

MGNREGA: Fostering Real Citizenship

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Moving from ignorance and non-participation to active involvement in planning and implementing, the women in Kesla are determined to develop their villages, conscious not only of their rights and entitlements but also of their roles and responsibility in developing their villages

Early in the morning on 16 August 2013, I received a call from Sunita Bai, a member of the Yashoda Mahila Samita from Dauri, a small village in Hoshangabad district, Madhya Pradesh, inviting me to attend a *gram sabha* in their village. This was a proud moment for me because the efforts of the struggle by the Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS) had begun to reap results.

I rushed to Dauri with my colleague, Bharti. The *gram sabha* was organized to plan the *panchayat's* annual budget for the financial year 2014–15. SHG members were submitting their family-wise plan to the *gram sabha* for approval and all the interventions in the Shelf of Project (SOP) of the *panchayats* so that in the coming year they could manage their labour, develop land, water and other infrastructure in the village.

I was happy to see that all *Panchayati Raj* Institution (PRI) representatives, the nodal officer from the district and about 180 villagers had gathered for the meeting; of these, at least about 60 per cent were women SHG members. At the end of the meeting, the *panchayat* secretary read aloud the interventions planned by the villagers, which were then thoroughly scrutinized by the participating members.

Radha Bai, a Federation member of NMS, informed the gathering that the same process was taking place in other villages such as Chipkheda, Dandiwar, Chartekara and Choukipura; and that SHG members in Jhunkar and Morepani had conducted this exercise a day earlier in their *gram sabha*.

This was the second year running that SHG members experienced this sense of citizenship in their *panchayat* structure, in which the PRI representative, duty bearers and even their male counterparts showed them respect and accepted their ideas for the development of the village, under MGNREGS and other schemes. These women are concerned about development in their area and are now confident that they will be able to achieve their goals. They have a vision for themselves and for the next generation.

What is happening in all these villages is not a one-day story but the result of a continuous struggle and dedicated effort by NMS members. In 2010, during a Cluster *adhiveshan*, NMS members decided that to have sustainable livelihoods, they needed to work on developing and managing natural resources such as land and water in the village. The leaders realized that they needed to create awareness among SHG members and plan collectively for the holistic development of the village. They decided that they needed an overall plan for the village, in which each and every family member's issues and needs are taken into consideration. A Family-based Well-Being Plan (FBWP) for every family of the village was created by NMS leaders, with the support of Community Service Providers (CSPs). In this process, experienced NMS members and CSPs, who had earlier undergone systematic training, took charge of conducting Focused Group Discussions (FGD) and individual surveys with SHGs and SHG members, respectively.

The main motto of the FBWP was to make SHG members aware of developmental issues and show them the way forward. The FBWP process took place in almost all SHGs, providing a platform for all the members, including

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their families, to articulate their concerns. They also became aware of and discussed their rights and entitlements. Issues related to domestic violence, land disputes, improper functioning of government schemes, land and water health

developments, etc., were also raised in the FBWP. Many common concerns emerged such as employment during lean periods, land and water resource development, and village-level infrastructure development, including roads and toilets.

In January 2011, NMS members decided to approach the *panchayats*, to meet the demands that emerged from the FBWP. They submitted written applications to the *panchayat* and received receipts for them. Many applications were submitted in different *gram sabhas* in January; however, when the SOP was finalized in the *panchayats*, there were no recommendations for the works demanded by the community and NMS members. The members felt cheated and lost hope because they had worked really hard to assess the needs of the villagers and arrive at plans for the overall development of the village. They had also supported the *panchayats* in drawing up the plans.

This was a big challenge all the NMS members. All their hard work and efforts were rendered meaningless because the local governance system had not accepted their plans or, in other words, the PRI representatives had not accepted the participation of the villagers in local governance.

