

# ACTIVATING PANCHAYATS THROUGH MGNREGA



Implementing MGNREGA in its fullness is a movement to establish local democracy and instruments of local governance, honour local wisdom and knowledge, promote power decentralization to *panchayats* and encourage participatory decision-making. Jharkhand's experience warrants telling.

## Introduction

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**T**HE MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is considered to be the foundation for establishing local democracy. The Act itself is empowering for local governance and the provisions of the Act strongly promote power decentralization to *panchayats* and villages. The Act honours local knowledge and wisdom, and its operational structure is based on the principles of decentralized and participatory decision-making.

The provisions of decentralized planning and implementation processes embedded in MGNREGA have great power to establish the instruments of local governance and activate *gram sabhas* (GSs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

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MGNREGA's operations at the grass roots are supposed to strengthen the local accountability structures and ensure transparent implementation on the ground. Whereas the Act itself is amply equipped with provisions for decentralized operations, this potential is yet to be fully realized.

### **The Vision of Decentralized Governance**

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The Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) experience in Jharkhand can be seen as a practice and praxis-based study of the gradual realization of the envisioned strong rural decentralization and the strengthening of the local governance. The positive experiences of the CFT programme have shown a few glimpses, which have helped us understand how through strategic engagement with the community, the administration and the elected local representatives, normative influences can be ensured, which can lead to a change in culture of the rural governance eco-system.

The idea of strong local governance is incomplete without the idea of democratic

decentralization, wherein people's participation in planning, decision-making and monitoring has to be fully established.

MGNREGA has given the GS the ultimate right to make their own plans, which no other institution can interfere or tamper with. It has given the *panchayats* the right to implement at least 50 per cent of the schemes under MGNREGS. In Jharkhand, the *panchayats* have been made fully responsible for 100 per cent implementation of MGNREGS.

The idea of employment guarantee completely eradicates the concept of contractor-based labour engagement in schemes, which was so far the way rural jobs were given out. The new method empowered the rural unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled people to have jobs in their locality and, at the same time, strengthened the rural service sector with opportunities in local institutions. MGNREGA promoted a system of demand-based work allocation, which empowered people to choose the time and duration of their work. It has a robust monitoring and grievance redress mechanism articulated in the Act. All this is directed to ensuring local

control and people's pro-active participation in the programme.

Whereas MGNREGA has several provisions that can be used to strengthen the processes of democratic decentralization and establish good local governance through people's participation, the CFT programme has enriched the state with many more provisions. These include circulars and detailed specific roles for each stakeholder, in the form of guidelines and office orders, which can further establish a system of people-centric planning and implementation. This also encourages strong accountability and action-strategies through the Public-PRIs-Administration integration.

### **The Jharkhand Context**

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The true potential of decentralized operations in MGNREGA is yet to be realized in Jharkhand. The *gram panchayats* (GPs) in Jharkhand are relatively new but are gradually maturing. PRIs are also at a nascent stage. Most GPs are on a learning path and the *panchayat* secretariats are not fully activated. There have been efforts, both by the government and civil society, to enhance the capacities of the

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representatives of the *panchayats* but the idea of developing GPs as an organization is very recent. Slowly, it has been learned that along with increasing the capacities of its members, the GP, as an organization, has to be capacitated holistically so that the secretariat starts functioning and proper systems and processes are put in place.

The local elite and influential people have dominated the implementation of MGNREGA for a long time, thereby creating space for the middleman-contractor nexus to control the show. In the absence of a strong local governance and effective people's monitoring, the poorest remained unattended and exploited because there was lack of accountability in the system and the demand side, too, was not properly developed. Institutional linkages between the GSs and the GPs are not well-established and the block office has been the centre of all key developmental activities. The dependence on the block administration for implementation of schemes and supply of social welfare benefits has been very high and, thus, the system of delivery has been weak and non-transparent. In such a context, a handful of influential people become so powerful that

awareness and benefits do not reach the last person.

In the context of present-day situations in rural Jharkhand, democratization to the last layer is important, to enhance the state of delivery of services to the poor. The *panchayats* as local governing bodies, the GSs as the ultimate decision-makers for grass-roots planning and implementation and the strong democratic local people's institutions and collectives as change agents and monitors are the way forward. Whereas physical and financial power devolution to the GPs should be a key focus area, the integration between the local collectives and the PRIs for planning and monitoring of schemes and ensuring smooth and transparent service delivery to the last person is also important.

