



Critical Stories of Change

Food for the Hungry, Work for the Poor
Tribals In Purulia Secure Their Lives

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2014

Glossary

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| AA/AA | ActionAid India | IAY | Indira Awaaz Yojana |
| AAY | Antyodaya Anna Yojana | MDM | Mid-Day Meal |
| APL | Above Poverty Line | MGNREGA | Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act |
| BDO | Block Development Officer | NGO | Non Governmental Organisation |
| BJJAS | Banchita Jana Jagarana Abhikar Samity | PDS | Public Distribution System |
| BPL | Below Poverty Line | PIL | Public Interest Litigation |
| CBO | Community Based Organisation | RTE | Right to Education |
| DM | District Magistrate | RTI | Right to Information |
| FRA | Forest Rights Act | SDM | Sub-divisional Magistrate |
| GP | Gram Panchayat | SDO | Sub-divisional Office |
| GRAM | Gram Unnayan Manch | SHGs | Self-Help Groups |
| ICDS | Integrated Child Development Scheme | SC/ST | Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe |
| JS | Jamgoria Sevabrata | OBC | Other Backward Class |

Cover image: In Sijadi village, of Purulia's Manbazar I block, women were drying out their stock of rice against an MGNREGA work site signage when we chanced upon them. The juxtapositioning of the two images seemed to capture the BJJAS initiative perfectly.

Foreword

Dear reader,

What you would find in the pages that follow, is a rare attempt to stop for a moment, take a breath and understand in some depth are “efforts” of social change that we are all engaged in, and see how it has affected the communities lives, as they are lived.

There are hundreds of partner social organisations we are collaborating with at present, and many more who have done us the honour of making us part of real, substantial and sustained change in favour of the marginalized and the excluded. At ActionAid India, we derive our inspiration and strength from the ability of the impoverished and excluded people to lead the change, working in partnership with formations of community based organisations and other social movements in their struggles for justice, equality and a life of dignity.

There is, as you may imagine a plethora of amazing stories of perseverance, courage and ingenuity of individuals, groups, villages and urban poor communities, challenging the complex structures of exclusions, poverty and patriarchy. We try our best to get many of them reported in our various publications and platforms, yet the big picture of the journey through time, often escapes us all. While data, log frames and reports contain within them ideas of ups and downs of change, very often the collective narratives of the roads less travelled are not put in one place, nor are failures, despair, fear and backlashes put on record in a “success story” driven world.

The ‘Critical Stories of Change’ is an attempt to address this and put forth a learning record of peoples’ journeys of change. They are ‘critical’ because they try to locate the critical factors which made change possible and ‘critical’ because they do not try to gloss over the difficult and painful parts. In an attempt to document the struggles and experiences of such undaunted and unfazed communities; their leaders –

women and men, who worked against all odds to challenge the unjust and inequitable structures, it seeks as much to document the failures, strife and discordant notes, along the way. 'Critical Stories' also recognise changing political factors and actors outside of us who directly or indirectly contribute to the transformative potential of such change processes

We hope that these documented experiences will provide a real picture and give worthy insights for all of us. We also hope that the stories will inspire all readers to strengthen their commitment to a just and equitable society.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Women Feature Services for agreeing to support us in this learning initiative. We owe a special thanks to Ms Pamela Philipose for so wonderfully recounting this story, **Food for the Hungry, Work for the Poor Tribals In Purulia Secure Their Lives.**

Happy Reading!

Sandeep Chachra,
Executive Director, ActionAid India

Background

Critical stories of change

Critical stories of change is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid International plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. But in their openness, self-criticism, detailed analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are far removed from self-congratulatory 'good practice case studies'. Critical stories of change are full of life, and are intended to impart the insights, advice and confidences of a friend. ActionAid International often makes claims for its work and achievements. Yet, in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is often one of many players. What ActionAid rarely gets to know is the significant nature of its contribution and the factors that contributed to the outcomes.

The stories are the product of a facilitated learning process and aim to explore how change (both negative and positive) happens from the perspectives of different stakeholders. These are stories that explicitly link ActionAid and its partners' grassroots work to a rights agenda and hopefully capture the full complexity of ActionAid's development interventions and experiences: from the perspective of poor people, partners and organisation(s) and other stakeholders involved, as well as ActionAid itself. The documented lessons and experiences will hopefully provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

Acknowledgements

Cyclone Phailin had hit the eastern coast of India just ten days earlier and the skies remained overcast with intermittent rain as we made our way to Bengal's Purulia district. In the circumstances, I was grateful for ActionAid India's Manu Sharma's sound sense of logistics, besides his ability to pitch in with Bengali translation and photography. Ashok Kumar Nayak, programme officer at ActionAid's Kolkata office, was very familiar with the situation on the ground and seemed to have an instant connect with local communities. He also demonstrated immense patience in translating what was said and answering my innumerable queries. For this help, I thank him. Two people who literally captained us through the terrain



were Khagan Chandra Mahato and Nakul Baske, both of them from the Banchita Jana Jagarana Adhikar Samity (BJJAS). They always commute to the various BJJAS locations on a motorbike even when darkness falls over the hills and forests of the area with only the chirping of crickets to guide them. I salute courageous activists like them who keep going despite great odds. The warmth with which the poorest households greeted us was also remarkable. Kanaklata Murmu, when she heard we were coming, got up early in the morning to prepare a delicious meal for us despite constraints on her time and resources. Looking back, one is humbled by such spontaneous expressions of grace and goodwill.

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Food for the Hungry, Work for the Poor

Tribals In Purulia Secure Their Lives



“We got only one day of work. So we approached the panchayat office as a group and told them if they can’t give us work they should pay us an unemployment allowance.”

– Tapas Kalindi
25, Dhanudi village, Baghmundi block, Purulia

“Our village is like our mother/It provides us with air, food and water/It protects us so that we, its children, can live.”

–From a poem recited by Gorachand Mahato
12, Sijadi village, Manbazar I block, Purulia

Introduction

It was a little distance away from the village of Jaragora, in Purulia's Manbazar II block, when we came across this Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) work site. The clouds looked threatening and the 70 men and women employed here, all of whom came from two neighbouring villages, were working against the clock to maximize their efforts before the rains came down heavily. The pond they were digging would prove invaluable during the punishing summer months. If the monsoon fails, as it often does, not only do agricultural operations grind to halt in this region, even drinking water becomes difficult to procure. Since time immemorial, during the parched times, people here had no alternative but to uproot themselves and migrate to distant places in search of work. Today, MGNREGA has proved something of an insurance against such a prospect. As one man explained, "This pond gives us work now and it will give us water during the summer. This work has made the difference between our staying hungry and eating two meals; between our children going to school or not; between our staying right here in our villages or searching for employment amongst strangers." But ensuring that MGNREGA worked for people's benefit required information and organisation. This was where the BJJAS through its mobilization and advocacy efforts has been able to make a difference...