Although Hoshangabad district was incorporated in the third phase of MGNREGS in 2008 for 100 days of wage employment, there was little understanding among the people about what kind of work could be taken

up at the *panchayat* level. The implementation of MGNREGS itself was rather challenging not only for the *panchayats* but also for the block and the district-level administration. A PRI member said that before MGNREGA, there were not many works being carried out at the *panchayat* level; the understanding about MGNREGS, therefore, was abysmal at the PRI level whereas at the citizens'/villagers' end, it was negligible. *Panchayat* officials were afraid to receive applications for work and avoided giving receipts under MGNREGS because they thought that MGNREGS funds would later be recovered from the people or from themselves.

Interactions with PRI members also revealed that ideas put forward by NMS or PRADAN were not easily accepted by many PRI representatives and duty bearers. Some thought they would lose their hold on the villagers or the *panchayat* and were also worried that if the villagers became involved in the process of governance, they might interfere with how the funds would be spent. Or perhaps, it was difficult for them to accept women's participation and their increasing influence in the work environment.

Thus, in an NMS Federation meeting in March 2011, where professionals from PRADAN were also present, two major focus areas emerged. One was to generate awareness among NMS members about the various government schemes and programmes available and create a demand for them, and, second, to sensitize PRI members and work cohesively with them in building a relationship with the *panchayats*.

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NMS members decided that they would have to participate more actively in public forums such as the *gram sabha* and public hearings at the block level so as to understand the proceedings and how the system works, gradually create a space for themselves and, later, through equal and active participation, highlight the areas that require development in the villages. Women needed to, over a period of time, become the people's representative and take charge of the up-liftment of the villages.

In the Federation meeting, NMS leaders planned to spread their ideas, including an awareness of MGNREGS, the Panchayati Raj system and other relevant schemes through meetings, training programmes and exposure visits, to each and every NMS member in different villages.

In the first step, training programmes were organized for those NMS leaders who were the village representatives selected by the SHG members of the village. PRADAN organized intensive 'Gender and Governance' training programmes, to help the leaders gain an understanding of the gender perspective in local governance, how women's needs and rights are vandalized, and why women should participate in *gram sabhas*.

The trained leaders, along with the PRADAN professionals, then organized village-level training programmes for SHG members and their spouses, creating awareness on the various schemes available, teaching them on how to apply for these schemes, and informing them about the documents that are needed to be filed with an application for those schemes.

Simultaneously, PRI members and village-level duty bearers also needed to be sensitized, for better implementation of the schemes offered under MGNREGA, and provided with support to initiate village-level developmental works.

In June 2011, PRADAN organized joint residential training programmes for PRI members and NMS village representatives, so that they were on the same page as far as awareness was concerned. PRADAN also sought the support of resource persons from DEBATE (a Bhopal-based organization, working for resource development for PRI and MGNREGS), Jagori (a Delhi-based organization working on women's rights) and other local PRI representatives, who had initiated projects and done well in their *panchayats*.

Exposure visits to Gurgunda were organized for PRI representatives and NMS members, to meet with the people's representatives and SHG members of Shahpur block in Betul district, where PRADAN had been working for over three years directly with MGNREGS. A meeting was organized with the *Gramin Jalbhishek Jalgrahan Samiti (GJJS)*, a committee formed by SHG members, PRADAN and PRI members. The major role of GJJS was to consolidate the plans made by villagers, monitor the data of the day-to-day works and manage funds. GJJS members shared how they and the PRI members had been planning and implementing the works. They also showed the visitors the land and water works, the process of payments and the collaboration among PRI representatives and the people, who had impacted the overall development of the village.

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In a Cluster meeting in Jhunkar *gram panchayat* in June 2011, NMS leaders showed interest in visiting other areas where the *panchayats* had implemented schemes with support from the community and also to build a better understanding of *panchayat* works and other schemes. The *sarpanch* of the Jhunkar *panchayat* was also in the Cluster meeting and showed interest in visiting such places.

