

NREGA: From Government Programme to People's Programme

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Bringing alive the spirit of MGNREGA as being a legislative guarantee that the citizens have from the government, a collective effort is being made in Gumla to change it from a programme doled out by the government to one that is owned and run predominantly and successfully by the women in villages

In Gumla district, and possibly in all of Jharkhand, the most common slogan used by the community about the National Rural Employment Generation Act is 'NREGA marega', meaning that anyone who works with NREGA is doomed. However, the walls of the district administration office, the block campus or the *panchayat* building have a different message painted on them, "NREGA *mein avaa, kaam paava* (Join NREGA and get work)"; "*Har haath ko kaam miley, kaam ka pura daam miley* (Every hand will get work and every worker will get payment)."

The administration, the bureaucrats and the NREGA functionaries say that there is no need for employment and that the people are no longer interested in NREGA. The community and the labourers believe the scheme failed because of untimely payments, lack of clarity, influence of the contractors and the middlemen, and the inactive and corrupt *panchayats*. The elected representatives of the *panchayat* have a different perspective. They say that they are powerless. They want to implement NREGA but are impeded by frontline functionaries, who are dishonest and not at all supportive.

With time, the community became so frustrated that they avoided any discussions on NREGA. Women Community Based Organizations (CBOs) would not discuss NREGA as they considered it beyond their scope.

In 2006–07, the PRADAN team in Gumla was involved in demonstrating how NREGA (or Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act—MGNREGA—as it is called now) funds could be utilized in a more productive way. The main activity introduced with 196 families on 110 acres of land was mango plantation. The objectives of this were to establish mango plantation as an activity under MGNREGA and to provide livelihood options for poor families.

In this programme, PRADAN gave technical support to establish the mango plantation prototype to the government and to the beneficiaries. Earlier, PRADAN was mainly helping execute mango plantation under MGNREGA; there was however, no recognition of MGNREGA as a people's programme.

Gradually, PRADAN's stance changed. The focus began to shift towards how to become a facilitator engaged effectively with MGNREGA. PRADAN wanted to articulate a role whereby MGNREGA would be owned by the community and not by the government or PRADAN. The spirit of MGNREGA is that it is a legislative guarantee that the citizens have from the government. That spirit had to come alive.

PRADAN realized that this would happen only if it played the role of facilitator and the community became the change agent for its own development agenda. From 2012, PRADAN became involved in MGNREGA with two blocks—Raidih and the Basia—in Gumla, with this new understanding. This article highlights PRADAN's efforts to make MGNREGA a people's programme in Raidih block.

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AWARENESS GENERATION ABOUT MGNREGA

PRADAN has been working in Gumla district for more than 15 years. Huge social mobilization has taken place through its engagement with the tribal community, and the organization has collectivized more than 40,000 households through the promotion of six women's Federations. PRADAN started

engaging in MGNREGA by building a vision of the Federation around the Act and also by building the confidence of the people in it. The critical missing link was that the people were mostly unaware about the Act and this led to corruption and malpractices in the system.

Thus, the first initiative of the Federation was to generate awareness among villagers so that instead of maligning MGNREGA, they start asking for it.

First of all, awareness needed to be created that MGNREGA was an Act and not a Scheme. The slogan that the Federation members raised and which became very popular was, "*Ham apna haq mangte, nahi kisi se bhik mangte* (We are demanding our right, not asking for alms)." If a person demands work under MGNREGA and does not get work, it is a violation of MGNREGA. The affected person can then claim compensation allowance for the same. Similarly, if there is a delay in payment for the labour, a person can claim compensation.

Next, the Federation members initiated discussions among SHGs and village organization members. The discussions provided the initial spark to understand MGNREGA. The people became aware that they were losing their rights by staying silent and that they were promoting corruption by pulling themselves back from MGNREGA.

With efforts from the Federation, the community started showing some interest in MGNREGA and began to participate in the awareness rallies actively. Conducting workshops, campaigning, promoting MGNREGA and setting up entitlements-related book stalls, etc., were the initiatives taken by PRADAN and the Federation to generate awareness in the community.

A big event was organized in the Raidih *panchayat* where almost 5,000 people participated. Federation members set up book stalls selling books written by eminent persons working on MGNREGA, to help people understand the Act. The books distributed were *Apna Haq Jano* by NREGA Watch; *Rojgar Guarantee Kanoon—NREGA—Majdooron ke Haq* by Ritika Khera, Gurjeet Singh and Jean Dreze; NREGA by Nikhil Dey, etc. A total of 1,300 books were sold at this one event.