Bengal's Purulia district is a geographically significant region, bordering the states of Jharkhand and Bihar and marking the eastern limits of the Chotanagpur plateau. Along with Bankura and West Medinipur, it forms Jangalmahal, the most deprived tribal pocket in the state, which had been





a site of internecine conflict between the state and ultra Left groups. Despite the great natural wealth of the area, history has not been kind to its original inhabitants, largely tribal, who have remained among the poorest communities in Bengal. This fact, more than any other, has been the reason why political militancy came to mark this region. The plunder of their forest resources over the years and the consequent deforestation, the usurpation of their land and disruption of their ways of life, have proved cataclysmic for the tribal communities of Purulia in innumerable ways. The distress migration of labour from Purulia to the mines of Asanol or the tea plantations of Assam in the earlier days or, more recently, to the steel factories of Bokaro and the brick kilns that dot the neighbourhood, reflected profound ruptures

in the web of local life. This experience has been captured in many poignant songs that expressed the exploitation and deceit that have often marked this journey out. One of them, oft quoted, goes 'hasi hasi prem fasi Mahajane paralo, patutular nam kare Asamete chalalo...' (the money lender lovingly, smilingly, cheated us/he said he would give us work but sent us to the tea gardens of Assam). Given such realities, it is not surprising that today Purulia is one of India's hundred poorest districts and within it the tribal community is the poorest and most marginalised community.

What is striking is that despite the clear immiserisation of the community, tribals have hardly figured seriously in the state's policy making discourse. Some attribute this neglect to the fact that, at a pan-West Bengal level, tribals can be easily ignored because they don't constitute a significant political presence. According to the 2001 census they comprised only 5 per cent of the state's population, a figure that rose marginally to 5.8 per cent in 2011. Adding to their lack of presence was the fact that the majority of them were located in rural areas. But, at the same time, there were districts in the state where the proportion of the tribal population rises sharply. Purulia, for



“Most of the land holdings were very small – less than an acre – and were unproductive because the soil was unable to retain its moisture.” – Brihaspati Mahato, President, Jamboria Sevabrata



instance, had one of the highest concentrations of tribals in the state and they accounted for 18.27 per cent of the district's population.

Ashok Kumar Nayak, programme officer, ActionAid, Kolkata, commented, “ActionAid, with its emphasis on empowering the poorest sections, had always prioritised the issues of the tribal community. However the mainstream developmental discourse in the state a decade ago had never perceived them as a discrete community with distinct concerns.”

Initially, the focus of AA's work in Purulia was on the larger environmental concerns of the region in partnership with a local organisation called the Jamboria Sevabrata (Sevabrata), which is today based in the town of Gopalnagar in Manbazar I block. Recalled its president, Brihaspati Mahato, “We started off as a youth club of about 30 to 40 members in the village of Jamboria. Since those were days of great environmental distress, we began to focus more on natural resources – water land, and of course local communities. In 1987 we registered as an NGO, adopting the name ‘Sevabrata’, or the promise of service.”

According to Brihaspati Mahato, most of the land holdings were very small – less than an acre – and were unproductive because the soil was unable to retain its moisture given the undulating terrain. Also the people, even if they owned land, often did not have know where their holdings were because they hardly benefited from them. Watershed development, therefore, emerged as important. In 2000, AA entered into a series of short-term partnerships with Sevabrata, with the aim of developing watersheds and setting up micro-enterprises to check migration.





Meanwhile, AA itself was undergoing a reorientation of its approach with a new emphasis on rights-based work. Therefore in 2004, when it forged a long-term partnership with Sevabrata, the focus shifted from service delivery programmes focused on micro development to campaigns designed to galvanise excluded communities into recognising their rights and then going on to claim them.

The switch from a service delivery to a rights-based approach was not easy. Commented Sevabrata's secretary, Ashok Mahato, "It was a new concept for us and required a change of orientation."

But the times, in a way, was ripe for such re-orientation. This was also the period when the Right to Food movement was taking off after the Supreme Court recognised the right to food as a fundamental right. Sevabrata became part of the Right to Food network at the state and national level.

The state of Bengal had a poor reputation in terms of the efficacy of its PDS outlets – and in fact continues to underperform on this score. For instance, the off take of the staple food grain – rice – from PDS outlets in a state that had seen food riots in its recent past, was less than the national average in the three categories of APL, BPL and AAY, and among the country's lowest. In contrast, the off take of wheat – which was not a staple food grain here – was better than the national average. These figures, taken together, indicated disturbingly high levels of corruption. In terms of MGNREGA, too, Bengal's performance was less than satisfactory, with Purulia being one of its poorest performing districts.

Going by this, the Sevabrata-AA initiative was one whose time had come.



Mapping the Terrain

It was understood from the very beginning by both Sevabrata and ActionAid that the right to food and the right to work were to be the foundational planks of the initiative. This emerged from the understanding that the right to food was an inclusive right and was, ultimately, about living an active and productive life. They also recognised that the right to work was intrinsically linked to the right to food, because it was through employment that an individual or family was able to access food in a sustainable manner.

While the initiative had a presence in 11 blocks of Purulia, the focus of its programmes were concentrated on eight: Manbazar I and II, Puncha, Hua, Arsha, Bandwan, Joypur and Baghmundi, with the entire stretch of the last block was located in the Ayodhya Hills, with a predominantly tribal population, that was part of the politically volatile region of Jangalmahal.

Over time the initiative could reach out to 4000 families in 147 villages. It was a population that was predominantly tribal – Santhals, Mundas, Koras and Bihors, the latter classified as a ‘primitive’ tribe, but there were also pockets of Scheduled



Caste communities like Kalindis, Rajaks, and Lohars. The majority of these people were either landless or possessed, as we saw, uncultivable bits of land.

These years were also a time of great mobilisation at a national level and Sevabrata, in partnership with AA, linked up pan Indian campaigns, like the 2005 nationwide Peoples’ Caravan, comprising several civil society organisations that lobbied against unfair clauses in the proposed World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements. They also joined forces with the Right to Food Campaign and the India Social Forum held in 2006 in Delhi. In Bengal, Sevabrata became a part of the state level



network, Paschim Banga Jeevan Jeebika Suraksha Manch.

