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**NREGA
brings smiles
in faces of
rural India**



People's struggle makes NREGA deliver...

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| <i>Preface</i> | <i>iv</i> |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | <i>v</i> |
| 1. Kasamma – a slow yet steady move towards a dignified and fulfilled life | 1 |
| 2. People's plan has its way under NREGS | 4 |
| 3. Mate training increases the work output in Sirohi | 7 |
| 4. Reduced measurement size attractive to women | 12 |
| 5. First unemployment allowance in Orissa | 15 |
| 6. Gandhi Giri leading to payment of pending wages | 18 |
| 7. NREGS – boon for the differently abled people | 21 |
| 8. People's audit fosters good governance | 23 |
| 9. Unionisation improves performance of NREGS | 26 |
| 10. Anantpur social audit towards transparency and accountability | 29 |

Preface

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005, coming into effect after a long and sustained people's struggle, can be termed as a People's Act. This landmark Act qualifies to be a potential tool of empowerment for rural labour. It guarantees employment for 100 days in a year to adult members of rural households who are willing to do unskilled manual labour at a guaranteed minimum wage. It will go down in the history of social security legislations as one which alleviates extreme poverty while protecting economic insecurity and ensuring the right to food.

However, towards the success of NREGA 2005, there is need for a massive process of public mobilisation. For any social legislation to be effective the pre-condition is a sustained struggle by people to enforce their rights to secure their entitlements. ActionAid India (AA), actively engaging in social mobilisation since 2001, is one of the civil society organisations that had been demanding for a comprehensive legislation on the Right to Work, along with its partners, who are also part of the Right to Food Campaign in India. AA, through its partners, is even today engaged in creating mass awareness on the Act, helping the community to access job cards, rightfully apply for work and demand for timely payment of wages under NREGA. Partners are also involved in facilitating village development plans to be executed under the NREGA. In 2007, our partners have collectively been able to help the community access 2,90,298 job cards across the country. Out of the 2,52,495 people demanding for work, 2,10,454 of them have been allotted work under the NREGA. The NREGA Act 2005 has completed two and half years of its enactment in the Country. In 2005 when it started, the Act covered only 150 districts of the country but from 01 April 2008, the Central Government has announced that the all the districts of the country would be covered. With initial teething problems, the NREGA has been, by and large, substantially successful to meet the desired objectives of the Act. In few States, people have been employed for more than 75 days in a year, resulting in creating quality assets. Women have been employed and also received timely payment. But there is still miles to go.

As with any Act, there has been a mixed response from many corners about the success of the Act. While it is the success stories in Rajasthan and in Andhra Pradesh (Anantpur) during the mass social audits of the NREGA that have been focused on, there are a few serious criticisms that this Act has faced in other parts of the country. At this point, several civil society organisations instrumental in the formulation and enactment of the NREGA, feel the urgency to capture the best related practices across India to add to the credibility and validity of the Act. This would be a safeguard against the threat of repealing the Act since there has been much resistance from some quarters, including the Ministry of Finance, India.

This document identifies the best practices in terms of the processes and outcomes of the NREGA so that it can be used as an advocacy tool in various States to improve upon the implementation of the Act and thwart any chances of it being repealed. Ten success stories of NREGA from nine states are documented here.

The first case study is of an old lady, Kasamma, from Bidar of Karnataka. She who earlier was not preferred for any public works, under the NREGA received work and proper wages. Kasamma became an example for motivation in her village.

Umi Daniel
Team Leader

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Acknowledgements

Identifying and documenting the best practices of NREGA from different areas of the country has been both herculean and challenging. Had it not been for the dedication, determination and active support of the various AA Regional Offices partners along with the partner community, this task would not have been accomplished. It is these people who inspired us with their sustained struggle and demonstrated how an united effort can make a difference. We sincerely thank all those workers who struggled, realised and implemented the employment guarantee scheme in their areas in its true spirit. We wish to express our heartfelt thanks to the staff and members of various organisations like Jan Chetna Sansthan and Aviyan from Rajasthan, Sahayog, SIRE and Swaraj Network from Karnataka, Sambad and Samajik Sansthan from Uttar Pradesh, Chaupal from Chhatisgarh, Gram Swaraj Abhiyan and NREGA Watch from Jharkhand, APSS from Andhra Pradesh, Jan Sambad from Madhya Pradesh, DISHA from Gujarat and Agragamee and Nabchetna Network from Orissa. These community people provided us valuable information by sharing their experiences and thereby helped in documenting the best practices of the community people.

Our thanks to the activists of the Right to Food Campaign of the States from where these case studies were collected. The regional units of Rajasthan, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh coordinated very smoothly the visits of the researchers, interaction with the community and NGOs directly or indirectly and information collection. We acknowledge the arduous efforts invested by Pradeep Baisakh and Jitendra Rath to conduct the extensive interviews with the local community, NGOs and other stakeholders through visits in the villages of Rajasthan, Chattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka or over the phone that helped us to bring out this document. Our sincere thanks to all those who sent material to prepare case studies which due to certain unavoidable constraints could not be incorporated in this abridged document. Within this limited time, space and short supply of resources and keeping in mind the variety in terms of nature of cases and geographical locations, we have tried our best to do justice to the effort.

The successful struggle of the workers throughout the country is valuable, irrespective of whether they figure in this small document or not.

Kasamma – a slow yet steady move towards a dignified and fulfilled life

NREGS has brought cheers in her life...

Kasamma hears 'NREGS' and she is beaming with happiness now. NREGS has brought about a ray of hope in her life.

Since the last two and half months she is employed along with other women in an irrigation canal that is being built in her Malchapur village, under Bhalki taluk (block) of Bidar district in Karnataka. She earns a sum of Rs74 (the minimum wages under NREGS in Karnataka now) per day of work in the project. This is a big leap from the amount of Rs20 to Rs25 that she used to earn while labouring in the agricultural fields of the rich landlords in her village. The wages she gets under NREGS helps her to meet the weekly consumption need of her family without now having to depend on the village ration shopkeeper from whom earlier she used to purchase on credit which was very given to her reluctantly, after a lot of nasty verbal exchanges, and bargaining. In the current year she has worked almost for 50 odd days in the above project which makes her confident about her capability to bargain and meet her family needs in a dignified manner.

Seeing her lean and thin and haggard, the labourers in her village, who are mostly women, decided that she could take care of their children on the worksite. As per the provisions of the Act, she also gets the minimum wage for managing the crèche. "Now things are much better after the NREGS work has come to our village. The whole family can have a better living than before, as even during the lean season we get work and the wages are better than what we women get as agricultural labours," adds the visibly optimistic Kasamma.

Kasamma, a single woman, is 43 but looks like an elderly aged women. Reason: malnutrition. Throughout her life her intake of any nutritious food has been minimal. Her family of four comprises her younger brother, father and mother all living on a small patch of dry land, which is grossly insufficient for them to earn their livelihood. All of them work as daily labourers, save her brother who works as contract domestic labour. Since her parents are very aged and unable to work outside the house, in this family it is only Kasamma and her brother who are the breadearners. During the agricultural season, when labour is available, with the money coming in from two hands, the family somehow manages two meals a day. But during lean seasons, employment is hard to come by and hence, "We have to go half stomach many a time during non agricultural seasons when there is no work available," laments Kasamma.



Kasamma: a happy lady now

There are several such stories, of late, of how NREGS has bettered the lives of several people in the villages. After a lot of struggle, people of Malchapur village are now getting regular work under NREGS. In the last two and half months, people have got up till 58 days of work and have started receiving regular payment.

The process

Though NREGS came into effect in February 2006, it became effective only almost as late as December 2006. For the people of Malchapur village, from not having employment or being totally underpaid and now to arrive at this stage of getting regular employment on respectable terms and under dignified conditions, has been thorny and bumpy. December 2006 saw the district level NREGS meeting to generate awareness on the Act, and people of the Malchapur village participated. The district level orientation was followed by area and village level orientations. Learning from the orientation they applied for jobs. But the Panchayat Secretary who assured them work, later backed out. Then about 140 people, mostly women from 8 SHGs in the village, marched up to the Panchayat office for three days consecutive and demanded work from the President and Secretary of the gram panchayat. They attempted to lock the Panchayat functionaries in their office, This technique worked: The villagers were provided jobs and the very next day, the

Panchayat started cleansing work of an irrigation canal in the village. But this did not last long.

Observing the lackadaisical functioning of the scheme and the government's inaction toward its implementation, in March 2007, a rally was organised by the Swaraj network (the network of NGOs funded by ActionAid) and other NGOs under the Right to Food campaign in the district headquarters. They submitted a memorandum to the Chairperson and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Zilla Parisad. The demands were to:

- complete registration of Households (HH)
- distribute Job Cards
- provide 100 days of work
- provide regular wage payment
- provide worksite facilities
- involve the people in the process of planning the NREGS work at the village and the Panchayat levels.

Following the rally, about 180 people in Malchapur village applied to the Panchayat authorities who gave them verbal assurance for work based on NREGS. This time, however, they insisted and got the Panchayat authorities to give them assurance in writing. This worked. Finally work started in a neighbouring village namely Khanapur. But the people were paid less wages (about Rs31 a day) for the work done as the payment was based on the



The Irrigation canal and check dam in Malchapur village where Kasamma worked

piece rate system. People boycotted the wages, and the Junior Engineer and the Panchayat Secretary argued that the output was less. Finally wages were paid on the basis of daily wages. The people decided to take things in hand and introduced penalty provision upon themselves in order to ensure efficient work inputs. “This was an exemplary step by the people who fixed standard and discipline for themselves,” says Kavita Hushare of Sahayog.

People struggle to yield results

People are getting regular work since March 2008. There is need to submit only one application in which they make a demand for work for hundred days in a year.

Sumitra, the Action Group (formed by women of the village to fight for gender justice) leader says, last year we used to get only four to five days of work on each application. Sometime they even would just ignore our applications. But after a prolonged struggle by our SHGs and the Action Group and the Right to Food campaign along with the district level Swaraj network, things have been moving well. The planning of work was done by the Panchayat authorities without taking the people into confidence in 2006–07, but for the work being taken up in 2007–08, plans have been finalised by the panchayat people in consultation with the people in the village. In nearly two and half months people have got work up to 60 days. They are being given wages at Rs74 /day, which is the minimum wage in

Karnataka as per the current norm. Facilities like crèches, drinking water provisions, etc., are provided on the worksite.