Alongside, street plays were performed, and songs and slogans were created on MGNREGA. Training programmes were organized in many *panchayats* and villages by the Federations and PRADAN, to make the community aware about MGNREGA. This was the first time that the Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI), Federation, administration, civil society and the common people came together to discuss MGNREGA and explore ways to make it successful.

Following this, events such as 'NREGA Mela', 'Majdoor Diwas', 'Haq ki Ladaï', etc., were held for creating awareness. Another big step was to motivate women to make MGNREGA an agenda item in their SHG-VO (village organisation)-Federation meetings so that they could study the Act, identify issues and prepare plans to resolve them.

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REGULARIZING THE GRAM SABHA

Another important area where PRADAN worked was in regularizing the *gram sabha*. The proceedings of the *gram sabha* were a document prepared by some powerful persons such as contractors, *panchayat* staff, PRI representatives, etc. The wall paintings of the villages or the

block office say, "*Naa Lok Sabha naa Vidhan Sabha, sabse bada gram sabha*" (The *gram sabha* is more powerful than the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha). However, the *gram sabha* was not functioning on the ground. There were no meetings. In fact, it was a vicious cycle. Because the majority of the people did not benefit from the *gram sabha*, they (especially the women) did not attend the meetings; and because people did not participate or raise their voice in the *gram sabha*, they did not get any benefit from it. The intervention point into this cycle was to ensure people's participation.

The Federation took the responsibility of making the villagers aware that participating in the *gram sabha* was the only way to strengthen the institution. They discussed it in the SHG-VO meetings and in all the other gatherings. When the Federation started engaging directly in the *gram sabha*, the participation, especially of women, increased. In most of the *gram sabhas*, the meeting register was found missing.

PRADAN, along with the Federation, started encouraging villagers, especially the SHG women, to attend the *gram sabha* to help regularize it. Slowly, in a few *panchayats* such as Sikoi, Parsa, Upar Khatanga, Silam and Kansir, the *gram sabha* found a place in the lives of a large number of people. From October 2012 onwards, the *gram sabha*

became regularized in these *panchayats* and people also found their meeting registers. The SHG women and the other villagers collectively pressurized the *panchayat* representatives and staff to participate in the *gram sabha* regularly.

It continues to be an issue, however, that what the *gram sabha* decides does not get implemented. For example, if the *gram sabha* took a decision that a few structures need to be constructed under MGNREGA, the plan would not get sanctioned. The plan that would get sanctioned was usually different from the plan prepared by the *gram sabha*. The district administration is meant to give the final approval to the plans of the *gram sabha*. Some of the reasons given for the plans not being approved are:

- ♦ The plans were not recorded in the original *gram sabha* minutes.
- ♦ The plan budget is much higher than the labour budget.
- ♦ The villagers do not furnish a priority list of the plans, so sanctioning happens on a random basis.
- ♦ The district or block administration always prefers making big structures rather than small structures.
- ♦ The villagers do not keep a copy of the *gram sabha* minutes and, therefore, cannot challenge the sanctioned plan.
- ♦ Every individual family thinks only about getting sanctions for its own plan. Nobody thinks about the total village plan.
- ♦ The community believes that the plan can only get sanctioned by giving bribes.
- ♦ The administration is unwilling to sanction plans.

To deal with these issues and to make MGNREGA more people-oriented, PRADAN

became engaged in the NRLM-MGNREGA-CFT Convergence Project.

NRLM-MGNREGA-CFT CONVERGENCE PROJECT

In 2013, PRADAN signed the NRLM-MGNREGA-CFT (National Rural Livelihood Mission-Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act-Cluster Facilitation Team) Convergence Project, and became involved in MGNREGA as a facilitator.

Under this Project, PRADAN and the Federation began working in six revenue villages in three different *panchayats* of Raidih block. PRADAN groomed a team of two social mobilizers and an INRM consultant dedicated for MGNREGA. This team was meant to help villagers in their planning as well do other administrative work in MGNREGA. Trainings, workshops and exposure visits were conducted for the villagers, the PRI representative and the *panchayat* staff. Coordination Committees were formed at the district, block and *panchayat* levels, to discuss the issues and challenges at each level. The Committee would meet at regular intervals. Discussions were held at the *panchayat* level on Plan preparation and prioritization. PRADAN articulated the following action steps:

- ♦ The team of two mobilizers and one consultant, groomed by PRADAN, would help villagers in planning as well as in the administrative work of MGNREGA. The role of the INRM consultant was to educate the people in forming estimates and budgets, and in providing hand-holding support to MGNREGA Mates for measurement. The consultant's additional responsibility was to support block engineers, when required. The role of the social mobilizers was to provide training on MGNREGA/INRM and to help the villagers in accessing their rights and entitlements related to MGNREGA.