The initial efforts under the Sevabrata-AA initiative was to develop a nodal team that would take the process forward and many leaders from the local community came on board. Nakul Baske, a Santhal, whose village of Chhatni was in Ayodhya gram panchayat of Baghmundi block, knew the region and its issues intimately. Khagan Chandra Mahato, also from the local community, proved to be a natural mobiliser of people (see box). Women like Kanaklata Murmu (see box), who questioned the status quo and could easily assume a leadership role within the community. Many more joined in along the way, including Chhayarani Mahato, Biswanath Pramanik, Anil Besara and several others. Each person made his or her distinct contribution over the following years, growing in understanding and organisational capabilities as they went along.

While everybody in the team had a sense of the existing social realities, it was felt that what was badly needed was a deeper understanding of the district's status in term of its implementation of the government's food and livelihood schemes. A survey was therefore conducted among 360

families in the six rural blocks. The respondents included people from the SC/ST and OBC communities. Its focus was primarily on gauging the efficacy of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) and provisions for the elderly.

What was also an obvious factor behind the failure of the government's welfare schemes was that there was no publicity about them in any form in the villages of Purulia

Under the TPDS of that time, every family below the poverty line was to be given 35 kilogram (kg) – estimated to cover at least half the monthly cereal requirement of the average BPL household with the central issue price of Rs. 5.65 and Rs 4.15 per kg of rice and wheat respectively. The AAY, aimed at reducing hunger among the poorest segments of the BPL population and provided selected families, from a list compiled by the state government, 35 kilo of grain at the rate of Rs. 3 and Rs 2 per kg for rice and wheat and respectively.



A very significant aspect that surfaced from the survey was that the identification of impoverished families for TPDS and other government welfare interventions – a complex and sensitive task in the best of situations – was far from satisfactory in Purulia. The district exhibited the same trend as many other regions also no doubt did; that the relatively better-off families from the poorer sections, rather than the really poor, tended to gain disproportionately from such interventions. Three broad reasons were responsible for this: the ignorance of the latter, the ability of the former to corner the benefits through personal contacts with local administrators; and of course the apathy and indifference of the implementing authorities. In other words, the poorest of the poor, people who desperately needed all the support they could get, who tended to be illiterate, live in mud ('kachha') huts, were largely landless and who eked out an existence as wage labourers, were unable to benefit from the TPDS/AAY umbrella.

What was also an obvious factor behind the failure of such schemes was that there was no publicity about them in any form in the villages of Purulia. This despite the fact that the Supreme Court had specifically ruled that a detailed list of the

beneficiaries and schemes they could avail of had to be displayed in the local language in all public places and in panchayat offices and ration shops. The AAY programme, for instance, had a long list of beneficiaries. They included landless agricultural labourers, marginal farmers, rural artisans/craftsmen, like potters and weavers, slum dwellers and persons earning their livelihood on a daily basis in the informal sector, like coolies, cobblers and others, households headed by widows or terminally ill/disabled persons or people over 60 years of age with no assured means of subsistence, as well as all primitive tribal households.

Yet very few of these categories, and very few people within them, really benefited, despite the fact that Bengal had received an additional 1.92 lakh metric tonnes for the AAY programme in 2004-2005. This raised the question of distribution and awareness. Around 95 per cent of the respondents had reported to those conducting the Sevabrata survey that they were not aware of the scheme. Clearly neither the government departments, nor the village panchayats had put any effort into publicising the existence of the AAY. Also, despite women headed households being specifically mentioned as a beneficiary category,



the great majority of such families had not been included, with many reporting having received no information about the scheme or how to apply for it. Another poignant fact that emerged was that there were families so poor that they could not afford to buy the food grain on offer even at their subsidised rates.

Meanwhile PDS dealers and ration shop owners, in cahoots with local officials, were clearly profiting from the situation by quietly siphoning away the food grain meant for the poor. There were hints that party politics was also a factor in some being able to corner the benefits, although there was a reluctance on the part of the respondents to talk openly about their party affiliations.

Many stratagems were adopted to cheat people of their entitlements. Sometimes the grain supplied

was unsuitable – wheat was supplied to those who were accustomed to rice; or raw rice given to those accustomed to parboiled rice. At other times, only inferior and damaged grain would be available. Sometimes damaged wheat would be ground into flour and supplied to consumers. It was quite obvious that the government had benefited the large mill owners through such a system at the cost of the smaller mill owners at the village level. While the villagers consumed more rice and less wheat, BPL households often received no supply of rice at all. This was especially serious in the context of the price rise that has made rice in the open market prohibitively expensive.

The majority of ration shop keepers also did not bother to issue cash memos against the purchase of food grain or keep their shops open for the five and a half days a week mandated by the Supreme Court. In fact most shops were extremely arbitrary about their hours of functioning and, with no fixed timings, people were clueless as to when they could get their food grain. This was a major impediment. After walking several kilometers to the nearest ration shop – often giving up a day's wages in the process – they would find the facility locked. Adding insult to injury was the treatment accorded

The majority of ration shop keepers did not bother to issue cash memos against the purchase of food grain or keep their shops open for the five and a half days a week mandated by the Supreme Court





to them. Often the legitimate beneficiaries would be roundly abused and were even thrown out of the premises if they insisted on getting their fair share.

Oversight mechanisms to check such practices had clearly failed. The inspectors of the state's Food and Civil Supplies Department, even if they took their responsibilities seriously, were so few in number – just one or two per block – that they were unable to check cheating and ill treatment. According to the government's estimation, in 2011 the shortage of staff in the food department in the Janglemahal area was 56 per cent and 40 per cent in the districts and urban pockets, respectively.

Survey Recommendations

Among the survey's recommendations was the suggestion that the gram sansad (village assembly) be involved in the process of preparing the list of BPL beneficiaries that had to take into account the actual socio-economic profile of each beneficiary family. This was because it was found that the pradhans of the gram panchayat had often played a pivotal role in the implementation of the AAY scheme – with nearly 93 per cent of those who benefitted from it having submitted

their applications through them. The other recommendation was that every form of local media – from handbills, leaflets and wall graffiti to cultural performances and announcements through microphone – should be deployed to carry the message of TPDS and the AAY to the last person, with a special emphasis on making women better aware of their right to food.