### ***Rojgar Diwas: A first step towards activating Panchayat Secretariats***

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The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) came up with a guideline to organize a *Rojgar Diwas* in the GPs in 2013, to improve work-demand generation in MGNREGS. However, MGNREGS is a demand-based employment guarantee programme and its

true spirit never materialized on the ground because implementation was mostly target-based and controlled by the block administration. Also, the contractor-based supply mechanism was established in many areas due to the local malpractices and the lack of monitoring.

Although civil societies and governments have run demand generation drives, called *Kaam Maango Abhiyan*, from time to time in villages to regularize work-demand and to ensure a system of demand-based allocation, there are hardly any spontaneous work-demands. The workers usually wait for supervisors and frontline functionaries to come to them and ask them to work and, thereafter, create a demand for work. The general notion among the workers is that work is only allocated if the schemes are sanctioned and opened.

*Rojgar Diwas* was supposed to change this set idea of work-demand and allocation, and instead create a formal space at local levels to facilitate people to demand for work as and when they require it. An institutionalized platform for constant demand for work

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at the local level was the idea behind *Rojgar Diwas*. Although the original guideline from the Ministry was that the *Rojgar Diwas* should take place at least once a month, Jharkhand has further added a lot of value to make it a more effective platform at the level of the GPs.

In Jharkhand, the idea of *Rojgar Diwas* was seen as an opportunity to activate GP secretariats through MGNREGA transactions. Both, the state as well as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), engaged in the CFT programme, have considered this as an opportunity to facilitate workers and PRI representatives. They have worked towards making the office of the GP a vibrant place, where citizens are assisted and supported to access critical inputs and services. The state government has further built on the MoRD guidelines and ordered for a weekly *Rojgar Diwas* at the *panchayat* secretariat. In Jharkhand, where Panchayat Bhawans used to always be locked up, the opening of Panchayat Bhawans once a week for the purpose of MGNREGS transactions was a significant step. Establishing the *panchayat* office as a centre of local administration is still a distant dream; through this initiative,

however, the functionaries at the *panchayat* level are operating from the Panchayat Bhawan, ensuring services and benefits to the citizens. The infrastructure of the GPs are also getting utilized.

The *Rojgar Diwas* has been designed in such a way that all kinds of MGNREGS transactions, for example, job-card application, work-demand, work-sanctioning, and preparation of documents translation are done on that day. PRADAN has been particularly focussed on establishing this forum, with a long-term goal of activating the *panchayat* secretariat as the office of the local government.

PRADAN has been facilitating the women of Self Help Groups (SHGs) to participate in the weekly *Rojgar Diwas* with their MGNREGA agenda. It has created a positive environment around demand generation; in many *panchayats* across our CFT areas, demand-generation has been regularized through citizen participation in the *Rojgar Diwas*. Jharkhand has, however, gone beyond demand-generation and included all MGNREGS activities in the *Rojgar Diwas*. As a spill-over effect, social security schemes and agendas other than MGNREGA are also addressed in the *Rojgar Diwas*.

It has been a long struggle to regularize the weekly *Rojgar Diwas*. The success of the *Rojgar Diwas* is subject to participation of the citizens in the forum. The *panchayats* and the local administration were not very keen on activating the forum but through constant engagement with the local administration and the Panchayati Raj representatives, it was ensured that Panchayat Bhawans open and the functionaries attend the event every week. The people were also reluctant to visit the *panchayat* offices with their applications and issues because their past experiences with the administration around these issues were not very good.

One other important factor that helped the *Rojgar Diwas* gain more fuel in the state was the inclusion of the grievance redress initiatives. Historically, the system of redressal of public grievances is lacking. Grievances are often not heard and registered and, if registered, they are not monitored or followed-up on. Even a hasty survey in the villages will prove that there are various issues and grievances, which never come to the surface and only add to people's grim plight. We focussed on the people's issues and grievances in the CFT

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programme because MGNREGA, primarily being an employment-generation programme, could not deal with unresolved and unattended public grievances.

