

# Power Play and the MGNREGA: Impressions from Khunti—1

KANDALA SINGH

*Despite the conflict and power politics that come into play, there is tremendous scope for collective action through collaboration with the government, unions, people's movements and gram sabhas to ensure effective implementation of NREGA*

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been hailed as a landmark legislation in India because it places the concept of rights at the centre stage of the processes of the Act's implementation. A rights-based approach to development seeks to empower people themselves, especially the most marginalized, and to hold accountable those who have a duty to act (UNHCHR, 2006). This people-centred approach is reflected in several measures of the NREGA, for example, in the vesting of power and responsibility of planning with the *gram sabha*, whereby people come together as a community to plan for their collective development. Another example is the demand-based approach to work, whereby individual workers and households have to seek work actively by demanding it from the government.

In other words, the rights-based approach incorporated in the NREGA focuses on people as individuals being active agents of their own development. Taking this as the point of departure, this article explores stories of the agents of development—individuals and communities—that the NREGA seeks to activate through empowerment. These stories were gathered during a three-day visit to Khunti block in Jharkhand in February 2010. Though the instances cited later in this article may be nothing more than context-specific impressions, the larger picture they paint is more universal/general in nature. By 'universal/general', I do not mean that these are representative of larger trends in the implementation of the NREGA in Jharkhand but that these reflect concerns and sentiments, and highlight problems of power and agency on the ground faced by several 'agents of development' that the Act seeks to employ. Before delving into these stories, I am going to outline the context in which these have been gathered.

## THE CONTEXT

The purpose of our visit to Khunti in February 2010 was to understand how NREGA works on the ground and how NGOs such as Pradan can play an active role in strengthening the implementation of the Act. We interacted extensively with the staff of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra in Khunti, a centre that provides support to *mazdoors* (labourers) seeking employment under the Act.

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Our field trips included visits to three different villages in Siladon *panchayat*, and to a cluster-level meeting of Pradan's women self help groups (SHGs). Pradan supports 270 women SHGs, or *mahila mandals*, in Jharkhand. All the villages we visited had more than one *mahila mandal*.

The villages to be visited were selected by the NREGA Sahayata Kendra; these were villages in which the Kendra is currently working. Thus, the stories that emerge from these villages do not represent the situation of NREGA in all the villages in Jharkhand, or even Khunti.

### **SULHE**

Sulhe village has a mixed population of both Sadans (Other Backward Classes—OBCs) and

Mundas (a tribal group), with the majority being the Mundas. There was an open construction site—a road—when we visited the village. Sulhe is one of the success stories of Siladon because it is one of the few villages in which worksite facilities have been provided, thanks to the efforts of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra. These include a shade to provide respite from the sun, a person to provide drinking water to the workers and a caregiver for the children of workers. On the other hand, there are several lapses and complaints in the implementation of the NREGA in the village; workers complained about the long distances and the expense involved in getting to the bank, and the fact that the soil they work on is extremely hard and filled with stones. The attitude of the bank workers was another grievance.

## SARIDKHEL

We got the opportunity to attend a meeting of cluster leaders of women SHGs from ten different villages. When the issue of NREGA was probed, the women said that although they know that the issue is relevant because it concerns their daily wages, they do not know how to go about accessing their rights under the Act. Our attempt to discuss the concept of rights (*hak* or *adhikaar*) was met with silence and blank stares, and it took us some time to explain what rights mean.

## BELAHATHI

Belahathi's population comprises 150 Sadan families. The people of Belahathi came across as far more aware and vocal as compared to the residents of the other villages we visited. The fact that eight *mahila mandals* are active in this village testifies to this. This village was considered one of the 'better NREGA villages' by the Sahayata Kendra. In June 2009, some labourers from Belahathi were granted compensation for late payments by the district authorities.

Despite this, the average man days available to each job-card holder amount to an average of a mere 20–40 per year. The women said that they are not well versed with the NREGA processes and its nitty-gritties, and that the implementation of the scheme in the village does not figure as a topic of discussion in the weekly meetings of the *mahila mandal*.

## IRUD

Irud village has a mixed population. Clearly, the NREGA Sahayata Kendra has been active there; one of the worksite supervisors is a *sathi* of the Sahayata Kendra and thanks to whom worksite facilities (crèche, shade, first-aid kit and drinking water) are all in place. Some labourers from Irud received compensation for delayed payments from the

state last year. At the time of our visit, work on a road was underway. However, the soil that was to be worked on was extremely stony, which should ideally have been noted so that the piece rate to be paid to the *mazdoors* could be doubled. Worksite supervisors are not trained to know the difference because this assessment must be made by junior engineers, who rarely show up in the villages, the *mazdoors* were forced to labour on the stony soil for low wages.