NMS leaders from other *gram panchayats* also talked with their *sarpanches* and tried to convince them to participate in the exposure visits. Subsequently, in October 2011, NMS leaders, some of the interested *gram sarpanches* and PRADAN professionals visited Ralegoan Siddhi and Hiware Bazaar in Ahmadnagar district, Maharashtra.

The overall development of the village, made possible because of the co-operation and collaboration between PRI representatives and the people, was impressive. There were well-constructed roads, an efficient drainage system, neat and clean schools, a hospital and a veterinary hospital, functional toilets, large community halls, etc. The villagers were responsible for the maintenance and monitoring of all these assets.

The people of Hiware Bazaar reminisced that there was no dairy in Hiware Bazaar in 1987; now, however, the village produces about 60,000 litres of milk daily! The visiting group also met the *gram sabha* members and ward members. Popat Rao Pawar, the former *sarpanch* of Hiware Bazaar, explained to the visitors how in their monthly *gram sabhas*, they discussed village issues and how they

solved problems together after taking the views of the community into consideration. The governance system in Hiware Bazaar was very strong and each villager took ownership for it.

NMS members, who travelled to these places, were more confident and had a greater understanding of how the *gram sabha* and the *panchayat* work, and the approach and provisions under MGNREGS. They had regular meetings with other NMS members in the villages and made them aware of the various provisions in MGNREGS, their rights and entitlements in the *panchayats*, and how they could help PRI members and work with them for the development of their villages.

Simultaneously, the PRI representatives' and duty bearers' perceptions about NMS and PRADAN changed. Initially, PRI representatives and duty bearers were hesitant to attend the training programmes organized by PRADAN. They thought that they would have to answer many questions related to the works and the progress in the *panchayats*. One *sarpanch* shared in a meeting, "These NGO people have

created extra tension for us. They (PRADAN and NMS) always find out our (the PRI members') faults and make complaints about us at the higher level."

Gradually, PRI representatives recognized that NMS and PRADAN were trying to help them to work for the development of the villages and the area. It was not an easy task. NMS leaders, along with PRADAN, met almost all the *sarpanches* of the area and discussed ideas of village development. NMS members invited the *sarpanch* and the ward *panches* to participate in village-level training programmes. In the course of the training, *Jal Jungle aur Jeevika*, a documentary film by PRADAN, was screened, and an environment for a healthy discussion was created among the villagers and PRI members.

In every meeting and training programme, NMS leaders maintained their intention of not criticizing the representatives and the duty bearers. Instead, they would only facilitate healthy discussions. They would maintain an environment, in which PRI members could also share their problems and concerns and, together, solutions would be found.



CSP Urmila Bai facilitates a MGNREGA planning meeting in village Kesla

Initially, when duty bearers and PRI members attended the training programmes organized by NMS, they would begin their conversations with, “Tell me what the problem is and why have you called me?” NMS members realized that because they had always been complaining about the officials and the PRI members, there was lack of trust among them. NMS members, thus, worked on bridging this gap by replying politely, “We called to meet you. We would like to share our ideas and also listen to you, your problems and how together we can do better.” PRI members and duty bearers soon began to stay for longer hours in the meetings and also shared many of their personal and work-related problems, which they had never had the opportunity to do earlier.

Interestingly, after two to three such meetings, PRI members and duty bearers began to ask NMS members if they could attend their village level Cluster meetings. Their numbers began to increase in the meetings, and training and exposure programmes organized by NMS. They also began to invite NMS leaders to their meetings and training programmes at the *panchayat* and block levels. Kushum Bai, the *sarpanch* of Kesla *panchayat*, Rampreet

Dhurbe, the *Janpad Adhaykshaya* of Kesla *Janpad* and some other PRI members visited the NMS office to discuss how MGNREGA could be implemented in a better way in their block.

