enhanced confidence. There is increased co-operation between women's collectives and *panchayat* representatives, both of whom play nodal roles in the programme's implementation, including in preparing the Village Development Plan.

Across Chhattisgarh, there are several women like Sashikala and Sita Bai, who are raising their voices to assert their community's rights and entitlements under various government-run poverty alleviation schemes. In fact, women, organized under SHGs, have emerged as a strong force against corruption and malpractices at the village level and in the local governance. Continuous training and capacity building of women's collectives, not only helps them realize their strength but also helps them establish their identity in the outer world.