People's grievances needed to be heard, registered and constantly followed up at all levels. The platform of the *Rojgar Diwas* was considered to be an ideal forum to attend to the citizens' grievances because the representatives from the administration would be present. Important it is that local matters are registered and resolved locally, and that people should not find it difficult to register their grievances. Therefore, *panchayat* secretariats were activated for dealing with grievances, an idea which increased people's participation in *Rojgar Diwas*.

*Panchayats* have gradually earned credibility and the offices of the GPS have gained relevance through the initiative of the *Rojgar Diwas*. This is a pioneering initiative, which now needs to be sustained and built upon further. The challenge now is to keep Panchayat Bhawans open for the rest of the days in the week and ensure that the secretariats are activated for other transactions as well.

### ***Panchayats* role in sanctioning: A step towards financial autonomy**

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Whereas the *Yojna Banao Abhiyan* was hugely impactful in the villages and was widely acclaimed, the story of the implementation of schemes was not as encouraging as the planning. The villagers had planned many assets but only some of these received attention from, or were sanctioned by, the administration.

So far, GPS had almost no role in the sanctioning process in Jharkhand. Incorporating the learning from the past, the state came up with a revised scheme sanctioning guidelines, which incorporated two major provisions to enable GPS to have a strong say in the matter of sanctioning the schemes. For the first time, *panchayats* were being empowered to prioritize the schemes for sanctioning. The state ordered that individual schemes of up to Rs 1 lakh and community benefit schemes of up to Rs 1.5 lakhs would not require any verification from the Circle Officer and could be passed with a self-declaration from the owner. These initiatives simplified the sanctioning process and ensured

the GP's role in the process of sanctioning.

PRADAN worked very closely with the GPS to ensure that local priorities were honoured and schemes were sanctioned according to the needs of the GPS. Due to the effective engagement of the CFT, many schemes were sanctioned and opened, and several assets were created. The *panchayat's* interactions with the state and the political executives were a lesson in how democratic decentralization would always be a journey full of struggle and strategic battles. Because of CFT's engagement, the local administration, in many cases, gave in to honour the GPS' plans and priorities.

Hatnatodang *panchayat* in Chakradharpur block has shown a way forward and created an example for all the GPS in the state. They exercised their power to get their schemes sanctioned by the block administration. The *panchayat* prioritized and submitted a proposal for animal sheds for their *panchayats* whereas the block administration was only sanctioning farm ponds. It disallowed the priorities of the GPS.

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The GP Executive Committee members then wrote to the Principal Secretary, Rural Development, Jharkhand, referring to the revised sanctioning guideline. The new guidelines stated that prioritizing farm ponds over the local priorities vetted by the GP was illegal and such decisions should be reversed. The state issued a letter to the district, asking the administration to sanction animal sheds, as required by the GP. As a result, animal sheds were sanctioned in Hatnatodang, and other *panchayats* also got their preferred schemes.

### ***Panchayat's* role in Implementation and Monitoring**

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Learning from the experience of the CFT and taking cognizance of ground realities, the state listed out guidelines with detailed roles and responsibilities for GPs in implementation and monitoring.

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The detailed guidelines from the state empowered GPs to allocate work to workers against work-demand and also provided it monitoring powers. Below are some of the powers given to GPs under MGNREGA:

- GPs are empowered to allocate work to the workers against work-demands.
- GPs can issue work-orders to the mates.
- *Mukhiyas* have the authority to sign Fund Transfer Orders (FTOs) as second signatories; the first signatory being the *Panchayat Sewak*.
- Ward Members are supposed to verify each and every muster roll in their Wards.
- GPs are supposed to issue the completion certificates only after which the schemes can be closed in the Management Information System (MIS).
- GPs can issue supply orders to the vendors for procurement of material.
- GPs are to provide a satisfaction certificate for the material, and only then can payment for the material be made to the vendor.
- The Block Programme Officer (BPO) is to provide the monthly 2B report, which shows the work and

expenditure for a specified period of time, to all GP Executive Committee members for the purpose of monitoring.

- The BDO also has to mandatorily provide a monthly progress report to the block President/*Pramukh*.
- GPs are empowered to review *Rojgar Sewaks* and MGNREGA supervisors (*Mates*).