In 2013, the Hoshangabad *zila panchayat* CEO, K.G. Tiwari, invited PRADAN and NMS leaders to work directly as an implementing agency. Although this request was politely refused, Sunita Bai, an NMS leader, expressed this beautifully in the meeting. “Sir, we want to work with the *panchayat*. The *panchayat* is ours and we can develop the village if we work together. The *sarpanch* and the executive should co-operate with us women. We will co-operate with them in return.” She continued, “We would like you to come to our village or to the *gram sabha* meeting. We have talked with our NMS members about their concerns and even conducted a family-based livelihood survey of 2000–2200 families. We want their work to be connected with the *panchayat* and for them to get jobs according to their demand and need. We want to have a meeting with the representatives/executives of the Kesla *Janpad*, the *rozgar sahayaks* and the rest so that we are all on the same page and can plan ahead together.”

“I like working for NMS. I have been working with them for the past four to five years. Earlier, the women would neither get applications written nor go to the *gram sabhas*. Now, they get applications written and even take them to the *panchayat* with a receipt. They also find it easier to fill the employment guarantee form. Some girls from the Sangh are also working as mates. The women of NMS keep an eye on the sites of the projects and make sure that the employment assistants and the engineers don’t cheat the villagers. Many of the women trouble getting money out of their accounts because their accounts are in the post office. All the women are now getting accounts opened in banks so that they get the money faster.

“Women, with the help of PRADAN, conducted family surveys and began planning. The plans read out to the members. At home, the men and the women discussed these plans with other members of the family. People has thus now began to understand the work better and are able to talk to the *sarpanch* too,” says Urmila Bai, a CSP supporting NMS members in MGNREGS.

She was supported by Radha Bai, Sakum Bai and Urmila Bai. They put forth their opinion with confidence. They also met with the Collector, Rahul Jain, on the same day and shared their vision and plans. On the way back to Kesla, they were very hopeful because they had received a confirmation for a workshop of all the *gram rozgar sahayaks* (GRS), the *sachivs* and some of the mates, including all the district and block-level MGNREGS teams in Kesla block.

Their biggest challenge was to sensitize duty bearers. "Now we will have to make a good impression on them so that we can work together equally as partners. You people (PRADAN) should also help us." This was an order from the community to PRADAN, and I was very happy to obey this order. I realized that the community was beginning to own and take responsibility for their development, rights and concerns.

In mid-2013, PRADAN organized a two-day workshop for all GRSs, *sachivs*, and district and block-level MGNREGA teams during which

NMS members from Hoshangabad and Betul districts facilitated the training programme. The workshop was followed by a one-day demonstration at a village. The district administration of both the districts, including the Kesla *Janpad Adhyaksha*, participated in the workshop. This workshop gave an opportunity to NMS members to interact with the relevant duty bearers, and provided them an opportunity to convey their vision, mission and thoughts about village development.

After this workshop, the perception of the GRSs seems to have changed; they are now happy to help NMS members in their village-level plans. The GRS and some experienced NMS members have jointly approached each and every family in the respective *panchayats*, to generate demands under MGNREGS and its convergence. They also worked for community-based common interventions through FGDs. PRI representatives and the officials began to understand each other through this joint approach. They began to be less wary of each other and to accept each other's suggestions more easily. In a short span of time, they



NMS leaders in a meeting with MLA Sartaj Singh to discuss over issues in MGNREGA at NMS office in Sukhtawa

(NMS members) prepared a plan for 18 *panchayats*, which was submitted and approved of by the *gram sabha* in August 2013.

With the help of FBWP and the awareness created by NMS leaders, the plan that emerged from the community led to the holistic development of the village for sustainable livelihoods while keeping in mind the well-being of the community. SHG members convinced their spouses to create farm bunding. In a meeting at the Morepani village, Shivawati Bai, an SHG member, after watching the film, *Jan Jungle aur Jeevika*, spoke about the demand for a well in the village. "A well is a means to extract water from the ground; but if we don't put the water back in the ground, not a drop will be left. We should also put the water back in the ground. We will create bunds in all our fields so that we save both the soil and the water." Her husband supports her in this decision and has made available all the relevant documents. The planning meeting was attended by the *sarpanch*, *sachivs* and other villagers in Morepani. More than 200 SHG members from over 18 villages requested for farm bunding on their land this year. They worked for their farm and got employment in their own land!

