

Reflections on a *Jan Sunwai* on MGNREGA

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Airing grievances and raising issues regarding the implementation of MGNREGA, the stakeholders utilize the forum of the Jan Sunwai to come face-to-face with each other on a single platform to discuss and learn about the shortcomings and problems that each of them face.

On 29 December 2009, I happened to witness a *Jan Sunwai* (public hearing) in the nature of a social audit conducted by Jean Drèze and his team of students in Siladon *panchayat* in Khunti district. Jean Drèze is an Indian development economist of Belgian origin. He is currently Professor at the G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, and honorary Professor, Delhi School of Economics. He is a member of the National Advisory Council of India.

This is a brief report on the event and my thoughts thereafter. John Drèze and his co-worker, Reetika Khera, were in Khunti reviewing the implementation of the MGNREGS programme. They had a team of young college students/graduates to assist them in this. These students were also assisting villagers through the NREGA Sahayata Kendra (NREGA Assistance Centre), located at the district headquarters. This report is adapted from the official minutes of this event, recorded by NREGA Sahayata Kendra.

John Drèze and the NREGA Sahayata Kendra in Khunti organized a *Jan Sunwai* to discuss NREGA-related issues in Siladon *gram panchayat*. It was attended by Amaresh Sinha (Block Programme Officer, Khunti), the Block Statistical Officer and the Block Supply Officer (BSO). *Gram panchayat* officials—Fateh Narayan Singh (Junior Engineer), Manga Ram (*Panchayat Sewak*) and Manoj (*Gram Rozgar Sewak*)—were also present. The meeting was also attended by Balam, Commissioner of Food Security for the state, appointed by the Supreme Court and a few media persons.

The meeting began at around 1 p.m. and lasted for two-and-a-half hours. It took place near the marketplace on a Tuesday, which happens to be market day in Siladon; the location was probably chosen keeping the convenience for the villagers in mind. Jean Drèze, Reetika Khera and few local cadres used a market plinth under a huge tamarind tree as the podium, and the villagers and the university students sat scattered in semi-circular fashion. Some of the government officials sat on the plinth whereas some sat on chairs to the left of the podium. The media persons (as is usual in rural Jharkhand!) came late and recorded the meeting on video. There were hardly any village women for three-fourths of the meeting. Towards the end, a few women came and were invited to sit in the centre.

This hearing was not a discrete event. Preparatory work, conducted by the NREGA Sahayata Kendra team between 22 and 28 December, involved a survey of the NREGS work that was carried out in 18 villages. The team would follow-up the issues that were raised in the hearing.

The *Jan Sunwai* began with an introduction by Reetika Khera, who explained its purpose and introduced the NREGA Sahayata Kendra team. She opined that whereas there had been major improvements in Siladon *gram panchayat*, much remained to be done. She then invited a village member of the local cadre built by the Sahayata Kendra to share the salient features of the NREGS programme, which he did brilliantly in the local language, Mundari.

Jean Drèze then presented the main findings of the NREGS survey conducted between 22 and 28 December. He first shared the positive aspects—positive in comparison to the past. An earlier survey of NREGS was conducted in this area in May–June 2009. At that time, NREGS was on the verge of collapse, not only in Siladon but in all of Khunti block. Because of long delays in wage payments, the workers had lost interest in NREGS and most of the worksites had been closed. Drèze said that the latest survey had recorded a major increase in the scale of work. Many worksites were opened after the villagers applied for work. Also, many worksites had facilities such as shade, drinking water, first aid, and even, in one case, child care. The team had also observed several instances of well-designed works, such as a 3-km approach road to Irud village, highlighting the remarkable skill and motivation of the NREGS workers. The team,

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however, had found many irregularities in the implementation of NREGS. For example, many villagers had bank-related problems such as being unable to obtain a passbook or getting inadequate attention from the bank staff. Delays in wage payments persisted, and the Junior Engineers often failed to measure people's work in time.

There was then a lively discussion of the problems faced by NREGS workers, beginning with the delays in wage payments. About 10 workers from Taro village said that, even after several months, they had not been paid their full wages. Jamal Khan, one of the workers, claimed that they had been told to sign the muster roll before being paid. The *abhiakarta* told them that he had forwarded the muster rolls to the block office. When Manoj, the *Gram Rozgar Sevak*, was asked why the wages had not been paid, he replied that the block had completed all pending payments in Taro. It was decided that a full audit of this particular work would be conducted on 10 January in the presence of the *Gram Rozgar Sevak*, *Panchayat Sevak* and Block Programme Officer. In another case of delayed payments, Phagu Singh Munda of Chukru village said that NREGS work on his land had stopped because the wages had not been paid on time.