In terms of actual disbursement of food grain, it was suggested that there should be a ration outlet in every gram sansad. For those too impoverished to afford the food grain, it was suggested that it should be made available on credit or paid for in instalments as and when the family got cash in hand. A major recommendation was that the village development committees should be allowed to inspect the quality, quantity and the distribution system of the food grain in all ration shops. Emphasis was placed on ration dealers being made to conform to norms, including the proper maintenance of records of receipts and disbursements. On no account should they be allowed to 'confiscate' the ration cards of their customers – as was often the practice – or bully them in any way.

At the same time, it was felt that some of the complaints of PDS dealers of not being paid on time, given their full commission, or reimbursed for their costs in lifting the grain, were valid. Therefore the recommendations emphasised the importance of being fair to PDS dealers in order to check the temptation to indulge in illegal gratification.

Interestingly, several of these findings were borne out by a Planning Commission paper that came

out in 2005, entitled, 'Performance Evaluation of Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)', which looked at the national picture. That study noted that about 57 per cent of subsidised grains did not reach the targeted group. Of this, a little over 36 per cent was siphoned off the supply chain. It pointed out that the implementation of TPDS was plagued by large errors of exclusion and inclusion and that a fresh BPL identification survey through independent agencies engaged in social science research was required to eliminate targeting errors. It also maintained that making the system more accountable and efficient required the involvement of panchayati raj institutions.

"The government was claiming big things like having given antodaya cards to the poorest of the poor, but we knew that on the ground nobody even knew their entitlements and now we had proof of this," remarked Ashok Mahato. In many ways those early learnings garnered by closely studying ground realities gave the Sevabrata-AA project the basis it needed to take the next steps.



Hunger Deaths and Public Outrage

If any further evidence was needed that public food distribution was not effective, it came in the tragic form of the deaths of two women, Patu Mura and Anchal Mura, of Pathardih village of Baghmundi block, in the Ayodhya Hills of Purulia district.

The drought had immediate impacts on households. News of starvation deaths had also surfaced from the adjoining district of West Medinipur and the issue was regularly raised in the assembly in 2004 and 2005. “In times of distress migration, the able-bodied would leave and the frail elderly would be left with hardly any support. Those two unfortunate women must have died in such circumstances, being left without access to proper food for days together. So we felt the immediate requirement was

to ensure that the elderly, children and women left behind in the villages got something to eat, which is why we initially emphasised on the entitlements of the most vulnerable,” Nakul Baske pointed out.

In December 2004, a ‘Bhuka Michhil’ (a mobilisation against hunger) was held with the idea of bringing the corruption inherent in BPL classification to the fore. There was enough evidence to show that the PDS was not working satisfactorily. Activists began to put pressure on the district magistrate’s office and the administration was forced to take some action. Food inspectors were sent, health camps were held and antodaya cards were distributed. With extensive media coverage and opposition parties taking up the



Activists like Jean Dreze were in touch to impart more information about the rural job guarantee law, which was passed in 2005 and came into force the next year.

cause, the government of the day instituted a pension for tribals living below the poverty line.

Sevabrata was associated with the national level campaigns for legislation on the right to food as well as the awareness raising on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, later rechristened MGNREGA). “We understood the importance of this legislation but knowing how to go about raising people’s consciousness on it and about its working to actually ensure that guarantee was more difficult. This is where NREGA activists like Jean Dreze helped out,” recollected Sevabrata’s Brihaspati Mahato.

Through 2005, the Sevabrata-AA initiative maintained a steady campaign on both issues by distributing leaflets, putting up posters and organising meetings and processions. The

enthusiasm with which people responded revealed that it had touched a chord in communities that had long known both hunger and unemployment. Scattered, localised rallies and campaigns throughout 2005 ended in the mobilization of about 10,000 people from 11 blocks in a ‘Pete bhaat hate kaaj’ (food for the stomach, work for the hands) March’ through the starvation zone of the Ayodhya Hills of Baghmundi in December. The marchers were literally the wretched of the earth, who instinctively understood what women like Patu Mura and Anchal Mura had suffered before dying and were now demanding their basic rights to food and a livelihood.

This 2005 march proved to be a tipping point. The 10,000 people who came together pledged to



set up an alliance that would bring them together to mobilise on their rights and pressurise the government to fulfil its mandate in guaranteeing these rights. The network that emerged was named the Banchita Jana Jagaran Adhikar Samity (BJJAS), or the Society For Creating Awareness

Among The Deprived People Of Their Rights. Given the nature of its emergence, BJJAS represented the collective will of the local community. Formally set up in 2006, BJJAS in partnership with Sevabrata, steered the AA initiative from that point onwards.

Building A Movement

The BJJAS began by raising awareness on three distinct but related rights: the right to food, the right to livelihoods, and the right to information. As it built the movement it was, in turn, built by the movement. This mutual reinforcing synergy between the organisation and the people it represented was what kept it going through the good times and the dark periods.

Explained Ashok Kumar Nayak, AA Programme Officer, “We were very clear from the beginning that it should be a federated district level network and that, in fact, became its core strength. This model was adopted primarily because in West Bengal, under the state PRI Act, there was a provision for setting up village level committees. But these bodies were usually controlled by the ruling party that it was very difficult for outside organisations to

function independently through them. Since BJJAS wanted its autonomy, this model was chosen.”

Through BJJAS’s mobilisation several platforms emerged at the village, gram panchayat, block levels, whether they were SHGs, teachers’ organisations or youth groups. All of these were linked directly to the BJJAS district level network. A little later a separate women’s wing also came into existence, as well as village platforms known as the Gram Unnayan Manch (GUM). By 2007, BJJAS had district level presence with representatives in every block.

Given the ruling party’s cooption of PRI institutions and the need to have a separate and distinct identity from such state-controlled entities, many in BJJAS argued for identity cards for its members.



The measure was even tried initially but later discontinued because it was found to be impractical. However, through a process of trial and error, BJJAS began to develop its own identity. Within the first year of its inception, it organised a six day rally on MGNREGA, again in the Ayodhya Hills, followed by a public hearing. Recalled Khagan Chandra Mahato, “At the time BJJAS was set up, the talking point across the country MGNREGA, and we decided to raise awareness about it in every corner of the 11 blocks where we were known. It had so many aspects to it – people had to apply for job cards, get them, demand work, ensure that they were paid for the work. There were hurdles at every stage of this process and the community had to understand how to overcome them.”



By 2007, Sevabrata-AA was encouraging BJJAS to conduct a social audit of work sites in 75 villages in the Ayodhya Hills. “It was a week-long programme ending with a public hearing on the eighth day. We were able to identify some cases of corruption in this way. In Arsha block, for instance, a BDO was fined Rs 25,000 and in Puncha block, another BDO was transferred and had a penalty of Rs 25,000 imposed on him,” revealed Khagan Mahato.