Ancillary benefits

“The general wage level in works other than NREGS, particularly for the women labourers, is staged to go up due to better payment under NREGS,” opines Prakash Patil, the President (Sarpanch) of the Gram Panchayat. “The canal which is being constructed will be a great asset to the villagers as it will store the water which could irrigate the nearby agricultural fields. Previously the water flowing to the village was wasted and could not be used for any useful purpose,” says a villager.

Still a long way to go

On one hand when things have started improving in terms of the contribution of NREGS to people lives, many aspects like adhering to transparency clauses, complete distribution of job cards, etc., are not being properly followed. Even though people have worked for nearly sixty days, they have got the payment for about 21 days. This delayed payment is partially attributed to the lengthy procedure being followed in transferring cheque from the block level to panchayat to Head Post office and then the local Post Office. “The State is on verge of Assembly elections now, which has affected the smooth release of funds under the scheme,” clarifies Prakash Patil, the President (Sarpanch) of the Gram Panchayat.

People's plan has its way under NREGS

This year's monsoon showers have brought smiles in the faces of farmers of Rajwati village and gram panchayat in Chhatisgarh. All the family members are found working in their small patches of land. Male members are engaged in making small bonds to steer the flow of water from and to the land and women are seen half bent sowing the paddy crops! This time they are not too worried whether the small crops that are sown now shall survive or not; whether they will have a good harvest or not. These uncertainties in Rajwati have been due to the pattern of land in the area and high dependence on the rain feeding water to their land. But this time around, the micro plan done by people for land development and creation of farm pond for irrigation under NREGS has been approved by the panchayat and higher levels. The implementation of these plans in the coming days will pave the way for better agricultural returns.

People struggled out

The initial phase of execution of the Act was not encouraging in the panchayats under Sitapur and Batauli blocks. The 12 months went by and 2006

was gone but many people did not get even a single day of work. This shoddy state of affairs may be attributed to the ignorance of the people about the whole scheme, with the main reason being the apathy of the government. Responding to the shabby implementation scenario, the Right to Food Campaign of Sarguja and various civil society organisations (CSOs) like *Chaupal* and others, initiated mass awareness drives in all the seven blocks of the district with special focus on Sitapur and Batauli Blocks. Toward the end of the year 2006, the activists and villagers staged a dharna in every block (except Ambikapur) with the demand to start the work as per the need of the people. In the beginning of the year 2007, the activists of Right to Food Campaign conducted regular village level meetings and in the month of March organised a *padyatra* in all the seven blocks covering 118 villages and encouraged the workers for registration and work demand. As a result, in Rajwati gram panchayat 490 people filled their applications in the panchayat office demanding work. But the panchayat officials failed to provide the work within 15 days of stipulated time. Then with the help of

Profile of Rajwati village

Rajwati village/GP is under Sitapur Block of Sarguja district in Chhatisgarh. Sarguja is supposed to be among the most backward district in the State. The district consists of seven Blocks which are mostly inhabited by different tribal communities. It is not only the people of Rajwati of Sitapur Block but also all the panchayats of other Blocks like Menpert, Batauli, Lundra, Lakhanpur and Udayapur who are dependent on agriculture or wage labour for their livelihood. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in February 2006 brought about a ray of hope to the people who were assured they would get employment for hundred days from the government in their own village. The work would be not be some kind of makeshift but it would cater to their skills and requirement, like undertaking land development and creating farm ponds which would directly solve their prolonged problems of water scarcity for agriculture and cover up their low investment ability.



The struggling people

the activists, around 300 people went to the block office and staged a dharna demanding work. They also filled applications for unemployment allowance with the Programme Officer at the Sitapur Block. However, the unemployment allowance was not given and instead, within four to five days, they were allotted work in the Rajwati gram panchayat. The workers from different villages took up the work and realized that even the decision to give them the kind of work was without any planning in the Gram Sabha as mandated in the NREG Act. They soon got frustrated. All the work was on moorum roads which, according to the villagers did not mean anything to them and was not the kind of work they were keen on working on. "What shall we do with the roads? We cannot eat moorum during the summer. I have eight members in my family and all they need is rice to fill their stomach, therefore we need water for our land, so that something can be cultivated," said 60 years old Ghur Sai Khaka of Rajwati village.

The issue of arbitrarily deciding work by the administration and imposing this on the people was not restricted to Rajwati gram panchayat.

In Chattisgarh too, the situation was the same. "The Government of Chhatisgarh had outsourced to an agency from Orissa to conduct the district perspective plan before the initiation of works under NREGS," says Siba, an activist of right to food campaign of Sarguja district. The agency prepared a plan which was submitted to the district collector. However, the people of the villages for whom the plan was made were totally unaware about the process. The District Collector asked his authorities

at block and panchayat levels – the Sarpanch and the panchayat officials – to give their consent so that the plan prepared by the agency was passed in the gram sabha on paper. But luck was on their side and the activists of right to food campaign came to know that the works carried out in different panchayats were from that particular plan.

From then on the campaign tried to mobilise people around the issue of need-based people's planning along with other issues of NREGA. Towards end of March 2007, a block level workshop was organised in Sitapur where the experts from ActionAid and other organisations from Rajasthan trained about 300 people to plan under NREGA at the village level.

During the month of April 2007, in Sitapur Block, another issue came to the forefront. In many gram panchayats workers were not paid even after one and half months of completion of the work. Under the banner of right to food campaign and Chhatisgarh Kisan Mazdoor Andolan, around 1500 workers from 25 gram panchayats gheraoed the block office to demand for the pending wage as well as to start their need-based works, namely land development and farm ponding.(???) Though the pending wages were paid within seven days of protest, no assurance was made by authorities on the demand for carrying out works of people's choice. People however did not relent. In May 2007, a district level sharing meeting was held at Ambikapur. During the interface, the workers and activists from throughout the district shared their NREGS-related problems before the district officials. The district officials attending the meeting assured issuing orders to the block and panchayat officials to incorporate the land and water-related works into the annual NREGS plan.

In June 2007, a social audit and public hearing was organised in Batauli Block by the right to food campaign where Prof. Jean Dreze, Development Economist and member of the Central Employment Guarantee Council (CEGC) participated. The representatives of the block and district administration also participated in the public hearing. They all empathized with the workers' problems.

Government finally succumbed

In January 2008, the Chhatisgarh government, under its regular programme of Gram Swaraj, (awareness campaign of the government of Chhatisgarh on various welfare schemes where the government officials of district and block levels reach out to villagers, explaining about the benefits of the schemes) organised regular camps in the gram panchayats for making people aware of the provisions of NREGS and other government schemes. In these camps the villagers were asked to organise special gram sabhas in order to plan for NREGS for the year 2008–2009. In the month of February 2008, all the panchayats in Sitapur Block and other blocks, gram sabhas were held and special plans were made for the year financial year 2008–2009. Official sources say that all the plans prepared by the gram sabhas have been incorporated in the annual plan for the year 2008–09 and will be implemented as it is after the monsoon.

The hopeful villagers

Laxman Kindo lives in Khalpara village of Rajwati GP. Out of his 15 acres of land, seven to eight acres are cultivable and that too only during rainy days.

Scarcity of water is the major problem before him. But this time he is hopeful. "My proposal to the gram panchayat for an individual farm pond and for land labelling has been passed by the Gram Sabha and soon after the rain the work will start," says Laxman. "Once a farm pond is created, all the surrounding land will be irrigable throughout the year. The family income will definitely multiply from agriculture," Adds Laxman. Even though Laxman has a job card but not worked in the first two years, this time he is expecting to work under NREGS on his own land.

"In the year 2008–2009, about 48 works – the highest in the last two years – shall be carried out in our panchayat," says Bijaya Kumar, the Naib Sarpanch (Sub-sarpanch) of Rajwati gram panchayat. In the year of 2006–2007, in Rajwati panchayat only five works were carried out and all of them were the moorum roads. Similarly, in the year of 2007–2008, only two moorum roads were completed in the whole panchayat. But in the year 2008–2009, 48 works shall be carried out, of which 24 are individual land labelling, 20 are individual farm ponds (4m width and 6m deep) 4 are community ponds, informs Bijay.

It is not only in the Rajwati gram panchayat but also in all the panchayats of the district that priority has been given to the water and land works the year of 2008–2009.

Mate training increases the work output in Sirohi

The villagers of Morthala village/GP in Sirohi district of Rajasthan have benefited from the improved performance of Laxmibai Barwa of the village as the mate in NREGS works. The training of the mates on the measurement of the works done under NREGS has helped not only the mates but also the workers to measure their work and to correlate the same with the wages they would receive for their work. Rajasthan has always been in the forefront in terms of its struggle on right to work even before the enactment of NREGA and in terms of its implementation after the law was passed. The provisions of NREGS like maintaining muster rolls in the work site, providing 100 days of employment to a household, adhering to transparency mechanisms, etc., have been implemented in the right spirit from the beginning of launching the scheme in the State. The social audit conducted in Dungepur district in May 2006 also showed that Rajasthan is ahead of other States in terms of implementation of NREGA. However, ensuring payment of minimum wages to the workers under the scheme has been eluded till date.

The background

In Rajasthan wages are given strictly on piece rate basis and that too on the work done by the total group of workers present at the work site, not on individual measurement. As it has been witnessed during visits to some work sites in Abu Road Block of Sirohi district, this practice has led to various problems:

- people cannot measure the work they have done, and thus are unable to quantify how much work has been done and what is the wages they should get against their work. The mates are also not conversant with the measurement as

in most cases they are laymen in the village. They lack the expertise to measure the soil work. All these do not help the workers to quantify their work and demand payment. As a result, in most cases the payment given is less than the minimum wages guaranteed under the Act and decided by the State government. So much so, during the first half of 2006, the people got Rs20 to 30 against the minimum wages of Rs73.

- since the payment is not made to the individual but to the group, there is no recognition of individual inputs to the work. Moreover, the number of workers in the group can be anything from 30 to 300. When the number is large, there are some people who do not work but they take payment along with others. "It has been observed that in a group of fifty, about ten people who are close to the mate or are influential people in the village would just come once to the worksite for the sake of attendance and then go away. Some people would come for a few hours to work but enjoy the same payment as the others who work," says Manju Kahanr, the field level worker of Janchetna – the NGO working on the issue of right to work in Sirohi district. This is another reason for payment of less wages to the workers. And ironically there is no effective mechanism to check the slackness of workers on the worksite. An example is 'Drought Relief Works' (Akal Rahat Karya) which are undertaken during drought times in drought-prone areas of the State. During this period all the workers who come to work get minimum wages of Rs60 irrespective of output.
- payment of less than minimum wages is made when the payrolls of the workers has an addition of the names of the mate and the workers who

provide drinking water and manage creches since there is no separate list for payment to them.