Our visits to these multiple locations revealed different facets of the dynamics of how NREGA plays out in the village. As stated earlier, the implementation of NREGA in the villages that the Kendra has worked in (Sulhe, Irud and Belahathi) is not necessarily representative of the situation of Khunti block as a whole. The Kendra's efforts have ensured that these are some of the better NREGA villages. Indeed, the blank responses of the

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women (who hail from villages where the Kendra hasn't worked) in the meeting in Saridkhel seem to suggest the same. When viewed from a more general level, the myriad problems surrounding the implementation of the NREGA are rooted in the same theme: inequalities of power and the lack of agency on the ground. These power dynamics include inequalities of knowledge, agency and the concept of rights. What follows is an articulation of the nature and implications of power play from the perspective of the agents of development, that is, the *mazdoors*.

### POWER DYNAMICS

The power dynamics in the implementation of an Act such as the NREGA operate at multiple levels, starting from the individual to the interaction between *mazdoors* and formal institutions such as banks and agents of the government.

At a micro level, that is, the level of the individual, the demand-based approach inculcated in the NREGA is hard to implement because of the lack of awareness of, confidence in and information available to the average labourer. These complexities are further compounded in the face of authoritative institutions such as the government. In other words, individuals on the ground are not equipped with the power and agency required to play the role of active agents of social change. The blank stares we received at the meeting in Belahathi served as a reminder that the concept of rights is imposed from the top, and does not strike a chord on the ground. If one is to advocate a rights-based approach, it needs to be discussed, advocated and inculcated on the ground beyond the parameters of merely the NREGA. This is especially true for areas such as Khunti, where a strong people's *sangathan* (union) does not exist. At another level, there are power inequalities

within the village that hinder the effective implementation of an Act like NREGA. Sulhe village, where Champa *didi* is a worksite supervisor, or mate, is an illustration of this. The main job of mates is to record attendance in the muster rolls, and ensure that worksite facilities such as crèche and shade, water and medicine are in place. The *mazdoors* of Sulhe complained that Champa *didi* did not update muster rolls regularly, which meant that several *mazdoors* have not been paid for the work they have done. One labourer has as many as Rs 4,100 in dues, which he has not received because of Champa *didi's* carelessness. When asked why they did not complain about her in the *gram sabha*, the *mazdoors* said that they were scared to say anything against her because she is the *gram pradhan's* wife. When we spoke to Champa *didi*, she seemed shy and reclusive and hesitant to answer even simple questions about her day-to-day life in the village. Her husband sat with us and dominated the conversation. The idea behind appointing women as mates was to empower them to play a proactive role in implementing the Act. This has not worked in Champa *didi's* case because her husband is the *gram pradhan*. The staff of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra informed us that women, who attend the sabha or work as mates, often end up acting as proxy mates for their husbands.

Thus, the power dynamics in the *gram sabha* and gender inequalities in the village play a role in hindering the effective implementation of an Act that places everyone at par.

The most obvious power inequalities function at yet another level—that of interaction between the villagers and formal institutions such as banks and agents of the government. The dominant approach/attitude of these power structures towards the *mazdoors* is

indifferent, even hostile. There is a systematic cycle of subversion of the NREGA at every step of the Act, right from the time the *mazdoor* files a job application and does not receive a receipt to when the banks refuse to update his/her passbook. The labourers' lack of knowledge power/ignorance of the details of how the entire cycle is supposed to function coupled with low confidence to challenge authority compounds their inability to demand their rights.

The intention here is not to paint an entirely dark picture of government agents; without a doubt, there are several examples of government agents trying their best to ensure that the Act is implemented smoothly. Government agents, in charge of NREGA work, often have other responsibilities as well and are overworked. Nevertheless, the *mazdoor* faces hostility and apathy, rooted in the deep-seated class biases of our society.

Another area where *mazdoors* encounter hostile attitudes is the bank timings. Banks often entertain *mazdoors* only for a short while in the afternoon, which is too short a time for all the *mazdoors* to be attended to by the bank staff. The long distance to the bank combined with this unsuitable timing results in the loss of a working day for the *mazdoors* because they cannot carry out NREGA work either in the morning or in the second half of the day.

Thus, hostility and indifference dominate interactions between the government and its citizens. For the *mazdoor* at the receiving end, these attitudes compound his/her lack of faith in the government and the system.

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The humiliation that the *mazdoors* experience at the hands of such a system often borders on dehumanization. Workers who complained about being humiliated said, "*Hum bhi to insaan hi hain na* (We too are humans)."

Such power play at multiple levels—from the *gram pradhan* to the junior engineer and banks—creates a deadlock in which the *mazdoor* is trapped

and is confronted with an endless circle of power structures that he/she mostly does not even dare to attempt to penetrate because of his/her ignorance and diffidence.