Processes like this helped to raise awareness not just about MGNREGA but the right to information (RTI) as well.

If the BJJAS had not been so active, many would have been ignorant about this job guarantee programme, according to Biswanath Chalok, a resident of Saharajuri village that fell in the hunger-prone Baghmundi block and which had come into the limelight for having forced a PDS dealer be more accountable to the community (see box). “Our view of the world changed when two of us from our village went to Dadiria village to attend a BJJAS training programme. It was there that we gained an understanding of the basic provisions of the MGNREGA. Most important of all, the BJJAS brought us together and we were able to access 45



job cards almost right away. Today everyone in my village has a job card and we have been able to even

provide work for elderly women by getting them to supply drinking water on the site.”

Key: Uniting People, Training Them

As was apparent from Chalok’s words, the BJJAS had come to the realisation, very early on, that there was strength in numbers; that the key to success was bringing people together sometimes even entire villages so that they could jointly exercise their rights -. Take the instance of the scenic Mahato-dominated Dhanudi village of Baghmundi block framed by the undulating outline of the Ayodhya Hills. Tapas Kalindi, in his early twenties, was upset with the fact that it was how difficult for people like

him to earn a decent wage in the village. “If I had had an education, I could have done better in life, but my parents were migrants for eight months in every years and I didn’t get a proper schooling,” he revealed. This is one of the reasons why he regarded MGNREGA as an important lifeline.

In the beginning, the people of Dhanudi had only a very vague idea about it. “Some families here had sought work under MGNREGA and had been given less than the minimum wage. It was only when Nakulda (Nakul Baske of BJJAS) began to interact



“We went back to the BDO and finally got work within one kilometre of the village. Since then we have been getting regular work.”

- Tapas Kalindi



regularly with us that we began to understand our entitlements in a clearer manner,” Kalindi added.

At first, 75 people from Dhanudi gave written applications that they wanted work. But they got only one day of work. This led everybody to approach the panchayat office as a group and create what Tapas Kalindi described as a “jam”. He continued, “When they did not respond we went to the BDO and repeated our demand. When the BDO got in touch with the panchayat people, they could no longer ignore us. Since giving us unemployment allowance would have been a blot on their records, they offered us work. But it was at a site nine kilometres away. We worked there for three days but realised that this was only a ploy to break us up as a group, because some could not travel that far. So we went back to the BDO and finally got work within one kilometre of the village. Since then we have been getting regular work.”

There were of course occasional challenges to be faced. Accurate measurement of the work done so that wages were properly calibrated was one of them. But even here some gains were made with villagers having come together and successfully arguing that they needed to be compensated at a higher rate for digging, say, harder soils.

According to Ashok Nayak, it was unity that created the vibrancy that marked BJJAS’s efforts on MGNREGA. But to bring out the vibrancy required the hard work of training. To understand this a little more, a visit to Shyampur village of Purulia’s Manbazar II block proved useful. Here we met an active group of 50 to 60 tribal women – all BJJAS members. They knew every provision in the MGNREGA and could file RTI applications without outside help.

Training sessions conducted by Sevabrata-AA had made this possible. Explained Chhayarani Mahato, 37, a dynamic member of this group, who had joined BJJAS in 2006, “Every family in the village was in dire need of extra income, so we, the women of Shyampur, began to attend BJJAS trainings on MGNREGA. Then, in order to get information about work and wages, we began to get interested in the right to information. Here again BJJAS trainings and public audits proved valuable. Today we can file RTI applications without help.”

The women of Shyampur had an occasion to prove their mettle. In 2009, after working on an MGNREGA site, they discovered to their surprise that less than half their dues had been transferred to their postal accounts. “We had worked for 14



days but only Rs 700 was transferred in our names,” recounted Chhayarani Mahato. The post office, when contacted, claimed that this was the amount sent by the Block Development Officer’s office, so the women went to the BDO and lodged a formal complaint in writing. Since no information was forthcoming, they filed two RTI applications and got out the muster rolls. They discovered then that an amount of Rs 42,000 had been transferred to families in the village who had not worked. The women then gheraoed the SDO and it was only after they were promised justice did they relent and allow the official to leave.

The capacity to persist with the RTI process showed a new self-confidence. Over 42 such RTI applications were made by various BJJAS members

from 2007 onwards, many of which met with telling success. In 2010, for instance, there was the case of Gopal Mahato of Hensla village, Arsha block. When he failed to get a response after filing an RTI application seeking the muster rolls of a road repairing project, he decided to appeal to the district information commissioner, who ordered the immediate release of the information, besides slapping a penalty of Rs, 25,000 on the panchayat secretary for not responding to the application.

This order was later circulated widely in order to drive home the message that people were not to be harassed for seeking information and that their requests needed to be taken seriously and addressed promptly.

Writing On The Wall: MGNREGA Changes Lives

Has income from MGNREGA helped to make lives more secure? Most people we spoke to in the project areas of Purulia believed that it had made a big difference. In the village of Dhanudi, survival had earlier meant foraging in the forests and migrating

to distant locations – including Tamil Nadu in one instance. We came across a middle-aged man who had torn the ligaments of his shoulder while carrying heavy logs from the forest to earn a living. Today, he said, he was more than happy to get





MGNREGA work in the lean months. Perhaps nothing reflects the impact of this supplementary income more than the fact that all the children here now go to school, instead of working as farm labour as their parents did. In Dhanudi there are a couple of youngsters – Purno Chandra Lohar and Balaram Kalindi – who are doing their bachelors course in Bolorampur, 14 kilometres away. When we asked 15-year-old Bhavani Kalindi, who was in a residential high school in a neighbouring village, whether she would ever consider working on a MGNREGA worksite, her response was spontaneous and emphatic. “No, never, I will take up a job instead!” she exclaimed. It can be considered a measure of its success if MGNREGA has helped to make itself redundant for the next generation.

But it was in the village of Sijadi, in Manbazar I block, that the positive impacts of BJJAS and its emphasis on the MGNREGA was most telling. Old-timers in the village talk of how, a decade ago, every house in Sijadi had mud walls and thatched roofs. Today, it was a different scene altogether. The village roads were paved and the houses had plastered walls.

Explained Gautam Singh Mahapatra, sponsorship coordinator, “Our objective through this programme was to broaden the horizons of all children. We hold annual sports meets, provide educational and emergency medical assistance and organise fun times like Children’s Day celebrations.”