- arbitrary measurement of the Junior Engineers (JE). For e.g., in a *nadi* (small pond) work done in 2006 in Redhwakala village, the JE decided to give Rs30 per day as wages without taking any measurement. All the 150 workers in the work refused to accept the wages. Finally, the JE came and took measurement of their work and paid them Rs60 wages. These arbitrary decisions of the JE are because of two reasons:
 - ◆ even if the JE makes any arbitrary measurement or takes no measurement, people will not question him as they lack that the knowledge and are not aware of their rights.
 - ◆ there is severe staff shortage at the level of JEs in the block that makes it impossible for measuring all the works by them. As Mohammad Rafiq, the JE of Abu Road taluka puts it “there are about 600 works going on in Abu Road taluk and we are only two JEs. How can we possibly measure on a daily basis the works?”

Addressing the situation

The dissatisfaction of people with low payment wages was conspicuous after May 2006 in Dungerpur and Giribar Panchayats (Sirohi district). The government decided to train the Mates to address the situation and introduced the Mate's diary. Throughout the State people held rallies, dharanas, demonstrations, etc., to press for their legal rights of getting the minimum wages fixed by the government. Even though the government decided and implemented the Mate's training, the whole exercise yielded no visible results. With the worsening situation, Rozgar and Suchna ka Adhikar Abhiyan, a platform of citizen groups and people's organisations consisting MKSS, Janchetna Sansthan and Astha Sansthan, etc., took up the issue. A new slogan (*nara*) was made popular among the workers: '**Nyari napti nyari rate**' (Right measurement, right wages). The leaders of Abhiyan leaders like Arun Roy, Nikhil Dey, Girish, etc., met the Principal Secretary to the department of Rural

Development and Panchayati Raj to explain to him the need of a properly designed mate's training and offered their cooperation for the same.

With the government's approval a five-days Training of Trainers (ToT) programme was undertaken in Udaipur in November 2007. The content and the model of the training programme was designed after wider consultation starting from the cut off (village) level, then at Abhiyan level and finally in a State level consultation where experts and practitioners from both the government and NGOs participated. In the ToT programme some Junior Engineers (JEs) from the twelve districts where NREGA was operational attended this along with some CSO members. The ToT programme was followed by a one-day orientation programme at the district level where all the concerned authorities of the district attended. The real mate's training programme took place in two GPs of each block of 12 districts. Different NGOs were requested to conduct the training programme in different places in association with the district administration.

The content of the training programme

The training programme included both class room training and the field level exposure and learning.

The training discussed various provisions of NREGS and Right to Information (RTI). The mates were informed about various responsibilities they had to discharge which included filling up of the Muster roll and Job cards, dividing workers into groups of five, providing worksite facilities, taking measurement of work before and after the work, supervising the work, making arrangement for payment, etc. They had to learn to fill up of the muster rolls and the Job Cards.

The government also came up with an order directing the district collectors to implement the Mate's training and the newly developed 'Mate diary'. Some fundamental changes were incorporated through government policy:

- Labourers would be divided into a group of five instead of all working together.
- Work target for each day is fixed for every group for different types of work so that they all get minimum wages



Mate taking measurement of the "med vandi" work

- Measurement was taken before and after the work done by each group everyday
- Different mate's diary was introduced where separate columns for a group of five workers were to be filled along with the quantity of work done and wages to be paid
- The name of the person who is providing drinking water, managing the crèches and the mate's name will figure at the end of the Muster roll, not along with the group of workers as was done earlier
- Mates were given Identity Cards
- There will be one Mate for every 40 workers

Finally, the measurement by the Mates were considered official by the Junior Engineers and the wages paid accordingly. During training the Mates had a training kit containing mate diary, measurement tape, etc.

Impact

Major impacts of the mates' trainings:

- Increase in work output resulted in increase of wages. This happened as non serious workers disappeared from the scene and more discipline was brought about in the work place.
- People learn about measurement and therefore are now able to correlate their work and wages
- Reduction in forged entries in the muster roll

- Punctuality of the workers to attend and leave the work premises

The Mates' training brought about a healthy change in the working environment. "After the mate's training there has been reduction in forged entry in muster roll; the measurement of our work is better now and the overall wage coming is higher than before," says Ms Sharda Bai of Redwakala village.

The workers also came to learn about the measurement after the mate's training on the same. Ms Hodri Bai of Redwakala village puts it, "First the mates took training and they are then discussing with us. Gradually we are also learning the measurement." A target is given for every group to accomplish on a daily basis that would ensure them the minimum wages (Rs100 now). "In the ongoing work of *med bandi* (land development) in one of our villager's land, the workers group of five have to accomplish the task of 40ft length x 2ft width x 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ ft height so that they will be given Rs100 minimum wages for each day's work," says Ratan Lal, the Mate in the above village, who also had taken mates' training. After people know about measurement, they can now establish the link between their work and their wages. To that extent they cannot be cheated as before. In fact, in a unique instance of assertion of people, in the *med bandi* (land development) (referred above) the JE first offered Rs85 without taking any measurement. But people refused the payment and demanded full/minimum payment, Finally the JE gave Rs100, the minimum wages to all the labourers.

The grey areas

Despite attempts to address the issue of delivery of minimum wages to the workers, it has not been achieved in totality. The reason partially lies with the government's wrong understanding of the concept of the minimum wages and partially due to its apathy toward appointment of required number of JEs for the schemes. The government considers the minimum wages as maximum. The NREGA Commissioner is said to have openly refused to give more than Rs100 per day (the revised minimum wages from May 1st). Even though the Junior Engineer is supposed to accept the measurement of the Mates after the Mate's training, in reality the

JEs do not accept taking the plea that the Mates are not able to measure properly despite training. The JE of Abu Road taluka says, "I cannot accept the Mate's measurement as they are not measuring properly" He also cites some examples to his defence. When asked why he does not teach the mates when he goes to the field, he replies, "We are only two JEs to oversee 600 works going on under NREGS in our Taluka. This staff shortage creates a lot of problem for us." As per the people's assessment they complete the quantum of the task to ensure the minimum wages, but in the JE's eyes the measurement is less. On the other hand, the mates have been strictly instructed by the Panchayat level officials that people will not be given any wages more than the minimum wages, so it is not worth doing work more than the upper limit. Added to this, the JE does not accept the mate's measurement. This effectively results in giving less than minimum wages to the workers. In fact, in most of cases the people are able to complete the required task in less than the seven stipulated hours, but after that they are not permitted to work.

Ironically, but after completing their work the labourers cannot leave the place of work. The Mates are so instructed by the Panchayat Secretary, even though it is contrary to the government order. "This is gross injustice for the people as there are both task fixing and time fixing," opines Ms Richa of Janchetana. The new mate's diary is not introduced in Sirohi district even after the government's order.

The district and taluk administration apathy toward the Mates' training also has affected the process. "When we started the mates' training, the administration did not take enough care to ensure sending all the Mates in the training process," says Ranchhod Devasi of Janchetna. The fact is that after the mate's training '*nyari napti*' is achieved, but not '*nyari rate*'.

Practical problems

There are also practical problems to get right people as Mates as there are very few qualified people (10th pass male and 8th pass female) in Abu Road taluka which is highly tribal dominated,"

A case of increasing wage due to mate's training



Laxmi Bai, the mate who made difference after training

Laxmi Bai has been a Mate in NREGS works since 2006. By now she has undertaken a number of works like small pond, road, med vandi etc. But never has she been able to give adequate wages to her workers. But the mate's training by Janchetna brought about visible changes. "Before the training I did not know anything about measurement. The training helped me to learn it as a result of which people are now getting better wages," says Laxmi Bai. For example, in a nadi (pond) where she was a mate, the workers were getting Rs50 per day in April 2007. The work was left half done due to rain and in the mean time she underwent the required training. When the work resumed she carried out the work according to the learning from the training. And ironically she met with miraculous success. During this period the minimum wage was 73. After the training, the Junior Engineer (JE) accepted her measurement and paid the workers accordingly. Currently she is a Mate in a gravel road construction where three other Mates are also appointed (for every forty workers there has to be a mate). Her working style which is influenced by the training has impacted on the performance of the other 3 mates all of whom are male mates and were not trained. They have adopted her style of functioning and the JE also has accepted their measurement and their workers also got the same rate of 70 rupees.

says Anju Kumawat, the Programme Officer of Abu taluka. The number of JEs are insufficient to take measurement of all the works in the taluka.

Pakhwada Meetings

Description of NREGS in Rajasthan would be incomplete if a brief reference is not made to the practice of holding 'Pakhwada Meetings' or fortnightly meeting. The idea of Pakhwada meeting was introduced in some districts where ActionAid's partners are operating. Janchetana started the experiment in Abu Road taluka. This was aimed at mobilising work applications in every fortnight apart from discussing other issues relating to the policy and implementation of NREGS. But this practice successfully has led to mobilisation of the work applications and brings people together to collectively fight for improvement in NREGS implementation.

The awareness and assertiveness of the people is so high that after the law came to effect on 2nd February 2006, many families in Sirohi district had already demanded and worked for 100 days in that



Water shed structure carried out by Leela Devi as mate

financial year i.e. before 31st March. In other words in just two months time people had worked for complete 100 days! Contractors are mostly not in the scene. Worksite facilities are available in almost all the cases. Women Mates have been able to successfully complete works of high budget. Leela Devi of Danwa village of Agrabatta panchayat has completed a watershed structure, a project worth Rs5 lakhs, in her village as the Mate.

Reduced measurement size attractive to women

In March 2007 a work of excavation of pond started in the neighboring village of Rampad Devi, who is from Deorampurua village of Attolia Gram Panchayat under Kalakankar block of Pratapgarh district in Uttar Pradesh. Rampad Devi was in dire need of work. So she went to the Mate and asked his permission to work in the worksite. The Mate being biased against women's ability to work and their output, she was refused the work. This shocked Rampad Devi since she knew that the NREGS work had no discrimination against women in terms of work and wages. Bewildered, she approached the volunteers of Sambad, a local NGO and discussed her grievance. Though the Mate was flouting the law, the flip side to the law was that it did guarantee minimum wages, but on the other hand the payment, which is strictly made on measurement, is much less than the minimum wages. Even male workers in NREGS works were barely able to make Rs40–50 a day on an average against the minimum wages of 100. So the female workers were likely to get less.

However, after the intervention of the staff of the NGO in the panchayat office, Rampad Devi was given work. She worked in the group of four other workers and dug 200 cubic feet (cft) the whole day and got Rs200. That means, each in the group got around Rs50!