Resource persons, called the NRPs (NREGA Resource Persons), from the SHGs were groomed to support the community in processes such as opening bank accounts, training and workshops. Exposure visits were also conducted for villagers, the PRI representative and the *panchayat* staff.

- ♦ INRM training programmes and exposure visits were conducted for all the hamlets under the selected revenue villages. Workshops were conducted for the block and district functionaries.
- ♦ Hamlet-level discussions were held on plan preparation and prioritization, and *panchayat* representatives were involved in the planning process and plan prioritization.
- ♦ Coordination Committees were formed at the district, block and *panchayat* levels, to discuss the issues and challenges at each level. The Committees would meet at regular intervals. In the District Coordination Committee, the members are the Deputy Commissioner, the Deputy Development Commissioner, other district administrative officials, BDOs of the CFT Block, and CFT and Federation representatives. Similarly, in the Block Coordination Committee, the members are the BDO, other block administrative officials, the CFT, Federation representatives, PRI representatives and the *panchayat* staff.
- ♦ The *gram sabhas* were organized for plan prioritization and sanctioning of the works planned in NRLM.

After the implementation of this Project, some clear changes were observed: there is improved village governance, better engagement of the PRI, a sense of ownership among the villagers of the MGNREGA plan, higher women's participation, seriousness on the part of the administration and little interference of middlemen

- ♦ A booklet, which included the Baseline Survey Report, photocopies of the social and resource maps, well-being ranking plan consolidation, plan prioritization, and a photocopy of the *gram sabha* minutes, was printed. This was distributed in the villages, *panchayats* and Federation so that it would be accessible to all.
- ♦ Barefoot engineers and a Mate were selected in the

gram sabha (interestingly, all the Mates and the barefoot engineers selected by the *gram sabha* were SHG women)

- ♦ A weekly Rozgar Diwas was organized at the Panchayat Bhawan, in which labourers would put forward their demands and raise issues. These issues are either solved in the Rozgar Diwas or are taken to the Coordination Committee at the *panchayat*, block or district levels.
- ♦ Labour groups were formed to help labourers collectively put forward their job demands, raise issues and work jointly by helping each other.
- ♦ Efforts were made to strengthen the monitoring process of all stakeholders through the SHG-VO-Federation.

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Initially, it was a great challenge to bring all the stakeholders on to one platform with a common agenda of MGNREGA because there were many who had vested interests, and corruption was the main reason behind this. Some were completely against these initiatives. They started threatening PRADAN executives, Federation leaders and also began spreading rumours against PRADAN and the Federation.

In one incident in Hesag village of Upar Khatanga *panchayat*, an old person's plan for constructing a well was not approved for two years. Everybody—from the *panchayat* office to the block staff—told him that it was because of PRADAN that his name had been dropped from the list. Similarly, the labourers were told that their payment was delayed because of PRADAN's interference with the system and that they should go to PRADAN's office for their queries or problems.

The objective of the CFT was not to establish a parallel structure at all but to strengthen the existing system. In the initial stages, however, MGNREGA and CFT became two different schemes. The administration regarded PRADAN to be a competitor.

The strength of PRADAN was in its well-articulated vision, huge social mobilization, strong Federation and, most important, the trust the community had in it. Frequent workshops, the formation of the district-block-*panchayat* Coordination Committees, the collective pressure from the community and the support from the state administration played a vital role in changing the mentality of the *panchayat*-block-district officials. Slowly, they started working actively and jointly with the Federation and PRADAN.

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PRADAN then made it clear that this was not PRADAN's programme but the responsibility of the *panchayat*-block-district administrations. PRADAN was there just to facilitate the process.

With the PRI and the administration becoming more pro-active and with awareness in the community, the presence of the middlemen reduced considerably. Initially, in some areas, there were threats from powerful persons; slowly, community participation sidelined all these persons.