### **Integration of community collectives and GPs**

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We have experienced the *Yojna Banao Abhiyan*, wherein, people's collectives have taken part to ensure proper participatory and decentralized planning at the grass roots. The locals had then, in an organized way and through CBOs, partnered with PRIs to make proper plans around schemes.

*Panchayats* (being the local implementers and frontline supply machinery) and GSs (being the local decision-makers) are equal stakeholders in the process of planning. Thus, with the effective partnership between *panchayats* and community institutions (being institutionalized through the *panchayat* planning teams and the recent Ward Planning Teams

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(WPTs), the local knowledge, capacities and priorities are being honoured. Civil society's efforts in technical capacitating, in the process, further strengthens the quality of the partnership and ensures best results on the ground.

In 2018, the proposed labour budget planning was designed in a way that integration between the people and the local government takes place all the way to the Ward levels (through WPTs).

Apart from planning in 13 blocks of areas in which PRADAN is operational, we have successfully demonstrated awareness programmes through the apparatus of the women's Federation office. This has strengthened the demand mechanism and also contributed to activating the GP secretariat for MGNREGS transactions (*Rojgar Diwas*).

#### **Experiences of the CBO-PRI integration in Jharkhand (Formal and Informal)**

- Institutional linkages between the CBO and the PRI through *panchayat* planning teams (PPTs) and the WPTs for decentralized planning,

being already demonstrated everywhere

- SHG involvement has been made mandatory in Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) processes
- Active involvement of Sahayata Kendras at the GP secretariat in *Rojgar Diwas* is demonstrated in blocks such as Basia, Torpa, Shikaripara, Sonua, CKP, Peterbar, Boarijore, Kisko and Raidih.
- Frequent ward-wise camps for job-demand, awareness and other transactions are seen in Basia and Peterbar. Ward Members take the lead in such processes, with the CBOs mainly involved in organizing such camps and participating in the activities in the camps.
- Selection of SHG women Mates happens with an informal understanding among the SHG tiers, GSs and GPs in the CFT blocks.
- The Mate's joint review by the GP and the CBOs has been initiated.
- The GP help desk is part of the guidelines that is supposed to be run by the GP office, in collaboration with the MGNREGA *Sakhi* (SHG member).

#### **GPs in a Monitoring Role: A Transparency Initiative**

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*Panchayats* are empowered to monitor the schemes through several office orders and a detailed guideline on their role (monitoring with 2B reports, power to issue work orders to mates, power of allocation of works, clearly articulated roles in the sanctioning process, signatory powers, scheme completion and MIS closing of schemes, material procurement and payment, etc.). In various PRADAN and non-PRADAN locations, GPs exercise their power in sanctioning and monitoring.

Again, the Chakradharpur example from Hatnatodang *panchayat* can be taken as an inspiration when *panchayat* representatives wrote to the state that their priorities were not being honoured by the block in sanctioning schemes. Subsequently, the *panchayat's* priorities were selected over top-down impositions. Also, many *panchayat* functionaries monitor MGNREGS works and seek accountability from the administration, with the help of local CBOs and CSOs. Thus, a successful partnership opportunity between the two local bodies will trigger

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transparent implementation on the ground and will hold the administration accountable at the same time.

Scheme visits, village meetings and monitoring by *panchayat* representatives, with social audit reports (Report 2B and Report 3) for review of work-expenditure and payments, have been able to create a culture of monitoring in the area. Along with social audit initiatives, *panchayats* also actively verify reports through their organization. CFTs have played a big part in making *panchayat* representatives realize their accountability as well as responsibilities about reviewing the works and the expenditure. The accountability initiatives are a multi-tier engagement process, wherein the community, GS and GPs are simultaneously trained and capacitated to understand their roles and responsibilities. The locals can, then, question and seek accountability of the representatives and the functionaries at different levels.

In Jharkhand, there have been many examples in which *panchayats*, through effective monitoring, have been able to identify discrepancies in the physical implementation of work, in issues of workers accessing

their rights and in payment irregularities. Although dealing with leakages in the present context is a tough task, the initiatives are showing a way forward.

#### **Activating Gram Panchayat Executive Committee (GPEC) meetings: An Organization Development Initiative**

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GPECs, popularly known as *Karyakarini Samitis*, are responsible for monitoring and reviewing the progress of developmental activities in *panchayats*. As several *panchayat* Standing Committees are supposed to deal with specific areas, the GPEC comprising all the Ward Members, the *Mukhiya* and the *Panchayat Sewak* (being the Secretary to the Committee) are supposed to engage in the overall progress review of the developmental and social welfare activities in the area.