Chandra Devi in work

Similar is the case of Chandra Devi's family from Bahuri Bhagat Purwa village of Saraijanmati gram panchayat under Lalganj block of Pratapgarh district. "Last year (2007) the whole family worked only for 30–35 days. The work was hard in terms of the return we got. We had to dig 100 cft. hard soil for only Rs100. Four members of our family could hardly

dig 200 cft soil per day. So each member got around Rs50 per day. This was very discouraging."

The soil is hard and it is really difficult to dig. Rampad Devi and Chandra Devi along with other workers of their village started the demand for reducing the size of measurement in order to enable them to ensure the minimum wages. Every worker of Pratapgarh region had the same demand that they should be given Rs100 for digging less than 100 cft of soil. Owing to the increasing demand of the villagers of the district, the officials of the district administration visited few worksites and issued an order in 31 January 2008 to decrease the rate of measurement from 100 cft to 88 cft.

The process that brought change

During March and April 2007, there was heavy fall of hailstone in the Pratapgarh region and mainly in Kalakankar block. It resulted in massive loss of crops in the area and lead to a situation of food scarcity. Looking at this, the District Magistrate of Pratapgarh, Mr Senthil Pandian C issued an order to all the Block-level Programme Officers to excavate at least one pond in each village of their operational areas so that people could get some work and manage to restore their livelihood.

The demand for changing the size of measurement started with the execution of this order. The State government changed the old rate of 80 rupees for 100 cft and introduced the new rate in August 2007). While implementing the work, it was observed that a single worker was unable to dig a full pit of 100 cft per day. Therefore she/he is deprived of getting the daily minimum wage of Rs100. Another crucial point also came to the forefront. The participation of the women workers in these works was very minimal because of the

hard work of digging 100 cft soil. The workers of this area had no option but to work under NREGS as no such alternative was available. But along with the engagement in the works, the workers mainly the women, started the demand to reduce the size of measurement.

During the month of September 2007 the Government of India assigned ActionAid to facilitate social audits of NREGS works in Pratapgarh district of Uttar Pradesh. ActionAid initiated the process in the same month with its local partner organisation Sambad Samajik Sansthan (SSS) which operates in and around Kalakankar block of Pratapgarh district. It was an opportunity to also raise awareness among the workers of the area on the issues of NREGS. While conducting public meetings with the communities and workers, it was observed that the workers were dissatisfied with meagre wages against their hard work. The volunteers of ActionAid and Sambad Samajik Sansthan took up this issue and discussed with other workers of the area and mobilised them to demand the reduction of the size of measurement. This process helped in raising a common demand from the workers side. Demands were made before the government officials in the public hearings of the social audits held in Keraudi, Kandhai, Sekh Mahammad Pur Gram Panchayats of the district in different points of time. The District Magistrate Senthil Pandian himself attended a public hearing of the social audit in Pethanpur Gram Panchayat of Kalakankar block which was held in the month of January 2008. Along with other issues, the workers of this Gram



Chandra Devi at work

Panchayat shared their difficulties of digging 100 cft soil in a day. They strongly demanded for reducing the size of measurement before the District Magistrate who assured to discuss it with the Divisional Commissioner. 35 workers of Attolia village/GP under Kalakankar block once boycotted the work for a day demanding for reducing the size of measurement.

During the month of January 2008, the Chief Development Officer (the position is designated as the District Programme Coordinator in Uttar Pradesh) of Pratapgarh district, Ms Sradhha Mishra, along with a representative from the Government of India, visited Madhwapur Gram Panchayat of Kalakankar block. She too was informed of the plight of the workers, especially of the women. In this interface, she too assured the workers to raise the issue at higher level.

In the same month, the Allahabad Divisional Commissioner Mr P K Jha visited Punyagam Gram Panchayat of Kunda block of Pratapgarh district. The workers engaged in the worksite placed their demand before him. The workers also shared that the participation of women would increase only if the size of the measurement reduced.

The Allahabad Divisional Commissioner called for a meeting of higher officials, including the PWD in Allahabad about the issue. Considering different types of the soil of the area and the demand of the people, the Commissioner issued an order for reducing the measurement of normal soil from 100 cft to 88 cft w.e.f. 30 January 2008. Later it was made applicable for all the four districts of Allahabad circle, including the district of Pratapgarh.

After the demand of the workers was met by the administration, there have been visible signs of increasing women participation in the works. The immediate result is that more number of ponds have been excavated as an aftermath of the decision and more workers taking interest in NREGS works. On an average, a single worker is now receiving eight to Rs10000 in 100 days of work.

According to District Magistrate, Senthil Pandian, "It was because of the demands made by the people, the administration felt the need to change the size of



Pond Created in Saraijanmati Village

measurement. The change in the size of measurement has increased the women participation in work by about 50 per cent. In the whole district more than 1200 ponds have been excavated and the level of ground water has risen," opines the DM. The administration also decided to execute the work by forming group of the workers which would ultimately strengthen the community bond.

Rampad Devi is now eagerly going to join in the NREGS work as her wage return has gone up .

The Taste of the Change

Ram Asre, Nanhe Lal, Kapur Nath and Amarnath (four people) belong to Madhwapur village coming under Madhwapur gram panchayat of Kalakankar block. They have worked in toil (group) for 90–95 days in the year 2007–2008 and earned around Rs40,000. Out of five ponds excavated under NREGS in their village they have worked in excavating four ponds. Ram Ashre, the toil leader shared, "Each of them have got Rs10,000 and it was only possible because of the change in the measurement size."

In the current year (2008), all five members of Chandra Devi's family have already worked for around 60 days. "Not only my family but also others in my village got benefit out of the decision to reduce measurement."

"Thanks to the volunteers of Sambad. It is their initiative and guidance which helped us to fight for our demand and finally win," says Rampad Devi.

First unemployment allowance in Orissa

People's struggle + backdoor advocacy yield results

Sabu Hata Ku Kama Dia, Kamara Pura Dam Dia ('Provide work to every hand and give right wages for right work') was the powerful slogan people used in the village meetings in Khandiaguda village of Tentulikhuni Gram Panchayat of Navrangpur district of Orissa. The struggle by the villagers of Khandiaguda created history not only in the State but also in the whole country as they were first to receive unemployment allowance officially in the State and second in the country.

The informed citizenry

Nabarangpur district is part of the KBK region where people are mostly tribal and are either dependant on agriculture or on wage labour. After the operationalisation of NREGS, the local organisations like Agravamee and Nabchetna Network organised regular village level meetings to generate awareness among the people about the programme. The staff and volunteers of these organisations told people that they would be given work within 15 days if they apply for it to the panchayat office. If not, they would receive unemployment allowance from the Block Development Officer, who is the programme officer in NREGS. But the initial days saw much less demand for work from the villagers due to lack of awareness. However, regular village meetings, putting up posters, etc., by the organisations helped in mobilising the villagers to understand the legal necessity to put in a written application.

In the month of September 2007, 63 workers of Khandiaguda village decided to file applications for work under NREGS. They prepared a group application and submitted it to the panchayat office. But the panchayat executive officer (PEO) refused

to receive the application. This was his behaviour with all the people who visited his office to submit the application. Disgusted, the workers went to the block office on 30 September 2007 to submit the work application near the Block Programme Officer (BDO). Block Programme Officer Gangaram Pradhan instructed the PEO of Tentulikhunti Gram Panchayat to receive the application and issue proper acknowledgement receipts. The order was followed the same day by the PEO and the PEO received the application for work from 63 workers and gave proper acknowledgement receipts.

The first time the workers of the village got proper receipt and they were now sure that they would be provided with the work in 15 days. But this did not happen. People even waited till the 19th day of their application with a hope to get the work, but with no result. The volunteers of Agravamee and Nabchetna Network suggested that the villagers should now apply for the unemployment allowance as already fifteen days had gone by. They also guided the villagers about the process of getting unemployment allowance prescribed by the employment guarantee Act and the State scheme. Following the orientation, all the 63 workers decided to file the application for unemployment allowance. However, they knew that it would not be easy to get the allowance and therefore the workers got ready to make their demand in a non-violent and legal manner.

Struggle to beat the threat

On 23 October, all the workers went to Tentulikhunti block office to demand the unemployment allowance with their individual application forms. The Block Development Officer (BDO) was absent on the day and the Gram Panchayat Extension Officer (GPEO) was the office-in-charge. The workers asked the GPEO to receive

their applications for the unemployment allowance. The GPEO refused to receive any application from the people. But the workers were determined. So following the denial by the GPEO they sat in dharna in front of the block office and finally the GPEO asked the workers to submit a collective application in a single form so that he could acknowledge it. Finally the workers submitted this.

As per the guideline of NREGS, the disbursement of the unemployment allowance is the responsibility of the block level programme officer (BDO). A separate register has to be maintained in the block office to keep the records of the names of the people eligible for unemployment allowance. But the Tentulikhunti block officials denied having any knowledge of such guideline and refused to entertain the request. But the workers stuck to their demand for the acknowledgement and continued with the dharna. "Getting work was a different issue for us that time. We staged the dharna for the unemployment allowance and that was our first demand," says Premnath, an active youth from the village. Ramnath shares, "During the dharna the officials tried their best to send us back to our homes, but we all were strong enough and had decided to continue the dharna till we got written assurance for the unemployment allowance."

The message of the dharna and demand for unemployment allowance by the workers of Khandiaguda village reached the district administration on the same day, i.e., 23 October 2007. In the afternoon the Project Director (PD) and Assistant Project Director (APD) of District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) visited Tentulikhunti block office. The workers were surprised when these officials first persuaded and then threatened the workers to summon the police if they did not leave the place. According to the APD the provision of the unemployment allowance is only written in the Act and not issued anywhere in the State and therefore has no practical relevance. The workers refused to budge and continued with their struggle and even when activists and journalists came forward and could not help, they continued with their dharna and demand.

The next morning all the workers again came to the block office and sat in the dharna with the same

demand for the unemployment allowance. But this time they came in more numbers – workers from villages of Hatipukhna, Mangardara, Dongasil, Malbanshaed, Merakani, Tabapadar etc., also joined hands with the Khandiaguda workers. Representatives of the organisations like Rites Forum, Spread, Sova, Adibasi Manch from Koraput and Malkanagiri districts reached the Tentulikhunti block. On that day the Block Programme Officer (BDO) Gangadhar Pradhan tried to convince the workers and promised to provide work within two days. But the villagers asked the Programme Officer to register their names in the unemployment allowance register. But without registering the names of the workers, he said that the unemployment allowance would be given after one month. But the workers were not convinced and continued with their demand. Succumbing to the demands of people, a new register for unemployment allowance was prepared and the names of all the 63 applicants were entered, guaranteeing them unemployment allowance for six days starting from 19th October to 24th October. In a written letter, the BDO mentioned that the workers will get their unemployment allowance on 29 October 2007 and the new work shall start from 25 October.