In spite of these problems on the ground, the NREGA Sahayata Kendra's efforts have borne fruit. Following their efforts, 262 labourers were granted compensation for late payment last year and worksite facilities have been constructed. Most important, the four mates or *sathis*, who work for the Sahayata Kendra, are drawn from these villages themselves, which means that the Kendra has been successful in activating the agency of some people, who are beneficiaries of the Act. This is a small but significant step towards achieving the ideal of a demand-based approach for implementing the Act.

There are other heartening facts that indicate that there is great scope for collective action in Khunti. NREGS and the wage incentives it provides for each individual household have not managed to disrupt traditional working relations and practices such as *shramdaan*, which have close bearings on a sense of community ownership. Irud, for example, has retained the minimal wages (Rs 21–40) that the villagers demand to work on

each other's lands. These wages are kept deliberately low to ensure that even the poorer farmers are able to pay these. Barring occasional exceptions, the *gram sabha* is sensitive to requests by marginal farmers, who do not want their minimal land to be used for NREGA work. The *sathis* of the Sahayata Kendra inform us that the villagers have a high level of consideration for each other. There is an unspoken understanding in each village that NREGA work should be carried out for six months so that the rest of the year can be utilized to work on the fields, so that no individual farmer's crop suffers. All these factors indicate that whereas village society is by no means bereft of conflict and power politics, there is tremendous scope for collective action. This can be tapped.

***Pradan's widespread institutional network—the 270 mahila mandals it has initiated in Jharkhand—is an ideal platform to broach the topic of rights and the awareness of rights.***

## **A WAY FORWARD—POSSIBLE APPROACHES AND ROLES FOR PRADAN**

The above stories demonstrate that the cycles of systematic subversion and exploitation of the NREGA reflect deep-seated inequalities of power: lack of knowledge and confidence. How is one to challenge these inequalities and transform the equations? The work of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra has made a dent in the existing power structures and thus represents a step towards the goal. Pradan and other voluntary sector organizations that have the potential to influence change in this area can learn a few lessons from the work of the Sahayata Kendra.

### **COLLABORATIVE APPROACH**

Mihir Shah (2007), in his article titled 'Employment Guarantee, Civil Society and Indian Democracy', which appeared in the November issue of *Economic and Political Weekly* (pp. 43–51), argues that the most suitable approach to implement NREGA effectively is one of collaboration and working with the government. The work of



the NREGA Sahayata Kendra and the change it has managed to effect serves testimony to the validity of such an approach.

Anisha from the Sahayata Kendra spoke about her struggle in getting the agents of the government to do their bit to ensure the effective implementation of the Act. When the initial attempts at persuasion failed, the Sahayata Kendra undertook a PR exercise.

Week after week, Anisha recalled, they would walk into the District Collector's office and other government agents and make casual conversation with them. This helped in turning around the government's otherwise hostile and defensive attitude towards the Kendra, and several of them gradually came to see that the Kendra wanted to work with, and not against, them. The Kendra has a much smoother working relationship with the government agents now, thanks to which they have managed to make some amount of change.

Further, the benefits of collaboration for the Sahayata Kendra are not limited to working with the government alone. Collaborations with other unions/people's movements have helped the Kendras in other locations in Jharkhand. In the absence of such a network in Khunti, the Sahayata Kendra here has had to start from scratch, which has limited its outreach. In this light, collaboration between Pradan and the Sahayata Kendra in Khunti could go a long way in facilitating a smoother implementation of the Act. Pradan's widespread institutional network—the 270 *mahila mandals* it has initiated in Jharkhand—is an ideal platform to broach the topic of rights and the awareness

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of rights. The sheer scale and numbers of the women involved can ensure widespread dissemination and discussion of rights and procedures of the NREGA, which will be a step forward in activating the agency of the *mazdoors* and creating a demand on their part for the fulfillment of their rights.

### PLANNING

Another level at which Pradan can intervene effectively is by

working with *gram sabhas* to build their capacities in village planning. Village planning is Pradan's strength and is an effective point of intervention because it addresses the root cause of a lot of lapses in the implementation of the NREGA. This could be done either in collaboration with the government or by working with Pradan's SHGs. Working with the women SHGs could also help address the gender inequalities in the *gram sabha*.

### CONCLUSION

The struggle to ensure the effective implementation of NREGA entails a series of micro endeavours to change attitudes. Whether one talks about addressing power imbalances within the village between the *gram pradhan* and the *mazdoors* and between the men and the women, or about holding the agents of government accountable to the *mazdoors*, the effort is to change attitudes and perceptions about 'the self' and 'the other', transform relationships and enhance the agency of the most powerless to reclaim power for themselves. Our visit exposed us to how the work of one NREGA Sahayata Kendra has taken significant steps in this direction. Pradan can make a significant contribution towards this.