The Federation also involved the *panchayat* representatives when organizing events such as awareness camps and workshops. This gave PRIs a sense of ownership of MGNREGA and made them accountable for it. The weekly Rozgar Diwas in the Panchayat Bhawan provided the space for *panchayat* representatives and staff to become the solution providers to people's problems. This enhanced their self-confidence and, from then on, they were more willing to be a part of the change.

Earlier, the PRI would work as per directions from the block; soon they began working independently. The process of participatory planning by the community at the hamlet level, facilitated by the Federation-CFT-PRADAN, resulted in a sense of ownership of the plan. The most important feature in the planning process was that it was a plan prepared collectively. It was not any one individual's plan but an INRM Livelihoods-based Village Development Plan.

Each plan was prepared keeping in mind factors such as participatory methodology, labour budget, prioritization list, possessing a copy of the plan, etc. Thus, no plans were

cancelled by the administration. In this process, women were in the forefront in all aspects—from attending *gram sabha* meetings to the selection of the Mate. Women proved that they could do all the work, maybe even better than the men could.

MGNREGA SAHAYATA KENDRA (NREGA FACILITATION CENTRE)

To get employment in MGNREGA, a labourer needs a job card. However, s/he does not know how to and from where to get this job card. A labourer wants timely payment but does not know why the payment gets delayed and where to complain about this delay.

The Act says that if a labourer does not get employment within two weeks of a job demand, he or she is entitled to an unemployment allowance. Villagers, however, have no idea where to claim this. At a state-level MGNREGA workshop, we came to know that in Manika block of the Latehar district, an innovative concept of the 'NREGA Sahayata Kendra' (NSK) had been working successfully.

This was an initiative introduced by Mr. Jean Dreze, a social activist, and Mr. James Herenz, a local person from Manika, to generate awareness on MGNREGA and its entitlements, to help villagers raise their voice against corruption or any malpractices, through village-level institutions.

The experience of NSK in Manika motivated Federation leaders and PRADAN professionals to establish an NSK in Raidih block. In 2013, the Federation started an NSK without any financial support. It began in one of the Federation's office rooms, with a few volunteers from the villages, who worked for a very nominal honorarium.

NSK pays its staff through collections received as donation from the villagers. The staff received training from the NSK in Manika block and PRADAN. NSK helps in educating workers about MGNREGA, in generating demand for work and for job cards. NSK helps form labour groups at the worksite and makes workers aware of their entitlements in MGNREGA; it also helps to monitor corruption and other malpractices that exist.

Other than this, NSK stocks forms and formats such as application forms for job cards, employment demand forms, unemployment allowance forms, and forms for the interest for delayed payment, so that workers can easily access these forms according to their requirements. NSK then helps them to fill up the forms and forward the applications to officials from the *panchayat* to the district level, seeking solutions to their issues.

It also helps the workers in getting information from the MGNREGA-MIS website, to identify the cause of some of the issues raised by the workers. For instance, if somebody has not received payment for their labour, NSK helps them to find out the reason for non-payment, which could be late muster roll submission, wrong muster roll entry, delay in 'fund transfer order', delay in the bank payment, a mistake in the name in the job card, etc.

This information can easily be accessed through the MGNREGA-MIS. If there is any mismatch in the physical work and what is uploaded in the MIS, NSK raises the issue with the villagers and the PRI. For example, MGNREGA-MIS may say that the work has been completed but maybe the work is still under progress.

NSK also helps the workers in other entitlement schemes such as social security, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) or the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY).