Appearance of goons in the scene

Even though the Programme Officer of Tentulikhunti block gave it in writing that the unemployment allowance shall be disbursed on 29th October 2007, the contractors and various middlemen threatened the NGO workers who were helping the villagers. The goons of the contractors created a situation in which the NGO workers could not venture out of their office for two to three days. Within approx. four days the panchayat officials, with the help of local heavy weights (contractors and politicians) allegedly both threatened and emotionally exploited some people saying that they would be suspended if unemployment allowance is given to the people. They also allegedly offered them Rs5,000 and took their signature on a blank paper with the plea that work would be given to them based on this 'application form'. The innocent tribals gave their signature in the blank paper oblivious of the fact that the panchayat people would misuse it. Later on, it was claimed by the officials that the people voluntarily abdicated their claim for

unemployment allowance in their letter. The manipulated letter reads, "The BDO is a good person. He provided us work, but we denied the work. We do not need unemployment allowance; some people in fact incited us to take recourse to protest, etc...". It is noteworthy that as per a public statement made by the Chief Minister of the State, if the situation of giving unemployment allowance arises due to the default in providing work at the right time, that sum of money would be deducted from the Collector's salary. It is obvious that similar instructions would have gone from the Collector of the district to the BDO and the Panchayat levels. This order of the government had created fear among the officials from Panchayat to district level. When other workers and the volunteers came to know about the collection of signatures done slyly, they immediately called a meeting of all the workers to decide the next course of action. The workers who had received the money after signing on blank papers, realised their folly and went to the panchayat office next day and returned the Rs5000 to the secretary and demanded their signed paper back. The Secretary, as was expected, denied having taken any signature. During this period, the local volunteers and activists got threatening calls from the local politicians, contractors and the middlemen to stop the demand for unemployment allowance. After work was started on 25th October, some activists who visited the place to see the work were threatened and abused in filthy language by the local contractors. The goons visited the residence of an NGO activist and threatened to attack his family if he did not withdraw from the struggle.

Even the activists and journalists who helped the workers were summoned by the Collector of the district who expressed his displeasure over their role in drawing media attention in the State capital.

Backdoor Advocacy

The NREGS activists at the State level also assisted the struggle of the workers of Khandiaguda. There was a point where the district administration started threatening people in the name of law and order and at that time the local volunteer shared the matter with few activists and journalists who were keenly involved in NREGS-related issues.

While the dharna was going on in front of the block office, intervention was made by some journalist who contacted the Collector of the district, who was ignorant of the matter till then. The Collector then contacted the block officials and sent the PD and APD of DRDA to go to the spot and address the situation. The PD and APD, as has already been discussed, threatened people with police action. Following this, the state level activists connected to the Commissioner-cum-Secretary of Panchayati Raj department and the Director of NREGA and intimated about the situation. The State authorities acted swiftly and ordered the Collector to take necessary steps to provide unemployment allowance to the people who are legally entitled to it. Following such an order, the BDO gave the written assurance for disbursement of the allowances.

The whole process was being debated by the activists from different places of the State in Orissa REGS Watch Group (an informal e-group to discuss the matter of NREGS issues of Orissa to which many government officials, activists, NGOs and Members of the Central Employment Guarantee Council are members) regarding the demand of unemployment allowance by the workers of Khandiaguda. Through this the members of the CEGC were known to have keenly watched the development in Tentulikhunti. This also created pressure on the administration, particularly at the State level.

Last leg of struggle and final victory

The above sincere and consistent efforts of the workers led finally led to the disbursement of unemployment allowance to sixty three workers. They had received a total of Rs4,210 as unemployment allowance. The disbursement of unemployment allowance was the first official disbursement in the State of Orissa and second in the country after the case of Barwani of Madhya Pradesh.

However in Malkangiri district 13 women workers were given the unemployment allowance in December 2006 but it was not officially recorded. After the case of Nabarangpur, unemployment allowance was paid in Bolangir and Kalahandi districts of the State. Till the date, in the State of Orissa Rs1,03,492 has been paid as the unemployment allowance being the highest in the country.

6

Gandhi Giri leading to payment of pending wages

Various provisions of NREGS are being flouted during their implementation in different parts of the country. This situation has led to a struggle by workers who demand that their due should be given to them as per the law and in a dignified manner. While the forms of struggle adopted by people may vary from place to place, the people of Hardua adopted novel strategies to place their demands before the authorities – **Gandhi Giri!**. On 19 November 2007, a number of people from Hardua Panchayat offered roses to the Tehsildar in his office to press for their demands of payment of the pending wages of a pond renovation work under NREGS.

About Hardua and the Struggle

Hardua Gram Panchayat comes under the Riba district of Madhya Pradesh. This is the part of Bundelkhand region which is rightly known only for its deep-rooted poverty and also for feudalism and caste-based discrimination. Charmakar and Kola are the dalit and tribal communities residing in Hardua Panchayat along with Patels, Kurmis and Brahmins who are from the upper caste. Almost all the dalit and adivasi communities residing in the area are landless and earn their livelihood either from their caste-specific work or from daily wages. They usually work in the fields of Patels and Kurmis and are paid an average wage of Rs20 per day.

The NREG Act, which was launched on 2nd February 2006 created a ray hope among them. They wished to free themselves from their dependency to work in private land on meagre wages. But their wish was not to be fulfilled by the local Panchayat as they were not provided with any work under NREGS for a long time. People realised that if they demand work in written applications, the panchayat authorities would be legally bound to provide work. Under these

circumstances, on 15 September 2007, 341 *dalit* and tribal workers of Haradua Gram Panchayat assembled at the Panchayat office and applied for work. But the applications were not accepted by the Sarpanch, Harihar Singh Patel who belonged to the upper caste. The real reason however was that the private lands belong to the upper caste people there. To give the people under NREGS, the upper caste felt would deprive them of work during harvest season. Even if the labour is available, they will be scarce and the people will also demand higher wages as per the NREGS guidelines. However the educated youth of the villages read the posters and pamphlets on NREGS and started informing the workers about the opportunities and the principles of the Act. Vikash Sambad, the local NGO played a key role in spreading awareness and extending support to the people in their struggle. On the basis of the information provided by the youth, the workers of Hardua again applied for work to the Chief Executive Officer (Block Development Officer) at the Janpad (block level). Following this, the Chief Development Officer ordered the Sarpanch to start the NREGS work at the panchayat level. With this order the renovation work of Shiv Talab (pond work) was started.

However, the Sarpanch even tried to suppress paying the workers and he threatened them when they demanded for payment by verbally declaring that the work is stopped. The people on the other hand were aware that the work should be at least carried out for 14 days at a stretch as per the law and should not be stopped in between. So they continued working in the pond on their own. People like Rambharan Saket and Ramavtar played a key role to mobilise workers for payment of wages. All the workers realised that it would be difficult to fight against the Sarpanch as it is tantamount to challenging the age old feudal culture. They,

therefore, started discussions and organised meetings at different places of dalit and tribal villages of Hardua Panchayat for mobilisation of people.

Seeing the increasing strength of the dalit and tribal communities, the Sarpanch tried to use the strategy of divide and rule. He tried to motivate some workers in favour of him and asked them to do some work in the centre of the Panchayat. The workers saw through the trick of the Sarpanch and decided that either all of them would work or nobody. They also demanded that the Shiv Talab work be restarted as that was the main source for water for all of them.



Hardua Sangarsh Samiti

In the meantime the workers placed their demand of getting work and pending wages before the NREGS implementing officers at the Janpad (Block) and District levels. However, the government official did not pay any heed to their submissions. Following this, the workers of Haradua sat for a hunger strike in Simiria Tahasil Office from 28 September 2007. No NGOs or political parties were allowed to play any kind of role in this struggle of dalits and tribal. It was purely a people's struggle. The struggling workers formed their own organisation called **Hardua Sangharsh Morcha** to fight collectively against the exploitative system. The Right to Food Campaign of Madhya Pradesh also joined its hand with the workers for their cause.

While this struggle was continuing, the district administration came up with a new plea that the Shiv Talab (Pond) work be stopped as out of 6.5 acres of Shiv Talab, 3 acres belong to a private party and comes under another Gram Panchayat called Kota.

In response to the new revelation, the representatives of the Right to Food Campaign of Madhya Pradesh met the district Collector Mr D P Ahuja. He further complicated the whole matter by saying that a portion of the Shiv Talab belonged to a local advocate, Mr Rajkumar Pandey and therefore the administration would be unable to go ahead with the work of Shiv Talab. The government documents collected by the volunteers of right to food campaign, however, suggested that Shiv Talab is a pond of 300 years and has been used for public purpose. Although some part of the pond was of the private party so far they had never claimed for that.

The workers kept their struggle alive in a completely non-violent and democratic manner by continuing the work in the pond without payment for 60 long days. However, this was too much for the workers since during the period of struggle they had no sources of livelihood to feed themselves. Even during the struggle two workers namely, Sukhwanti and Shivmangal Saket died of starvation and many households spent nights with empty stomach, but the struggle continued. "The deaths of Sukhwanti and Shivmangal Saket were clear cases of starvation deaths. The people here are daily wage earners. Non payment of workers for 30 to 40 days of NREGS works forced the people into starvation. In case of private works they would get low payment but would, at least, get the payment to meet their day-to-day needs. We have submitted memorandums of these starvation death cases to the Chief Minister's Office, Advisor to the Supreme Court's Commission on Right to Food and other authorities," says Sachin Jain, a leader of Right to Food campaign in the area. As part of their strategy to mobilise the villagers, the members of the **Hardua Sangharsh Morcha** formed small groups and visited nearby villages to orient others on the issues of NREGS. People observed diwali as the dark diwali in protest against the injustice. During the struggle, a public meeting was held in Hardua where more than 1500 people from 25 nearby villages participated. In the meeting it was decided to *gherao* the Simiria Tahasil office on 19 November 2007. In between these seven days, 14 regional and national people's organisations joined their hand



Struggle continues near Shiv Talab

with the workers of Hardua. On 19 November, the Tehasil office was *gheraoed* and the Tehsildar was offered roses by the workers as part of their **Gandhi Giri** strategy. The State advisor to the commissioners of the Supreme Court on Right to Food also intervened in the issue and asked the district administration to pay the wages to the workers within 30th November 2007. The Collector DP Ahuja visited the place personally and ordered the release of pending wages. **“Even though it’s 6 o’ clock in the evening, the real sun has risen in Hardua now”** remarked a cheerful villager in response to the order of the Collector. **SHYLA BOX THIS!!!**

Media offered active support to the people’s struggle in Hardua. A number of roads, ponds, etc., works were sanctioned to the panchayat.