BANK-RELATED ISSUES

Several bank-related problems faced by NREGS workers came up for discussion. The manager of the local branch of Indian Overseas Bank, Dipankar Tudu, was present. To start with, the fact that many account holders had not been issued passbooks was raised. Some NREGS workers, such as Soma

Munda from Sodag village, were still waiting to open a bank account; it was not clear how he had been paid without a bank account. The issue of incomplete or incorrect passbook entries was also raised. Reetika Khera stressed the importance of accurate entries in the passbooks. Rajendra from Irud village, among others, said that his passbook was not being updated regularly. This complaint had been received from many villagers.

Another issue was that separate passbooks had not been issued for women. Many women were being paid through their husband's accounts because they did not have accounts of their own. The survey team demanded that passbooks should be issued immediately to all NREGS workers, with special attention to women. Complete and correct entries should also be made in the passbooks. Next, it was reported that NREGS workers were not treated with adequate respect by the bank staff. For instance, they were told that they could access their accounts only from 12 to 3 p.m. Another common problem was that the bank had held up payments to NREGS workers until after the 5th of every month.

Mr. Tudu, explained that the bank had been constrained because it had to open many NREGS accounts, making it difficult to issue passbooks in some cases. He said that problems with the passbook entries would be resolved, and that he would speak to the bank staff to ensure better service to the NREGS workers. Regarding the suspension of NREGS payments until 5 January, he said it was because many of the bank staff were on

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holiday. As for asking workers to come after 12 p.m., he explained that a separate counter for NREGS workers had been opened from 12 to 3 p.m. He was requested to ensure that when this counter is not open, NREGS workers have access to the main counter.

COMPLAINTS AGAINST JUNIOR ENGINEERS

There were several complaints against the Junior Engineers, including the fact that they do

not visit worksites or measure people's work, and that the schedule of rates is not followed when *chowkas* (pits) are measured. Mahendra Munda from Alaundi village said that even in rocky soil, labourers were asked to dig pits, as per norms that apply to soft soil. As a result, the labourers had stopped working and the work had come to a standstill.

MATE-RELATED PROBLEMS

An encouraging finding of the survey was that mates had been posted at every worksite for the purpose of worksite management, including the maintenance of muster rolls, arranging worksite facilities and measuring *chowkas*. Because some mates thought that they were not adequately trained, they requested Mr. Amaresh Sinha to arrange for further training for mates.

Another complaint of the mates was that they are not allowed to enter the date of work on the muster roll. Mr. Amaresh Sinha acknowledged that this was a serious issue and promised to ensure that this practice is corrected.

Mangal Singh Pahan, who works as an NREGS mate in Chitramu village, said that mates were not paid Rs 103 per day, as was

the norm laid down, and were, therefore, digging pits along with the labourers in order to earn at least Rs 99 per day.

OTHER ISSUES

When the public hearing was opened for other issues, several people from Remta village came forward to testify that they had been given only 29 kg of wheat and rice by the PDS ration dealer instead of the 35 kg to which they are entitled. This created a flutter in the audience and some people from other villages said that they had the same complaint. In fact, in a surprise visit by NREGA Sahayata Kendra team to the PDS ration shop at Dabgana village on 27 December, the survey team found that the dealer was entering 35 kg in the records but only giving people 29 to 32 kg of grain.

The BSO assured the gathering that he would take action if he were given a written complaint. Mr. Balram pointed out that, in fact, it was the BSO's responsibility to conduct spot checks without waiting for complaints. He said that the theft of PDS grain was particularly shameful at the time of drought. The BSO agreed to conduct immediate enquiries in the area (including Dabgana and Jikki villages) and prepare action-taken reports within a month.

DEMANDS OF THE GATHERING

A summary of the Charter of Demands that was placed before the local administration is as follows:

1. OPENING OF NREGS WORKS

- NREGS worksites should be kept open until June 2011 so that people have recourse to local employment during the drought year. Work should be implemented at the worksites as per the law.

2. BANK-RELATED DEMANDS

- The opening of accounts for NREGS workers, especially female workers, should be expedited.
- All NREGS workers should be issued bank passbooks without any further delay or excuses.
- The passbooks of NREGS workers should be updated regularly and accurately.
- NREGS workers should be treated with respect like other bank customers.

3. DEMANDS RELATING TO ENGINEERS

- Junior Engineers should be made accountable for any delay in measuring *chowkas*, leading to delays in wage payments.
- They should measure the *chowkas*, in accordance with the norms laid out in the Schedule of Rates. In particular, the wage norms for rocky soils should be different from those for soft soils.

4. MATE-RELATED DEMANDS

- Regular training of mates should be conducted by the district administration.
- Mates should be allowed to enter the dates on the muster rolls, which they maintain.
- They should be paid the wages due to them.

5. OTHER DEMANDS

- Keeping in mind the cheating in the distribution of PDS rations, the BSO should take immediate action against the concerned ration dealers.