NMS members thought of converging various schemes with MGNREGS such as Panch Parmeshawar Yojana, launched in Madhya Pradesh in 2011, for rural road construction, in which MGNREGS provided support for the labour component. The scheme helps develop common infrastructure such as roads in the villages and provides wages to landless members. In Dauri, Jhunkar, Mariyarpura, Kihira, Chandikaya, Dandiwarra, Mandikoh, Abadipura, Belawara, etc., roads of more than

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200 m, with drainage systems, have been constructed under this scheme over a period of two years. Other villages have also put in their application for road construction. This has specifically helped the landless wage labourers.

Sanitation is another big concern that came up for discussion at the village-level planning meetings. SHG members shared that there is a huge scarcity of

toilets and bathrooms. Villagers have to go into the open for defecation. During the FGDs and the family based survey with SHG members, almost all the SHG members demanded the construction of toilets-cum-bathrooms; interestingly, their spouses too have shown their strong agreement.

Although the villagers are keen to develop their land and water bodies first, some villages have taken the construction of toilets-cum-bathrooms as a priority because SHG members wanted to do so. NMS members also called a special *gram sabha* meeting in Chaukipura, Chipkheda, Chartekara and Dhasai villages, to discuss the construction of toilets-cum-bathrooms. In the financial year 2013–14, about 500 toilets-cum-bathrooms were constructed under the supervision of SHG members in the 18 *panchayats* where NMS exists. This was under the convergence of MGNREGS and Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA).

During September–October 2013, NMS leaders called the CEO of Kesla *Janpad* and the Assistant Programme Officer (APO) of MGNREGA for many Cluster and village-level meetings. They (the duty bearers) participated and helped the women draft a proper plan. Earlier, often, duty bearers felt helpless when

they wanted to do something because they could not find the proper forum to discuss plans with the people. During these planning meetings, however, they had many opportunities to share their knowledge and concerns as well. These meetings helped bridge the gap between the community and the officials. The duty bearers accepted and appreciated the approach of NMS.

These meetings helped develop a greater sense of collectiveness and built faith in the *panchayat*. About 2,000 women from various SHGs not only participate regularly in *gram sabha* and other public forums but are also questioning and co-operating with the *panchayats*. The women are now respected and are consulted by PRI representatives for any village-level development plan. They have the confidence now to approach a higher authority for their concerns. They are ready to face any shortfall that they find in MGNREGS.

One day, several women from Morepani village went to the Kesla SBI branch. When asked, Rajenti Bai said that they were there to open individual bank accounts. Sangeet Bai said, "We women should have our own bank accounts and we have decided that all of us women of the village will open our own accounts. Most of the accounts in the post office are in the men's names. We don't get money for our own work. We have told the manager that, every day, 20–25 of us women will come to open our accounts."

By the Federation meeting of NMS in September 2014, about 1,167 women from different villages had opened their bank accounts and others were planning to do so in the coming months. "*Hum sabhi mahiloan ka bank khata to hona hi chahiye.* (All of us women should

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have our own bank accounts)."

This inspiring statement was made by one of the Federation leaders during the meeting. This approach was adopted by NMS members, to work on the issue of late payments.

Late payment is one of the major concerns in MGNREGS; in Kesla, this is mainly because of the manual system in the post office. About 70 per cent of the accounts under MGNREGS are disbursed through post offices; however, people do not get their wages on time. That the labour groups were having problems with payments was raised by a Cluster representative of Mariyapura village. Cluster members decided to talk with the GRS and the mate. It came to light that the women labour signed cash withdrawal forms and gave these to the mate, to withdraw the amount from the bank. The mate then only paid half the amount to the labourers. The other issue was that the attendance of the labourers was not updated on their job cards, leading to underpayment.