Specialty of the struggle

For five reasons the struggle is important: **First**, it is purely a struggle by the people without any involvement or support of NGOs or political parties. The people unanimously perceived all the parties as opportunists. **Second**, it was done purely in Gandhian style. Offering flowers to tehsildar is the novel Gandhian technique. Boycott of work despite having no food in the home is reminiscent of the Ahmedabad meals strike in 1918, where workers had boycotted work demanding increase in wages. **Third**, following the struggle and success in Hardua, workers of all the panchayats of Sirmur block placed their demand before the authorities for the payment of wages for the first time. Here the wages were pending for more than six months. **Fourth** and most

importantly, it took the shape of a struggle that challenged the existing exploitative system toned with feudalist characteristic. Fifth, women played a major role in the formation and functioning of the **Hardua Sangharsh Morcha**.

Lala Saket, a struggling villager says, “Now the sun actually rose in the sky of Hardua; we fought eating a single roti in a day so that we can live with dignity. We know that now onwards life will become hard because the feudalism shall not keep quite, but we are prepared for that.”

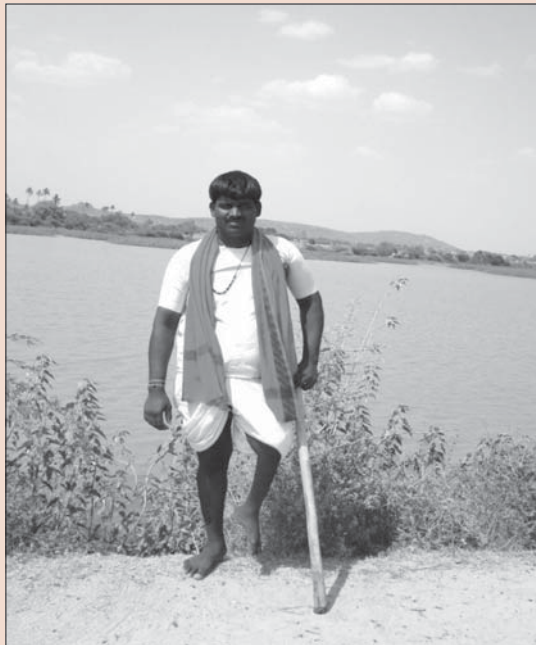
Feudal Backlash

Rambharan Saket, one of the leaders of the struggle had to pay a high price for taking part in the struggle. His daughter had mild mental abnormality. One day she did not return home from work. To file a complaint in one of the Simiria tahasil police stations, the people of his community (Charmakar) met the police. The statement from the police questioned the young girl’s character: “Your daughter is not an angel; she may have eloped with some boy.” After some days the girl’s dead body was found in a place, about 6km from the village. Police did not register any case, let alone make any inquiry. As a result, the reason of the girl’s abrupt missing followed by her death could not be ascertained. It is suspected to be a classic case of feudal backlash.

Similarly, Ramavatar, a cobbler by profession, was also fighting for his right to equality and employment alongside the villagers. Once, accidentally one of his pigs entered into the field of an upper caste person in the village (Patels). This incident was taken as trespassing and Ramavatar was severely beaten by the Patels.

NREGS – boon for the differently abled people

Sabanna: 26 years and wears a wide smile on his face. NREGS-related work has given him a ray of hope. In the last financial year he and his wife worked for about 57 days and got paid Rs5700 on piece-rate basis. Sabanna is a differently abled person with one lame leg. His is a joint family in Allipur village under Yadgiri block of Gulbarga district of Karnataka. He has three brothers and a widow mother. Out of the money from the NREGS work, he spent about Rs4000 to purchase the fodder for his bullocks and cleared the interest payment for a loan of Rs1,00,000 taken some years ago for his brothers' marriage ceremony. This year also he has applied for NREGS work as the agricultural work is over on his own land. For the first time Sabanna was absorbed into any government work as earlier he was never preferred by the contractors to do public work in and around their village. However, the struggle by his villagers, himself and their Sangathan has been long to ensure their rights under NREGS. And now it is work that he gets and wages too. Today, he gets wages through NREGS and his brother does not have to migrate to Bangalore city where he may get more wages but, according to Sabanna, "My brother working in the villages by staying with the family is preferable to working in cities and earning a little more. In cities he had extra expenditure on food and lodging, whereas at home he saves a lot more."



Sabanna, in front of the renovated pond



Sabanna, his wife and his daughter

Process undertaken

Even though NREGA was operationalised from February 2006, the villagers of Allipur village were not impacted until December 2007. It was only from November 2007 that registration took place.

Spreading awareness: Social Initiatives for Rural Empowerment (SIRE) decided to pursue spreading awareness on NREGA and help people to follow the different procedures under the legislation to get their entitlement. Venkatesh of the NGO started mobilising people of the Yadgiri taluka through spreading awareness on the Act by adopting various strategies. Initially door to door visits were made by the NGO workers and some interested people, followed by orientation programmes through Ward Sabha and Gram Sabha meetings. Meetings were organised with the presidents and representatives of Gram and Talukuka Panchayats and even Panchayat Secretaries in order to draw their attention on the legislation and their responsibility. Different types of posters covering various provisions of the Act and on work measurement, etc., were passed in important places in the villages and Panchayats.

Exposure Trips: From the village some people like Ramana, the President of the village Sangathan, Ravi, etc., were taken for exposure to a place in Raichur district of Karnataka where people have undertaken rallies, processions and held dialogue with the authorities for better implementation of NREGS.

Some people from the area were also taken to the social audit conducted in NREGS works done in Batagera village/GP under Sedam block of Gulbarga district during December 2007. All these exposures helped people learn the people's struggle and shape their own accordingly.

Registration and issuance of Job Cards: After people got to know about their rights and entitlements under the law, they approached the Panchayat Secretary and the Executive Officer (EO) at the Taluka Panchayat in Yadgiri, who either refused to accept the application or did not acknowledge receipt. In the mean time a new

secretary was posted who registered approx. 45 people in November 2007. But distribution of the Job Cards which should have followed within fifteen days of registration did not happen. People once again gave a written application for issuance of Job Card in January 2008.

Formation of Sangathan: "Forming Sangathans in every village of five Talukas of Gulbarga district where we are operating has been part of our strategy for facilitating implementation of NREGA" says Veeraiah of SIRE. The Sangathan in Allipur village, Coolie Karmikar Sangathan, was formed in November 2007 and Ramaya was made the President. Ramaya states, "Since the officials were not listening to our demands when approached individually, we thought it proper to form Sangathan which would bring pressure on the administration." After its formation all the activities of the people were conducted through the Sangathan. The Sangathan meets once in a fortnight and various difficulties, especially NREGS-related are discussed and the course of action to be taken.

Provisions of NREGS is also discussed in the meetings of SHGs (Self Help Groups) formed in the Village.

Group application for Job and unemployment allowance: After constant insistence by the Sangathan, the Panchayat issued 45 Job Cards. Others too followed the same course. However, no work was given and three people from the Sangathan met the EO of the Taluka, who assured to provide work immediately. Following the meeting, the Junior Engineer accompanied by the Panchayat Secretary visited the village and sanctioned a pond renovation work.

Struggle for opening bank account: The Panchayat staff claimed payment could not be made unless workers open bank accounts. Initially the bank officers refused to help open zero bank accounts but finally, Venkatesh of the NGO, led the people to meet the bank manager with the copy of the order of the Chief Secretary that speaks of opening zero balance accounts of the workers in the bank. The Manager finally yielded.

People's audit fosters good governance

Fagu Singh of Chukru village – a scheduled area in Jharkhand – is the gram sabha President. He has to oversee that the villagers make plans for works to be undertaken under NREGS, discuss various issues relating to the implementation of the scheme and see that the scheme is functioning well as per their decision. This activism of the villagers of Chukru and other villages in Silahadon Gram Panchayat in exercising their authority over the government scheme is a new phenomenon. The credit for a rejuvenated Gram Sabha goes to the social audit conducted on NREGS works in the Silhadon Gram Panchayat along with 15 other Panchayats in four blocks of Ranchi district from 14th to 21st May 2007. The local NGO Gram Swaraj Abhiya, Jharkhand facilitated the process of audit in Silhadon panchayat of Khunti block (now a separate district).

Social audit has been made a mandatory requirement under the Act. Government of India assigned NIRD (National Institute for Rural Development), Hyderabad to conduct six social audits in various parts of the country on a pilot basis to set examples. NIRD, in association with Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) of Rajasthan conducted audits in six districts of the country starting from Dungepur in Rajasthan, Anantpur district of Andhra Pradesh, Kalahandi of Orissa and in Ranchi district of Jharkhand etc. Social Audit in Ranchi was a collective effort of the district administration of Ranchi, NREGA Watch – a conglomeration of civil society organisations and individuals in the State along with NIRD and MKSS. It was conducted in 15 Panchayats of 4 blocks. The NREGA Watch played a key role in the whole process.

The process adopted

Collection of necessary official documents: Official documents like muster roll, work estimates,

administrative and financial sanctions, etc., relating to the works done under NREGS were collected before hand from the district administration

Consolidation of information: Thorough home work was done in consolidation of the data in the muster rolls. This consolidation gives a first hand knowledge about the discrepancies in the records and points out the probable areas of corruption which may be cross-verified with the beneficiaries and others in the field.

Two-days training programme: This was organised in Bromvey, near Ranchi where all the participants were acquainted with the muster roll watch, provisions of NREGA etc. They were also told about their role as facilitators and investigators in the villages.

Village visit: Participants were divided into 15 groups for 15 Panchayats of which Social Audit were to be done. Headed by a team leader, the team was dispatched to every panchayat.

Awareness and audit in the villages: Each team and the villagers participated in the whole audit process.

Panchayat level Public Hearing (PH) and Block-level hearing: Panchayat level hearings were organised and the volunteers presented the findings of the audit before the public and solutions were attempted immediately.

At the block level, grievances were presented before the BDO and other block authorities which were responded to by them the later.

District level Interface with the Deputy Commissioner: The DC, apart from attending to the findings within 3 days, also assured action on some aspects and expressed inability on some other as those were beyond his jurisdiction.