According to Mahapatra, no child in Sijadi village goes to bed hungry. “This is in sharp contrast to their parents’ generation, when almost everyone, child or adult, knew what it was to be hungry. Today all the families in this village have benefited from the Sevabrata-AA initiative, with those below the poverty line having successfully accessed MGNREGA employment,” he said. Interacting with bright-eyed, animated children in Sijadi’s primary school – who displayed an astonishing range of talent – was a delight, a reminder of the multiplier effects of the rights to food and work.



Nishit Kumar Majhi, a small farmer, a father of two daughters, Manji valued the manner in which BJJAS has linked right to work with an emphasis on the well-being of the children in Sijadi. “I believe education is vital

for my daughters. They will be able to face any trouble in their life if they get an education. Now

take my case. Because I cannot read, I don’t even know what is on the label of a medicine bottle and I am tongue-tied before powerful people because I am a class eight dropout. I don’t want my daughter to be like me,” said Nishit Manji.

As we left the village of Sijadi, we came across a large wall painted a blue-green, on which the following message was written neatly in Bengali: ‘100 days of work is your right’. It underlined not just the rights but the responsibilities of the villagers. It went: “Implementing MGNREGA is also your duty. You need to popularise this law. Take part in gram sabha meetings and get involved. Support all families to access jobs and get payment. Remember if you have any problems, RTI is your right. There will be a flood of happiness in this village if you do this and help to stem the flood of corruption. Sgd/-BJJS supported by Jamgoria Sevabrata & ActionAid”.

The writing on the wall was that the initiative was working in Sijadi village. The emphasis was on the community’s ownership of the programme. Every resident of the village was being enjoined to make MGNREGA work for each family and for the village as a whole.



Ashok Nayak observed, “Anyone can do wall writing. The question is what message do you put on it? The effort here was to use the language of rights, bring in people’s responsibilities towards making the programme effective for themselves and build bridges between the village, the BJJAS programme and the MGNREGA.”

To smoothen out this process of exerting ownership, BJJAS later began to get directly involved with the decision making process through GUM, with the twin objectives of building

local infrastructure that would be of use to the community even as it created jobs. Said Khagan Mahato, “BJJAS through GUM has been able to interact with panchayat raj institutions and representatives. We sit with local people and prepare a set of micro plans, which would then be presented during gram sansad meetings that looked at MGNREGA work.”

Over the years, nearly a lakh of people could apply for job cards because of BJJAS and over 60,000 of them were actually able to procure employment.

Making PDS Work for People

On a parallel track were the efforts to ensure the food security of the people. The very first rallies organised by the Sevabrata-AA in the Ayodhya Hills had focused on hunger. Later as right to work was also brought into the picture, the rallying cry was: “Pete bhaat haate kaaj – food for the stomach, work for the hands”. BJJAS founder member, Nakul Baske, helped to bring the starvation deaths of Patu Mura and Anchal Mura, of Pathardih, to the media’s attention. Today, he sees that as one of the most important moments in his life. But perhaps nothing captured his activism on this front more



effectively than the story of PDS dealer Shyampada Mahato.

Behind the locked inner door of Shyampada Mahato's store lay a mountain of burlap sacks, each bursting with food grain meant for the hungry. As a dealer in Public Distribution System (PDS) food grain, it was his responsibility to ensure that the grain in his store made its way to beneficiaries in Saharajuri village, nestled in the lower reaches of the Ayodhya Hills in Baghmundi block.

“Every time I visited Saharajuri village, people would tell me how they would walk many kilometres from their village to Mahato's ration shop, only to find it locked,” recalled Baske. What was also very clear was that even on the rare occasions when the



shop was open, the full entitlements of the people were never met. Shyampada got away with this for a long while because the local community had no clear idea about their actual entitlements and would just be grateful for any small amount of subsidised grain that came their way.

But this changed once BJJAS started holding meetings in the area. Slowly the fact that each family with an antyodaya card was entitled to a monthly quota of 35 kilos of wheat or rice – at two and three rupees respectively – became clearer. What also became obvious was the extent to which they were being cheated by their local PDS dealer. With Nakul Baske guiding them, the villagers of Saharajuri decided to take action on the issue, which they did over 2008-09. They first lodged a complaint with the district food department. Days passed by and there was no response. They then decided to go in a larger group to the food inspector.

When even this action failed to get results, the people decided to directly confront the dealer. A written complaint was handed over to Shyampada Mahato, but he refused to accept it. “Not only did he not accept the written complaint, he even refused to come out of his store and listen to the



villagers' grievances," narrated Baske. A stratagem to tackle the dealer was then planned. Instead of going in a group, the villagers decided to send a couple of people to pose as shoppers. They were to engage him in conversation, while the rest of the group surrounded him. When the dealer realised that he had been cornered, he asked for three representatives from the group to discuss the issue with him inside his shop but the villagers refused to do so and replied that they wanted an answer from him in public. Since Shyampada Mahato persisted in not cooperating with them, they decided that they would keep him hostage until he responded to their complaints.

Their action brought a lethargic food distribution system to its toes. The Food Inspector's office now intervened and directed the dealer to keep his shop open for the mandatory five and half days a week and supply the right quantity of rations to people. A penalty of Rs.10,000 was also imposed on him for having deprived the people of their fair share of rations over the years.

The victory at Saharajuri village spread quickly over the entire Baghmundi block, resulting in 12 ration shops here being made to keep their doors open for five and half days a week, supply the right amount

of food grains to the beneficiaries and issue receipts as well.

We were able to catch up with Shyampada Mahato in Saharajuri village, where his home and shop are located, in order to understand how he viewed that event that had taken place four years earlier. He was clearly leading a comfortable existence – a fact underlined by a thick gold chain around his neck – in sharp contrast to the people who came to him seeking their legitimate share of food grain.

Whether he had learnt his lesson or just wanted to project a virtuous mien, was difficult to fathom, but Shyampada Mahato readily admitted that “Nakulda” has played an important role in educating



Rights-based mobilisation on the issue has had an immediate resonance in the project area. People monitor the quality and quantity of food grain they get .

people about their rights. Said he, “Although we are at the receiving end of it, we can appreciate his work. He has taught the people how to monitor the quality and quantity of the food grain they get and we are trying our best to cope up and meet the people’s requirements.” He also admitted, rather ruefully, that now people are very aware. “If they don’t get their entitlements, they go straight to the BDO, and I will soon get a call from his office on my mobile phone!”