Urmila Bai made minutes of all the proceedings in the minute book, and the Cluster leaders asked the mate to make the payments but he refused. All the 48 women then went to the block headquarters and reported the matter to the CEO and the APO (MGNREGS). The GRS and the mate were summoned, and in the presence of the women labour, the mate finally succumbed to the demand to return the wages of the labourers, equivalent to three months' payment, taken by the GRS and the *sachivs*.

This was a huge learning for the women; seeing this happen, the other GRS and the mates followed suit by paying the full wages to their respective labour. In another incident, 80–90 women of Jhunkar panchayat,

Chipkheda village, and Chandkiya panchayat visited the block headquarters and raised the issue of delayed payments. All these incidents happened independently, without the involvement of PRADAN or NMS leaders.

Women are not only participating visibly in local governance forums but also questioning systems for better functioning of the forums and demanding their rights and entitlements. At least 50 per cent of the SHG members regularly supervise the ongoing works of the *panchayats* and discuss these in their SHGs and Cluster meetings. SHG members invite duty bearers to the SHG, Cluster or Federation meetings, and the duty bearers participate and offer all assistance.

During a meeting with the APO (MGNREGS) in Kesla block, he shared the data regarding

the progress of MGNREGS during the financial year. He pointed out that the maximum work had been done in those *panchayats* in which the NMS was present.

The women are happy with their achievements; NMS members, however, are now worried about the irregular flow of funds under MGNREGS, given the central government's recent approach to the scheme. They have been told about the shortage of funds at the state level by the block officials, who claim that they are unable to pass the administrative and technical sanctions for new works under MGNREGS. The community is very afraid about the future of MGNREGS. NMS members have worked hard to understand the schemes and have created awareness about them among the SHG members. It had been bringing about development, prosperity and empowerment

Sunita Bai (the NMS president) said, "We could not understand the *gram sabha* and the employment guarantee in the beginning. Slowly, we started understanding the scheme and helped others understand it too. We thought of changing the plight of the village together and are working towards it. Employment guarantee gives us employment in the villages so that we don't have to migrate. We have done *medh* bunding in our fields and have even dug *kuchha* and *pucca* wells. Under the employment guarantee, goat-rearing, poultry-rearing, and construction of toilets and roads are going on and yet to be completed. All of us from NMS have, in the past two to three years, understood our *panchayat* and the *janpal*. We have learned about and understood how the work is done and also where we must go if it doesn't happen. We have also started planning on our own and sitting with the *panchayat* and getting our plans included in their agenda. We have done a lot; a lot still remains to be done. The officers of the district too listen to us now. There are 400–500 women here who have latrines in their homes now, a number of fields have been bunded, villages are getting cement roads, and orchards are being planted. Much more needs to be done.

"But everyone is not getting 100 days of guaranteed work, and the wages do not get paid on time; this year, a number of latrines have been left half-finished. The officers in the district headquarters tell us that there are no more funds; that is why new projects are not starting and the wages are delayed. You tell us, does the government ever run out of money? And even if there is a shortage, why are the wages of us labourers stopped? But we will not let it go like this. We will get the unfinished work completed. We will get new projects too, so that more people get work and the village gets developed too."

of women; now, suddenly, the pace of the work has slowed down. The NMS members question, "Why is this so?" They want answers and no one is able to give them any.

In spite of all these challenges, NMS members are very hopeful and enthusiastic about improving the quality of their lives and ensuring better delivery at the local governance system.

They recognize their strength and have a positive attitude. No matter what the situation or condition, they are determined to develop their villages. As citizens, they are setting an example of being conscious not only about their rights and entitlements but also of their roles and responsibilities in making their villages and areas a better place to live in.