State level hearing: in the final leg of the audit process a symposium was held at the State level where the members of Central Employment Guarantee Council (CEGC), Principal Secretary, MoRD, Govt. of Jharkhand, Joint Secretary, MoRD, GOI and representatives from NREGA Watch and public at large were present. Discussion was taken up issue-wise where both policy and implementation level lacunae were discussed.

Meeting with Chief Minister: The members of CEGC met the CM of Jharkhand and presented the outcome of the whole process in the form of concerns and demands. He promised to look into and implement them.

The outcome

Platform for sharing grievances: Social audit and the public hearing provided first ever platform to the vulnerable sections of the society to share their grievances. When the volunteers were making cross verification of the record with the people, the latter shared their grievances. In the public hearing also the people testified fearlessly.

Corruption angle and percentage culture exposed: Corruption and 'percentage' culture prevalent in civil works were coming to the fore during the process. The *Abikarta* of Kuchhu Panchayat of Angadha block alleged that the Junior Engineer (JE) had accepted a bribe to release cheque for the payment to be made to the labourers.

In *Karge* Panchayat two of the beneficiaries of sanctioned works testified that the Panchayat Sewak had taken over Rs 500 from each of them as percentage cuts, and that they had made false muster roll entries to recover the amounts. While the concerned Panchayat Secretary denied this, it was established nevertheless that false muster roll entries had been made.

Bijaram of village Chaudanda (Panchayat Tendi) was told verbally to 'go ahead' after he submitted the proposal in the block, without any written sanction. Two months later, he owed Rs18,000 to the labourers but is unable to pay them because the Panchayat Sewak and others are demanding Rs12,000 to release the cheques.

In *Malti* Panchayat at a road work, more than 10 villagers testified that there were fake entries in the muster rolls, where muster rolls recorded 54 days of work done by villagers who had actually done between 2 and 14 days of work.

Pending wages paid: In the public hearing, cases were several where the authorities had not paid the wage of people for some reason or other. For example, In *Silhadon* panchayat, names of 10 women had been struck off the muster rolls when they demanded payment for providing drinking water to the workers. At the public hearing the panchayat sewak simply folded his hands and apologised, and agreed to pay the women for the work done within 3 days. In one case, where people had worked for 3 days but were not paid as that project was scrapped afterwards, the BDO ordered the payment to be made immediately.

Guilty officials punished: The crux of success of social audit lies on the action taken on the guilty officials. The DC of Ranchi promised the gathering in the district and State level sharing that he would take action on the officers guilty of siphoning off the funds under the scheme, after due inquiry is made on the basis of the findings of the SA process, within three days. The DC, within three days, suspended 16 officials and FIRs was lodged against 5, who were guilty of receiving commissions, misappropriating funds under NREGA and reporting without visiting the field!

Difficulties faced by officials: The government officials too face problems. The DC of Ranchi shared about the resistance he faced from his officials in bringing out the chart on schedule of rates. The DC honestly admitted that there were many instances where his officers have not been able to deliver as per the mandate of the Act, but asserted that systems should be in place for the same, for which he is not the only empowered authority. Many aspects also depend on the other rungs of the government (read-policy level of the State and of GOI).

Communication at policy and implementation levels addressed: The symposium provided the space for the policy making level of the government to grasp the difficulties faced

by the district administration and below to implement the Act. For example, the Secretary, MoRD, Govt. of Jharkhand assured to expedite the 'Time and Motion Study' and revise the schedule of rates to remove the discrepancy with minimum wages on one hand and the payment as per the amount of work done on the other. Sensing the inadequacy of the staff structure at the implementation level, the Secretary assured to strengthen the staff structure at the grass root level.

Ironically the symposium also helped in removing major communication gap between the policy and implementation level of the government. For example, even appointments of Mates were at times not known to the respective officials.

It also was a platform for bridging the gap between the State and the Centre. The Joint Secretary, MoRD, GOI clarified on many policy related issues and assured to look into the outcome of the audit process.

Real democracy in operation: The audit process proved to be a unique tool for ensuring accountability of the public servants to the public in a face to face interface. The otherwise inaccessible officials were seen answering the queries and assertions of the aggrieved citizens

in an open and public platform. People, who were helpless before, were visibly empowered to fight corruption and defend their rights under the Act in the PH. Real democracy was seen to be in operation. Observing the people's power exhibited in the PH, a lady who attended the PH at Angadha block, says, "Now the officials cannot escape from making right payments to our labour, now we can fight our case." It also provided the space for better understanding among the officials and the people, for officials could understand the problems faced by the people and vice versa.

Systemic problems identified: Apart from many other aspects, the process helped in identifying the gaps in the system.

The CEGC met the Chief Minister and expressed the following concerns:

- Inadequate staff structure
- Exploitative work measurement
- Delays in wage payments
- Ineffecient institutional arrangements
- Ineffective monitoring systems.

The Chief Minister assured the delegation of his full support.

The long-term impact

More than a year after the social audits conducted in Ranchi district, Gopinath Ghosh of Gram Swaraj Abhiyan, Jharkhand summarises the long-term impact of the social audits conducted in Silhadon and nearby panchayats as follows:

- *Gram Sabha has been rejuvenated. Now people are participating in the planning and implementation of the works to be done under NREGS according to their need.*
- *One major impact of people's planing is, unlike before, now the works done under NREGS are proving beneficial for the people. For example, in Silhadon Panchayat a number of small irrigation projects created under NREGS have helped people in fishing and agriculture. This indirectly contributed to the economic enhancement of people.*
- *People's awareness on not only NREGS but other government schemes has gone up and they are now demanding entitlement of these schemes.*
- *With a Junior Engineer of the block and the Gram Sevak of Silhadon suspended for their corrupt and irresponsible behaviour, the degree of corruption and 'percentage' share, etc., has reduced quite a bit. There is a feeling of being accountable and sincere at the official level, since misdeeds are being taken seriously.*

Unionisation improves performance of NREGS

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was passed in 2005 with much fanfare throughout the country. However, there was a mismatch between the spirit of the Act and its implementation. In the State of Gujarat (as in other States) the violations were many in the provisions of NREGS – improper distribution of job cards, not providing job in time, not giving wages in time and in some cases not giving wages at all after the work is completed, etc. Despite many attempts by the people and civil society organisations to draw the attention of the authorities for improvement in the execution of the scheme, the scenario did not improve much. People held protest rallies, *dhranas*, submitted complaints etc, but the response from the authorities were below expectation.

On 17th June 2006 a grand convention was held at Godra where about 5000 people from 6 districts of the State gathered to discuss the possibility of forming a Union of workers. Developing Initiatives for Social and Human Action (DISHA) facilitated the formation of the NREGA union with 5000 people. DISHA, a mass-based and membership-based organisation formed in 1985, works towards improvement of socio-economic conditions of marginalised communities, mainly the tribal societies and other landless labourers in Gujarat.

The main objective behind forming the union was that the workers would get a platform to discuss their problems and it could organise them and protect their rights. It would work for effective implementation of NREGA, payment of minimum wages for the guaranteed works and representation of different work related issues, etc.

Structure and functioning of Union

The Union has met from time to time to discuss various issue relating to the policy and implementation of NREGS. Two sets of meeting were conducted in June and July 2007 to discuss the formation of district level executive committees so that the activities can be conducted in district and sub district levels in a decentralised manner. Table given below gives a list of the meetings of the union.

Formation of the District-level Executive committee of NREG workers

Union met to form executive bodies in district and taluka levels (where NREGA was operational) to raise various issues relating to the implementation of the Act and to decide the strategies to deal with them. For example, in Dahod district, executive meetings were organised for planning of works, mobilising work application and also to decide the

| Sr | Date | Place | Objective of Meeting |
|----|----------|----------|--|
| 1 | 26-06-07 | Limkheda | Formation of district-level executive under NREG union |
| 2 | 17-07-07 | Limkheda | Discussion pertaining to NREG issues, planning & budget and future strategy in Panchmahal/Dahod districts |
| 3 | 27-10-07 | Limkheda | Planning of activities in every taluka under NREG scheme. Responsibility given to executive member concerning checking of work and assisting in submitting application |

future programmes/strategy. The committee also undertakes steps to spread awareness about NREG scheme to the community in every village of the *taluka*, assist the family to avail job cards, help job holder families to submit applications for demanding work, monitor the work in progress and check if worksite facilities are available, monitor whether wages are regularly paid. It meets the authorities regularly to insist that 100 days employment be provided to the rural community.

Responsibility of President/Vice-president of the NREG union is to:

- Represent to the Programme Officer any complaint of NREGA from the taluka.
- If complaint is not resolved at taluka level then to represent to the Union for its resolution.
- Undertake development works in villages under NREGA.
- Represent to the Union at district level for any complaint.

Programmes undertaken by the Union

Awareness Campaign on National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: Awareness campaigns pertaining to the NREGA were organised from village to village. Such campaigns were undertaken on 3 February 2007 from Banaskantha district and it ended on 8 June 2007 at Dharampur. 538 villages of 17 talukas were covered under the awareness campaign.

A house-to-house campaign was carried out from in October–November 2007 covering

99 villages of Panchmahal/Dahod districts in protest against the use of machines in NREGS work, depriving the people from getting works.

During the campaigns, meetings were organised from village to village and people were provided details about the Act. Rallies were organised, slogans were written on the walls and leaflets were disbursed among the people. During the meetings, Disha's team members taught the people to write applications and in some cases they wrote the job applications for people, and people shared various problems relating to the implementation of the law. The general complaints were of non-availability of job cards, not getting work, less payment of wages, etc. These rallies and meetings were attended by people in large numbers. Complaints that were received by the local Unions were forwarded to the Programme Officer of the concerned taluka for its resolution

Meeting with Officials of NREGA Department:

Regular visits are made by the Union workers to Programme Officers for resolving grievances of the worker such as, demands to provide jobs in response to the work applications, payment of pending wages, use of machines, etc. For example, about 30 visits were made by the Union people to the Programme Officers of various talukas (blocks) of Dahod, Godhra, etc., districts for resolving the issue pertaining to work applications, pending wages, job cards being kept with Mate and returning them to workers, proceedings for paying of unemployment allowance to the workers, etc.