REFLECTIONS

The testimonies of the wage earners indicate that corruption has been countered at the cost of their convenience: whereas bank payments of wages make it much harder to embezzle NREGA funds, the new system



also means that workers have to make long trips to the bank to collect their wages. The bank in Khunti is about 14 km from the nearest village in Siladon *panchayat* and 26 km from the farthest! At the bank, the villagers are often not treated with the respect shown to other customers. Their passbooks are also not properly updated, making it difficult for them to ascertain if they have received their dues. They often have to queue in front of a separate counter, which is open for specified hours on specified days. One reason given for such laxity by banks is that they are overstressed by their normal business operations, and that their officers have to attend election duty as well. Banks, perhaps, are worried about the small and insignificant volume of transactions conducted by a large number of the poor wage earners. This only means added burden for the bank without any significant returns in terms of long-term deposits, fixed deposits, safe credit arrangements, etc.

Several times in the *Jan Sunwai*, the government functionaries and bankers either evaded the issues/queries raised by NREGS workers or made unrealistic promises. The Junior Engineer, for example, repeatedly

said that he was ignorant of these anomalies and that he would not repeat these mistakes in the future. The hearing should, ideally, have focused on action to be taken against careless officials. The IOB bank official even committed to opening a new branch of IOB when requested by the public; this is an impractical solution because a branch had been recently closed in Siladon because of the lack of business. Such meetings will not be taken seriously by the public if no action is taken on the aberrations exposed.

Surveys and the presence of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra and Jean Dreze in the past year or so seem to have enhanced the implementation quality of the NREGA. The survey (held again after six months), in December 2009 revealed encouraging changes. Through the *gram panchayat*, it was found that MGNREGA worksites had been reactivated and that work had been provided to those who had applied for work. At many worksites, the mandatory facilities (shade, water and first-aid) were in place—a rare sight six months earlier. At one worksite, the investigators even found child-care facilities. In Irud village, for instance, there is a beautiful approach road, 3 km long, reflecting the remarkable motivation of NREGS workers. Verification of electronic Job Cards (downloaded from the Internet) by the NREGA team and a comparison with the Bank passbooks uncovered no evidence of major fraud—another positive finding, compared to the situation that prevailed two years ago when a social audit of NREGS in this area exposed rampant corruption.

These positive experiences, shared by the NREGS team in Khunti, demonstrate the possibility of significant improvements in the implementation of NREGS in Jharkhand through public vigilance.

The discussions revealed the gaps in the villagers' understanding and response towards NREGS implementation. There are shortcomings from the government officials' side as well. The problems faced by villagers relate to lack of awareness and motivation to work. The gaps on the government's part are of three kinds: one relates to the nature of operational difficulty amounting to managing a large number of accounts and making recurrent payments to a great number of beneficiaries on short notice, the second to the lack of technical know-how of land and water activity and the third to the unethical behaviour that they engage in, taking advantage of labourers' ignorance. Clearly, a case for civil society intervention. Just like Pradan intervened with SHGs as well as bankers to make credit available to rural households, there is a transformative role to play here as well. SHGs might be the best platform to do this.

The social audit method addresses only a part of the issues of implementation, mainly of the moral hazard nature, and to some extent creates 'dialoguing', which bridges the issues related to communication gap. The social audit methodology needs to be compounded with (i) awareness generation programme, (ii) understanding operational difficulties of government officials and sensitizing them (iii) helping govt officials and communities to generate better work plans and (iv) community rooted systems to track violations of rights and entitlements.

This *Jan Sunwai* was attended by government officials primarily because Jean Drèze was anchoring the event, and not because the community has a 'say' in what is happening around or can habitually question officials

(though this event surely shed light on what the format for such an exercise should be). This model of social audit is perhaps not sustainable in areas like Khunti! We need to create a model, in which the community itself is prepared to raise its voice, demand rights and entitlements, and (even if it is not heard) question irregularities.

The methodology of social audit can be carried out by SHGs, its clusters and federations. Some quick arithmetic would tell us that, by using this methodology, we may influence NREGS, PDS, health and other social sector programmes, and impact livelihoods in greater numbers than what we do by direct economic activity. However, by no means, should the latter approach be stopped.

Now that we have a better legal framework—MGNREGA, RTI, Forest Rights 2006, PESA, etc.—to claim rights and entitlements, can we have a prototype whereby our SHGs take up the responsibility to track the extent and reach of entitlement to its members? It could be a weekly non-financial documentation by SHGs, like the Regular Meeting Transaction Statements (RMTS, which detail weekly financial transactions). SHGs could then take action on some issues in their meetings, and forward the issues they cannot handle to the cluster bodies. Similarly, recording can be done at the cluster level and pending matters can be relayed to the federation. Federations could be widely networked to many government and non-government agencies and could influence local public representatives by calling them to *Jan Sunwais* and demanding that action be taken by the system to deliver services at the grass roots.