The state's guidelines have given monitoring powers to GPECs; however, it is important to work with GPs, to materialize the idea. The CFT can facilitate the GPEC forum, through the dedicated *panchayat*-level staff working on streamlining of processes in MGNREGS.

Through trainings, followed by constant engagement with members of GPEC, it has now been established that the GPECs in the CFT blocks sit at least once a month (in some blocks fortnightly) to review and monitor the MGNREGS progress. The Department of Rural Development in Jharkhand also has a special monitoring focus on the operations of the GPEC, which further helped establish and activate this forum.

In the GPs of CFT blocks, the importance of a GPEC meeting is known; the processes are now practised and the powers are exercised regularly.

GPEC members meet regularly to verify job applications, allocate work, review the maintenance of seven *panchayat*-level registers, prioritize schemes for sanctioning, *abhilekh* preparations, discussions on issues and grievances, etc.

GPEC, as an organization, has flourished and started functioning only after the CFTs intervened and provided hand-holding support to its members.

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not aware of their rights and powers because the local people's representatives, the guidelines and the office orders often did not reach the GPs. We have ensured that GP representatives are educated and oriented adequately about their powers, rights, roles and responsibilities.

It is, however, a fact that the incentives and honorariums for GP representatives are not very lucrative and 'sometimes' responsibilities become burdens. Most members of the *panchayat*, however, become engaged in the processes according to their roles because these have established their credibility among the people who elected them and also give them a sense of power when monitoring schemes and the functionaries.

### Opportunities

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The current experiences of working with GPs have further opened up several avenues to work for establishing governance mechanisms at the GP level. These experiences have been enriching and, despite the fact that representatives of PRIs are not paid adequately and not much has happened for their capacity-building and awareness, working

with *panchayats* give us great hope and encouragement.

*Panchayats* in Jharkhand are still at a nascent stage and evolving very slowly and are yet to be given key powers and controls. Although, in MGNREGA, the powers and responsibilities of the PRIs in planning and monitoring are clearly articulated, the sanctioning and financial powers are yet to be devolved to the *panchayats*.

In the present scenario, we see a lot of scope in establishing control of the local self governments over MGNREGA through the introduction of various institutional mechanisms and devolution of key powers. It is an excellent opportunity and a proper time to activate GP secretariats through MGNREGA and, then, further work on the OD processes and effective advocacy at the legislative and bureaucratic levels to ensure strengthened, responsible and accountable *panchayats* in the state.

Following are some of the key opportunities:

1) Ensure administrative sanctioning powers are devolved to GPs with effective

policy advocacy at the state level.

- 2) Ensure financial power for *panchayats* to have control over the administrative funds meant for GPs (at least 2 per cent of the contingencies).
- 3) Establish complete operations of MGNREGS transactions at the GP level by:
  - Re-enforcing the existing guidelines that define the *panchayat's* powers and responsibilities in planning, implementation and monitoring
  - Ensuring provisions for muster roll printing from the *panchayat's* log-in id (currently done from the Programme Officer, PO, log-in id) by advocating with the state and through demonstration of the idea in some places
  - Ensuring provisions for muster roll generation with the *Panchayat Sewak's* signature (currently the BPO signs on it).
  - Ensuring proper infrastructure placements at the GP secretariat through state-level advocacy and grass-roots level monitoring.

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The opportunities are many. In order to tap these opportunities, the state will have to ensure that the current bottle-necks and challenges are removed. Most of the current issues are linked with the policies of the central and the state governments, which need to be addressed by the government

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- Setting up a GP-level help desk for information, facilitation, support and grievance management is important, which may be constituted at GP levels, with participation from people's collectives and PRI representatives. Institutionalizing these collaborations will ensure more space for collectives in PRIs and, thereby, in local governance.

The opportunities are many. In order to tap these opportunities, the state will have to ensure that the current bottlenecks and challenges are removed. Most of the current issues are linked with the policies of the central and the state governments, which need to be addressed by the government.