Union's branch office at Limkheda and its achievements:

impact

During the house-to-house campaign organised by the Union in selected 5 Panchayats of Limkheda taluka in Dahod district, the community was sensitised about various legal provisions under the NREGA. In the village of Budhla Kaliya, Kalipabhai Bhabhor lives with his family of 11 members. His 3 children are studying in school and other 2 younger children are staying at home. They have a mud hut and own 5 acres of land. But this is insufficient for the family to lead a life where basic needs are fulfilled. Due to awareness generated by the Employment Guarantee Union, the family got the job card and worked for 100 days. Initially, the family earned Rs50 daily but later on received increased wages of Rs60 per day. The income from this work has really benefited the family and helped in the children's education, family health, livelihood of agriculture, etc.

payment of pending wages

The people of Sarjumi village in Limkheda taluka, Dahod district are mainly dependent on agriculture. But, since agriculture is rain-fed in lean seasons people migrate out to seek employment. With NREGS coming to the village, Pateliya Natvarbhai Dhirabhai and other 38 people got the job cards and worked from 22 January to 23 June 2007 in road construction and pond repairing work. But the wages were not paid for their 11 weeks' work. Even the payment to the tractor of Rameshbhai Damabhai Pateliya of the village which was used for transporting the raw materials like mud, metal, etc for constructing the road was also not made. On 8 July the workers filed a compliant to the Rural Employment Workers' Union for their due wages and fare of tractor. The union lodged a written complaint to both the Programme Officer, Limkheda and Additional District Programme Coordinator. Finally the due wages of workers and fare of tractor amounting to Rs48247 was paid on 10 September. Thus the Union has made affirmative impact and gained the confidence of the workers by resolving their complaints.

Achievements

Job Cards Provided through Union: During village visits the families who were devoid of job cards were helped out in submitting applications for the job cards. Total 14818 job cards were provided through the effort of union in 2007-08.

Application for the job cards: During the campaign and village level meetings, 3413 applications have been filled for demanding work at the village level.

Work Received for 100 Days under NREGA through union: About 475 families from 12 village has received 100 days work during the year 2007-08.

Unemployment allowances: 388 legal cases have been filed by the Union before the authority concerned for the unemployment allowance. The struggle is going on for the unemployment allowance.

Government recognition of the Union

The Gujarat Labour Commissioner has accepted the formation of NREGA Workers union in the State. This is probably the first registered trade union under NREGA. This Union is registered under the Labour Act (trade union) of Gujarat and the Constitution of the Union will be similar to the labour unions for Gujarat.

Table: Major quantitative achievements of the NREGS union

| NREGS union | District/Taluka/ Village | No. of people |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Awareness campaign | 539 | 11819 |
| Door-to-door campaign | 99 | 4977 |
| Village-level meetings | 270 | 7409 |
| Taluka level executive meetings | 136 | 297 |
| District level executive meetings | 16 | 890 |
| Initiated work | 33 | 3413 |
| Job card issued through union | 171 | 14818 |
| 100 days job through union | 54 | 475 |
| Meeting with officials of NREGA dept | 3 | 147 |
| Awareness cycle yatra | 235 | 10172 |
| Convention | 3 | 5000 |
| Rally/Dharna programme | 3 | 5000 |
| Payment of due wages | 10 | Rs410210 |
| Court case for unemployment allowance | 3 | 388 |

Anantpur social audit towards transparency and accountability

Experience becomes a model for Andra Pradesh...

Anantpur district is at the south-west of Andhra Pradesh and consists of 3 revenue divisions and 63 revenue mandals. The district is one of the most backward province of the State as it receives very little rainfall which adversely affects the agriculture. This is also one of the reason for which NREGS assumes greater significance for the villagers of the district.

The execution of NREGS in Anantpur district was not very encouraging even after five months of its operationalisation, as in case of other districts too. In those initial days, in many gram panchayats there were the issues of delayed payments and non- payments even after two months of completion of the works. For example, Obulamma of Kurubavandlapally village of Penukonda Mandal (block) complaint was "I have supplied water for 30 days in a worksite but not been paid a single rupee by the Sarpanch." Even Anjaneyulu, a differently abled person was denied work though he wished to do so.

Background

In June 2006, the Civil Society Organisations like Anant Paryabaran Parirakhyan Samiti (APPS), Young India Project, Rural Development Trust etc. of Anantpur district decided to review the performance of NREGS in the district and conducted a meeting at the district headquarters. The workers were not getting proper and timely wages, there was involvement of the middlemen/contractors; there were problems and adjustments in measurement and also problems in opening of bank/postal accounts for payment, etc.

The group of Civil Society Organisations felt the seriousness of these issues and decided to carry out the social audit process. "Social Audit was not a new concept, it is in the Act itself and we only decided to invoke this provision and use this as a tool for awareness generation and for bringing about more transparency in the execution of the scheme", says Balam, a leading activist associated with APPS. The representatives of the Civil Society Organisations met the district administration and the higher officials of the Rural Development Department of Andhra Pradesh Government (the department is the implementing agency of NREGS,AP) and proposed to them to carry out a model social audit in selected panchayats of the district. The administration, mainly, K Raju, Principal Secretary of Rural Development Department of Andhra Pradesh, agreed to the proposal of the organisations.

The process

In the meeting a broad outline was drawn for organising social audits in the whole district. Representatives from 30 organisations, who have been actively worked on NREGS in the district, participated in the meeting. Ten members from different organisations visited Dungarpur district of Rajasthan and experienced the process of mass social audit which was carried out by MKSS and other civil society organisations there in May 2006.

The ten representatives shared their experiences on their return with CSOs, activists, volunteers and union leaders. A detailed plan for the padyatra and social audit was prepared. A month before the padyatra, 20 district resource persons drawn from the CSOs went through an intensive training (Training

of Trainers) by the representatives of ActionAid and MKSS and were properly equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out social audits. This group then carried out the field exercise in Bathalapalle village of Anantpur district which prepared them for the task of training other volunteers for the mass social audit and padyatra.

Orientation programmes for the Mandal Parisad Development Organisations (MPDOs, which is equivalent to Block Development Officers-BDOs) was planned. In August 2006, a half day workshop and a press conference was organised in Anantpur where apart from the officials, the representatives from the local media were sensitised on the objectives of the padyatra and on the needs of the social audit process. This process worked and later the local media gave wide coverage to the process of social audit.

Volunteers from different parts of the State gathered at the Lalitha Kala Thoranam in Anantpur, the district headquarters to attend the training on how to carry out the social audit process as well as the padyatra. More than 1500 people participated in this programme including the officials of district and State administration. Further, the State resource persons facilitated a three-day classroom training of all the padayatris at three centres arranged by the district administration from 30 August to 1 September 2006. Apart from NREGS-related issues, the volunteers were also told about their roles and responsibilities.

Padyatra, with a mission

The District Collector of Anantpur flagged off the padyatra. The routes for the padyatra were finalised by the working committees formed before. The volunteers were then divided into separate groups to lead the padyatra in different routes. About 180 gram panchayats were covered by different groups and during the yatra, they made efforts to generate awareness on the provisions of the Act as well as verified the records like muster rolls, measurement registers, job cards, pay slips work orders etc. The padayatris conducted panchayat level meetings to hear the grievances and complaints of the workers.

On every day's basis, the padyatri groups used to send the major findings of the day to the district level coordination committee, which were forwarded to the administration and to the press on the same day. This process of padyatra and social audit continued for six to ten days.

On 8 September 2006, a public hearing was organised by the concerned MPDOs where the NGO/union representatives presented reports on the findings of social audits. The local MPDO facilitated the meeting and made note of the follow up action needed to be carried out. In the evening of 8 September 2006 there was the meeting of the special officers with the Principal Secretary of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh and the Anantpur District Collector.

On 9 September 2006, two meetings were organised at the district level, where Mr Raghubansh Prasad, Union Minister for Rural Development and other ministers of the Andhra Pradesh Government participated in all the meetings. Ms Aruna Roy from MKSS, representatives of ActionAid also participated in this. The officials from different mandals of the district also participated. The representatives of the civil society organisation and the volunteers of social audit presented major findings there. Based on the success of social audit process as a tool for awareness generation and transparency, the Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh also assured to regularise the process through out the state. The second meeting was held in the playground of Art College of Anantpur district head quarter where the process was formally concluded.

The meeting concluded with the following resolution:

- Gram panchayats to be involved in the planning.
- Labour groups to be mobilised to create awareness.
- Continuous social audit, both internal and external, to be carried out.
- Protection of water source, common property resources and reserved forests through NREGS works.

Learning and impact

Even with all the discrepancies and misappropriations, it was found that NREGS contributed to the family economy of those living in the villages. During the padyatra and social audit in the district many villagers expressed their appreciation and happiness to the fact that they were now getting work in their own village. N Varadamma, says, “My entire family earlier had gone to Bangalore searching for employment as there was drought and no work was available here, but now, after the implementation of this Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), we are able to get work and earn in the village where we reside. If the government continues providing us employment in the same way regularly, we will not have to migrate.” She was also hopeful with the process of social Audit. She says, “After the *Praja Taniki* (social audit), the panchayat seems very active, payments made regularly and

timely and the documents kept open for verification. In short, it has brought some sort of accountability to the people by the panchayat and block officials and representatives.”

Along with awareness generation many of the grievances of people were redressed during the process of social audit. Issues were brought up with the MPDOs, District Collector, Chief Post Master General and the Commissioner of Rural Development. Several cases were taken up and after departmental enquires, the concerned accused were dismissed or criminal charges were filed against them. During the social audit process, disciplinary action was taken against 5 postmasters, criminal charges were initiated against 26 middlemen/contractors. In Gudibanda mandal, all the Field Assistants and Technical Assistants were terminated and action was taken to recover the misappropriated amount of Rs56 lakhs.

Example setting audit process

The experiences of Anantpur social audit also brought many positive changes in the system. Soon after this social audit, the Government of Andhra Pradesh decided to carry out regular social audits of all the NREGS works in the whole State. For this purpose, a special social audit cell was created by the department of rural development, Government of Andhra Pradesh for regular facilitation and follow up of each social audit of the NREGS works. State and district resource persons were selected from the civil society organisations, Agriculture and labour Unions, etc., and trained. These people in turn trained the village level social auditors. These village level social auditors are now facilitating the process of social audit in each gram panchayats of Andhra Pradesh. Based on the experiences of Anantpur and as per the provisions of the Act, all the measures were finalised for follow up action. The State of Andhra Pradesh is the first State in India, which has institutionalised and regularised the processes for social audits in NREGS. This is because the people of Anantpur showed the way.

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ActionAid works with poor and excluded people in 24 states in India and over 40 countries worldwide to end poverty and injustice.

Together we claim legal, constitutional and moral rights to food and livelihood, shelter, education, healthcare, dignity and a voice in decisions that affect their lives.

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