Table 1: Some Cases Resolved by NSK

Complaints Received in NSK	Present Status
Some labourers from Pibo (Pibo <i>panchayat</i>) complained that they had not received their payment. NSK did a primary enquiry and found that the labourers, who had worked for road construction under MGNREGA, had not received payment because it had been made to some other labourers who had not worked on that road.	First, NSK made a field visit and interviewed the MGNREGA Mate and all the labourers, who had worked in the road construction. They used the field-visit data and cross-checked with the MGNREGA-MIS, and found that the names of labourers had not been registered in the particular work number, and that the names of some other labourers had been registered instead. NSK took the issue to the BDO, who began a joint enquiry with NSK. The enquiry brought to light that the MGNREGA Mate had put the wrong names in this work number. Finally, the BDO instructed that the muster rolls be rectified and payment made to the actual persons. The Mate was reprimanded.
In Hesag village (Upar Khatanga <i>panchayat</i>), NSK presented the MIS data entered in MGNREGA for the previous financial year. In more than 15 cases, the beneficiaries did not know that they had been chosen. Meanwhile, work had started, material had been purchased and the labour payment had been made in their names.	NSK, along with villagers, made a complaint to the BDO, who conducted a joint enquiry with NSK. The case was that in more than 15 poultry sheds, the beneficiaries were not aware that their schemes had been sanctioned. The MIS, however, showed that the material had been purchased and the labour payment had been made. Although the work had not started, the booking of the amount was initiated by the <i>panchayat</i> staff. Finally, action was taken against the <i>panchayat</i> staff and the work on the poultry sheds actually started.
In Turidih village (Sikoi <i>panchayat</i>), a complaint was made by the villagers about the use of a machine in the construction of a MGNREGA well.	NSK reported it to the BDO, the machine work was halted, and action was taken against the Rozgar Sewak.
In Turidih village, a well had been sanctioned in the name of one person and the work was going on in another person's plot.	NSK reported the issue to the <i>Rozgar Sewak</i> and the work was started on the correct work site.

NSK has helped more than 400 families to get their job cards on time. NSK put the job card application form along with the receipts; therefore, not providing the job card on time would be a violation of the Act on the part of the block administration. The block administration took its responsibility seriously and provided all the job cards on time. Earlier, villagers were apprehensive about making complaints but because they know that they can approach NSK, they now are confident

about raising issues. And because the issues are resolved promptly, it has led to people believing in the system, and they have begun raising their voices against the malpractices.

However, this also led to serious threats to NSK staff from contractors and the *panchayat* staff. Because NSK had the backing of women's collectives, it not deterred by such threats.

ENHANCED ROLE OF PRI IN MGNREGA

In Raidih, the role of the PRI was negligible, especially in MGNREGA. PRI representatives worked as mere support hands of the block administration. They had no decision-making powers on MGNREGA. *Panchayat* offices existed but always remained locked. For every small work, villagers had to go to the block office. The block administration took the credit for any achievements but passed on the onus of failure to PRIs. PRI representatives became the contractors for the block.

After going to Kerala for an exposure visit, to understand the convergence of PRIs and the community based organization, Kudumbashree, PRADAN, along with the Kudumbashree resource persons, conducted

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a PRI-CBO convergence workshop for Federation members. This helped the Federation understand that they need not compete with PRIs but could build linkages with them and support them for the holistic development of the village or the *panchayat*. The Federation also realized that a shared vision with the PRI would help in the overall development and lead to less conflict between the two. To work jointly, the first step would be to strengthen the PRI. The concept of PRIs was completely

new to Jharkhand; it was only as recent as in 2010 that a PRI election was held in the state for the first time.

To strengthen the PRI, the institution had to first become active. To have an active PRI, it is required to have a working *panchayat* office where people can access services. The most vibrant and important initiative was the Rozgar Diwas, for which the *panchayat* office had to open at least once in a week for MGNREGA-related works.

Initially, the hurdles were that the villagers were not coming to the *panchayat* office, the PRI representatives were not giving time in the *panchayat* office, etc. The Rozgar Diwas changed all that. It brought so many people to the *panchayat* office that the staff had to work hard and late into the night on that day. The success of the Rozgar Diwas forced the BDO to make it compulsory for every *panchayat* to have one. In a recent meeting of the BDO and the PRI representatives, a discussion was whether to have the Rozgar Diwas twice a week.

The advantages of holding the Rozgar Diwas are that villagers have direct access to their

panchayat, there is no need to go to the block office for each small issue; PRI representatives have found a space to work; villagers have access to and can question their own people easily and they do not need to interact with the BDO or other officials of the block; and although initially meant for MGNREGA work, other issues are also being addressed on the day.

Other than this, *panchayat*-level workshops and meetings organized by the Federation have increased the interaction between the villagers and the PRI. Through this, a collective effort is being made in Gumla. This is the endeavour

to change MGNREGA from a government programme to a people's programme.

The success of the CFT Programme and the MGNREGA campaign has infused new energy, passion and approach to the Scheme. This year, PRADAN, the district administration, PRI and Federation have decided to expand this approach to the entire block. The villagers are now planning the successful implementation of the 'Integrated Participatory Planning Exercise—IPPE' (*Yojna Banao Abhiyaan*), a central government's programme, to add a new dimension to the development of Jharkhand.