The issue of low honorarium, financial sanctioning authority and direct access to administrative funds are major issues that need to be dealt with immediately. At present, Ward Members are not paid adequately and their payments are irregular as well. A meagre sum of Rs 200 is inadequate to fulfill the needs of Ward Members and, thus, sometimes the powers are considered a burden and are not exercised properly.

*Panchayats* are yet to get financial sanctioning powers that will make them operate independently from the block and fulfill the needs of the locals according to the requirement of the area. This is an important area to be looked at.

*Panchayats* have also been demanding direct access to two per cent of the administrative cost. This will help them operate as an independent organization and free them from the influence of the block administration.

Apart from this, one important challenge will be to ensure muster roll generation and establish an MIS at the GP level, which would need the state to write to the central government immediately.

Financial powers will also make *panchayats* empowered to deal with the major grievances of the workers. Currently, *panchayats* are not capacitated to resolve people's grievances because they have very little control over critical matters.

## Stories of Inspiration

### — Kaliga GP

As part of the Beacon *panchayat* programme, Kaliga GP was selected for a special demonstration for service delivery and implementation of schemes. The Beacon *panchayat* programme has been initiated with an aim to establish and enable GP secretariats to extend



**A picture of MIS Operator *Kajal Kumari* working at the *Kaliga GP Secretariat***

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In a state such as Jharkhand, it is important that facilitation, information, awareness, implementation, service delivery and grievance management happens at the panchayat secretariat, which is relatively closer to the people and easier to access, given the dynamics between the people and the panchayats

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services to the citizens. The critical services relating to various schemes, programmes and welfare initiatives need to be channelled through the GP secretariat, in order to make the local government active and to establish proper accountability mechanisms at the grass roots.

In Jharkhand, villages are usually located far away from the block; due to many social and local dynamics, people are routinely hassled and troubled and, sometimes, denied access to their rights and benefits. Therefore, in a state such as Jharkhand, it is important that facilitation, information, awareness, implementation, service delivery and grievance management happens at the *panchayat* secretariat, which is relatively closer to the people and easier to access, given the dynamics between the people and the *panchayats*.

The Beacon *panchayat* programme aims at strengthening GPs by developing its organizational structure (by strengthening Standing Committees and the GPEC), extending support in awareness and capacity-building, and meaningful advocacy at each level.

Kaliga is the first *panchayat* that has, to some extent, materialized the dream of activating the complete MGNREGS transactions at the GP secretariat level. In the Beacon GPs and, thereby, in Kaliga, we have been constantly promoting the following activities:

- Ward-wise awareness and transaction camps for MGNREGS, with respective Ward Members leading the camps.
- Grievance Redress Day at GPs, apart from the weekly *Rojgar Diwas*, to provide people an opportunity to register their grievances at the *panchayat* level itself.
- Regular planning by *panchayat* representatives around monitoring and scheme inspections, with reports, and carrying out the responsibilities as planned.
- Carrying out the roles and responsibilities by GP members in sanctioning, implementation, scheme closure, monitoring payments and material procurement, according to guidelines.
- Appoint *Sahayata Kendra* representatives to help people

in registration-and application-related work at the GP Secretariat on *Rojgar Diwas*.

- Regularize the GPEC meeting and maintain a GPEC checklist for measuring performance of GPs.
- Regular monitoring of Register No. 3 with original documents, in order to ensure on-time allocation and Ward Members' responsibility in allocation.

Apart from this, the *Mukhiya*, Alok Toppo, went one step ahead and took the initiative to establish the Management Information System (MIS) set-up at the *panchayat* level. For complete decentralization of MGNREGS systems, it is most important that the MIS is set up at the GP level and muster rolls generated from the local GP Secretariat.

However, in the present-day system in Jharkhand, the muster roll cannot be printed from the GP's log-in id and can only be generated and printed from the PO log-in id, which is the block log-in id. Further, the muster rolls have to be signed by the BPO when issuing them because the BPO holds the issuing authority of the muster rolls in Jharkhand.

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This arrangement between the panchayats and the block can be seen as a temporary one but has given adequate insights that the state is considering having a discussion with the Ministry over a possible change in the provision of the MIS to empower the panchayats to generate, print and issue muster rolls from panchayat log-in ids for Jharkhand

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Despite obstacles and technical obligations, Alok Toppo's indomitable spirit has brought vibrancy to our initiative in Kaliga. The *panchayat* has appointed an operator for entries related to both MGNREGS and the Fourteenth Finance Commission (FFC) works, and pays the MIS operator from the FFC money. The operator was trained for a month in the block before finally getting placed at the *panchayat*.