But Shyampada Mahato, too, had his problems as a PDS distributor and BJJAS has tried to take them up with the authorities. For instance, he constantly found that the full quota of food grain sanctioned against his name was never available for lifting.

One of the more effective interventions BJJAS evolved in later years was to train Gram Unnayan Manch members to understand PDS entitlements and monitor local centres.

Corruption, in fact, manifested itself in various ways at various levels and remained unaddressed because of the close nexus between the trader, the politician and the lower level bureaucrats. They connived with each other to siphon away the food grain meant for public distribution. So widespread was the phenomenon, that BJJAS’s rights-based mobilisation on the issue has an immediate resonance in the project area.

One of the more effective interventions BJJAS evolved in later years was to train GUM members to understand PDS entitlements and monitor local centres, check samples of material supplied and send regular updates to the BJJAS gram panchayat committees, which in turn took up instances of malpractice with PDS vigilance committees and the



block and district supply inspectors. Interestingly, the mobile phone helped greatly in this effort, with information conveyed instantly through SMS alerts and even through images.

In this way over a hundred establishments came under continuous monitoring of BJJAS members, including 21 PDS shops in the blocks of Arsha, 15 in Baghmundi, 15 in Hura, 16 in Pancha and 7 in

Manbazar I. The initiative helped thousands access ration cards. Around 5000 AAY card holders were part of this effort.

Not only did it improve the quality and quantity of the food grain supplied, it ensured that the shops were kept open for longer periods and for more days in the week.

Women, Community Anchors

The status of women in Purulia was one of the worst among Bengal's 18 districts, and their literacy level was also abysmal. Yet everywhere we went in this block we noticed that it was the women who were working themselves to the bone to keep their families going.



It was just before Diwali, the festival of lights, known in tribal communities as Bandana, and traditionally this was the time to decorate the courtyard and renovate walls by plastering them anew with clay. But what was most striking was the amount of labour they put into ensuring the food security of their families: harvesting the rice, threshing it, parboiling and drying the grain – often spreading them out on to the roads – or carrying home heavy loads of precious grain from PDS outlets on their heads or bicycles.

Women have also been on the forefront of the struggle for jobs under MGNREGA, and



Women have been able to come out of their homes and participate in the public space. They have been part of deputations, taken part in cultural events, staged rallies and held public meetings.

through BJJAS activism around 26,373 women in the project area have been able to access such employment. The extra money they earned directly benefitted their families as was obvious from the responses of the women of Baghmundi village when we asked them how they spent their hard-earned money, would they for instance have considered



buying a sari for themselves during Durga Puja. Forty five-year-old Malti Munda's answer was poignant, "Who wouldn't want a new sari? But first we will have to think of our children – the sari we can always buy later."

Yet, women's lives are far from secure. Instances of desertion and domestic violence have been widely reported. Observed Kasturi Soren, a BJJAS women leader from Kumari village, Manbazaar II, "Domestic violence here is common and closely linked to alcoholism. Women are sometimes thrown out of the house and even accused of being witches."

Under ActionAid's guidance, BJJAS was encouraged to set up a separate women's wing in 2008. The potential of such a step however has been far from realised so far. Despite the emergence of many strong women leaders like Kanaklata Murumu (see box), the BJJAS is still dependent on its male leaders who have the advantage of being able to travel extensively on their own to the project villages. However there have been some gains that needed to be recognised and perhaps foremost among them is the fact that over 12,000 women have been able to come out of their homes and participate in the public space. They have been



part of deputations, taken part in cultural events, staged rallies and held public meetings. Almost 70 per cent of women who have received job cards actually applied for work and 76.5 per cent of them got work.

Some issues, like witch hunting and violence against women, received focused attention, and BJJAS has been able to hold campaigns against early marriage and high school dropout rates among girls in the higher classes. Around 45 women survivors of violence have been supported by BJJAS's women's wing in accessing legal services. Desertion was identified as a significant problem in the area and mobilisation on it has been met with some success. For instance, in Patuara gram panchayat of Arsha block, 15 women who had been deserted by their husbands have been able to access support for themselves.

Every year, the women's wing of BJJAS has been observing International Women's Day on March 8 and the International Fortnight against Violence on Women from November 25 to December 10 through special activities. Participation in these programmes, however, has been largely women-centric and event-related, which indicated its limitations.

Observed Manu Sharma, programme manager, ActionAid, after having toured the project area, "Women members should have been brought into decision making at the highest levels of BJJAS. If women had been allowed to play a bigger role, this initiative would have benefited a great deal more in its perspective and impact."

The BJJAS was hoping to correct this in its future functioning and planned to induct many more women in leadership positions.

Shadow of Extremism

Maoist groups had been operating from Purulia's Ayodhya Hill region for decades, periodically scaling up attacks against ruling party functionaries and government institutions. In 2007, for instance,

a CPI (M) party official was blown up by a bomb and, a few months later, in 2008 just before the panchayat elections in Purulia, another CPI (M) leader Ganapati Bhadra was gunned down.



Each attack of this kind provoked fierce counter attacks by state agencies and a climate of violence prevailed, with the Bengal Chief Minister publicly demanding that the police “weed out these ultras” from their hideouts in Baghmundi and Arsha.

Over the years the state authorities came to recognise that the objective of BJJAS’s work in the community was to create better conditions for dispossessed people, so that they could take charge of their lives and not fall victim to the diktat of extremist groups

Remarked Ashok Kumar Nayak of ActionAid, “This scenario had an adverse impact on BJJAS’s work, since it was working with the poorest communities in extremism-hit blocks like Baghmundi, Jalsa and Arsha. Given this, it too came under the scanner for being close to the Maoists – a charge that was completely untrue.” BJJAS activists, like Nakul Baske, even had to face arrest on the concocted charge of shielding Maoists. Recalled Baske, “Somebody in my village informed the police that I was working for the marginalised and had

connections with extremists. So they came and detained me for a day. They had no evidence and so great was the public outrage at this nonsensical charge that I was released within a day.”

According to Sevabrata’s secretary, Ashok Mahato, this was one of the major disruptions that Sevabrata and BJJAS has had to face in its decade-long activism in Purulia, “Those were challenging times. There was the fear that we would be blacklisted because we were perceived as Maoist sympathisers. There would be people from the Intelligence Bureau and police visiting us or tracking our movements. It was all trumped up by vested interests and today nobody makes such accusations anymore.”