Further, the block has given its PO log-in id in good faith to the *panchayat* operator and they have been generating, printing and issuing muster rolls from the *panchayat* itself with the BPO signing the muster rolls in bulk from time to time. This arrangement between the *panchayats* and the block can be seen as a temporary one but has given adequate insights that the state is considering having a discussion with the Ministry over a possible change in the provision of the MIS to empower the *panchayats* to generate, print and issue muster rolls from *panchayat* log-in ids for Jharkhand. However, there are multiple technical glitches in achieving this, including the change of issuing authority (currently the BPO in Jharkhand)

but a scope for discussion was created, which can prove to be a game-changer for the question of decentralization in the coming days.

Transactions such as the Entry of demands, Job-card generation, MR generation, Entry of filled MR, Wage-list generation, Fund Transfer Order (FTO) generation and FTO signing have been possible in the GP secretariat itself and this has made implementation far easier at the local level. The *Rojgar Sewak's* job has become easier because he no longer has to shuttle between the villages and the block to make things happen on time and can easily operate from the Panchayat Bhawan.

The story of Kaliga, however, is not a permanent solution but has given us a taste of the envisioned state that we had dreamt of. We expect, that by next year, Jharkhand would have completely established its MGNREGS transactions at the GP Secretariat.

### **Pantha Panchayat**

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Under the able leadership of the *Mukhiya*, Basant Guria, the Pantha GP has been the most impressive in the quest of achieving decentralized governance at the grass roots. Along with other initiatives, this *panchayat* has demonstrated



**The Mukhiya of Pantha Panchayat, Basant Guria, facilitating a Mate review event**

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There are many obstacles in the journey of democratic decentralization and accountable governance. Many of these issues are linked to policies and some others are linked to implementation and grass-roots dynamics. Our short-lived experience has been an enriching one and has re-established that learning by doing is the best practice on the ground

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exemplary action at the GPs in MGNREGS, which can open up new avenues in the area of local governance.

Pantha *panchayat* has been instrumental in organizing the *Rojgar Diwas* and helping people apply and register their various needs at the GP level. It has reserved one *Rojgar Diwas* as Grievance Redressal Day, wherein, only people's grievances are heard and registered. In a rural set-up, where the voices of the weakest and marginalized are hardly heard and often lost or suppressed, this initiative has given genuine hope.

As an extension to the Grievance Redressal Day and *Rojgar Diwas*, Pantha has put in place a help desk for citizens' awareness, information and registration of grievances at the *panchayat* secretariat, aimed at creating a front support desk for people for a steady solution related to information, facilitation and public grievances.

Pantha has also established a good communication mechanism with the block regarding public grievances. It has created a

linkage with the block for reciprocity relating to public grievances through *Sahayata Kendra* representatives, who act as a bridge between the two institutions through which follow-ups and escalations happen with the administration. It is still unfortunate that *panchayats* have little power to resolve or redress people's issues at the moment and hence most issues need to be taken up with the block administration and subsequent levels in case of non-redressal on time. We are also hoping that our little demonstrations will soon change this and will empower *panchayats* to deal with people's issues and grievances.

The most recent and most important initiative taken by Pantha is the review of Mates by a joint team of representatives of women's collectives and the *panchayat*. This joint review, on the one hand, helps in sustaining the SHG Mate initiative through regular reviews and immediate intervention, checking drop-outs and, on the other hand, ensuring that Mates' issues surface and payments are made on time.

This practice of a joint mate review has been strengthening the CBO-PRI integration at the *panchayat* level. Learning from Pantha many other *panchayats* across blocks in Jharkhand have now planned to initiate the process.

### Conclusion

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There are many obstacles in the journey of democratic decentralization and accountable governance. Many of these issues are linked to policies and some others are linked to implementation and grass-roots dynamics. Our short-lived experience has been an enriching one and has re-established that learning by doing is the best practice on the ground. Action on the ground and the evidence-based policy advocacy seem to be the way forward here.

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