In fact, over the years the state authorities came to recognise that the objective of BJJAS’s work in the community was to create better conditions for dispossessed people, so that they could take charge of their lives and not fall victim to the diktat of extremist groups. Khagan Mahato described one situation in 2012, when the BJJAS held a large public meeting and the police, who had come to keep an eye on them, actually sat down and shared a meal with the participants. “When we first began, women in the community, as soon as they spotted a





police person, would flee in fear. Now our members are not intimidated by the uniform. They can even talk to police officials on an equal footing. This,

I believe, is one of the major gains of the BJJAS mobilisation,” he remarked.

But there can be no denying that extremism in the area did undermine BJJAS’s work and the figures revealed this. While BJJAS could get around 34,255 to benefit from MGNREGA in 2007, subsequent years saw a sharp drop in their numbers. In 2012, for example, the figure stood at 10,418, indicating that the everyday reality of localised political violence had indeed taken a toll on the initiative, forcing a drastic whittling down of the number of villages that saw consistent activity.

Sustainability Challenge

If the localised external violence that had undermined BJJAS’s work receded as a problem, the sustainability of BJJAS after the withdrawal of AA’s support emerged as a growing concern. Sevabrata president, Brihaspati Mahato, put it this way, “ActionAid has been a constant all these years as a stable revenue source with organisational reach. There are not many funders who see such grassroot mobilisation as deserving of support. So we have had to think of ways to keep BJJAS going

with the same energy, even after AA withdrew from the programme. Around 2011, we began to hold long consultations on the issue with the primary stakeholders, especially the local community, and it was decided that the best course would be to register BJJAS, or a connected entity, as a trade union, raise funds and carry on.”

According to Khagan Mahato, a trade union was seen as most suitable, since the work over the years



had been oriented towards deepening rights and changing power equations. “We thought such a body could help workers, whether they were on farms, work sites or anywhere else, and shore up their morale. We also felt that through it we could extend our areas of intervention to include issues like land and forest rights,” said Mahato.

The trade union, called the Purulia Gramin Sharamik Sangha, was envisaged as a registered entity within the broader BJJAS alliance. It was to be made up of several tiers with a central zonal advisory body at the district level with local committees at the block, panchayat, akhara (cluster of four villages) and village levels. It was expected to take BJJAS rights-based struggles to the next level by filing claims and PILs, liaising with the Labour Department and the State Workers’ Welfare Board, and bringing workers under the Unorganised Social Security Act of 2008. It was also proposed to bring women into its functioning in a significant way and take up the various biases they faced while accessing employment.

The goals set for the trade union were ambitious and reflected the hopes and ambitions of BJJAS cadres. Unfortunately, despite having applied



for registration in 2011, the process has not been completed because of various bureaucratic hurdles. While that effort carried on, BJJAS cadres are hard at work drafting plans to keep the idea of their network alive, convinced as they are of the vital role it has played.



“There can be no two ways to see this, BJJAS must not collapse. It has been able to reach the poorest and bring him or her into the development process. Above all, it has helped to create a sense of aspiration for a better life in many. At the moment, it seems difficult to see a future for it, but we will have to search for ways to keep it going,” commented Bishwanath Parmanik, an old-time BJJAS member, sitting in the BJJAS’s office lined with the banners of the marches and mass mobilisations of old times. Despite the complexity of achieving sustainability, the confidence in being able to achieve it remained. “BJJAS’s greatest strength is that we who comprise it are from the excluded communities ourselves and by working through the BJJAS, we are merely representing ourselves. So we have a direct stake in keeping this network going,” Parmanik concluded.

Parmanik and his colleagues are working on a sustainability model. One that is based on the transparent collection of membership fees, annual subscriptions, and modest charges for advice and help in making job applications, filing RTI petitions, providing banking advice, or even ensuring something as mundane as depositing electricity payments – a huge chore for people living a long

way off from billing centres. In other words, the attempt is to use BJJAS past experience to finance its future.

A new structure for the organisation is being considered with one BJJAS representative coordinating each of the eight to ten blocks where the network has a significant presence and representing pressing concerns. That person would also be responsible for collecting membership fees from around 300 local men and women. There was also a plan to select a village as a “model village” which will demonstrate to the world how the assertion of the rights to employment and food, along with ability to file RTI applications, have the potential of bringing about sustainable social change. The expectation was that showcasing the positive impacts of such work would encourage people in other areas to adopt similar practices – and mainstream the BJJAS model.

What Ashok Nayak found striking about these ideas for future sustainability was that they had all emanated from the bottom up. “This is about grassroots decision-making. No one is telling them what to do,” he remarked.



Gains and Gaps

Success in building of a leadership from the community was, according to Brihaspati Mahato, the biggest gain of a decade of hard work. “Today 50 community leaders through the BJJAS process have compact knowledge of the entire spectrum of laws that exist to help excluded communities. They are also confident about themselves and have the respect of their people,” he said.

What was also striking was that BJJAS activism has made the community far more alert in seeking their entitlements. In an earlier era, if the PDS shop keeper gave them inferior rations, if the mid day meal in the school was inedible, or if they did not get work under MGNREGA on time, they would accept it quietly even at the cost of great personal distress. “We wanted to change that attitude of submission. The one thing we kept emphasising was that if people did not demand, they would not get. It was this very act of asking that was transformative,” noted Khagan Mahato.

Today, people are petitioning the gram sabhas and BDO, filing RTI applications, demanding the timely release of their rations and asserting their right to a full hundred days of work under MGNREGA. For

something like the revision of BPL lists, people who had no idea of the existence of such a list earlier, now are fully aware and demand revisions in it. According to BJJAS records, more than 7,000 people have been able to gain information about these revisions. Similarly, new ICDS centres have been demanded, and over 30 new ones have been sanctioned in the project area.

Heartening as all this has been, some gaps have remained. One source of disquiet is the feeling that BJJAS seems to have spread itself a bit too thin. This was a concern highlighted in the mid-term review of the initiative, but not sufficiently addressed. Some villages had certainly benefited from the activities and actions, but others lagged considerably behind. Similarly, while work on the right to food has had its outstanding moments, with PDS dealers forced to be more transparent and accountable, issues like land rights have received rather less attention. While BJJAS’s efforts on MGNREGA could possibly be classed as among the best seen in the state of Bengal, not much has been done to value add into the permanent gains such as, building infrastructural assets for the poor.



BJJAS activism on forest rights was clearly inadequate. This was disappointing for two reasons. One, ActionAid has always emphasised people's control over natural resources, including forests, as central to its work and had earmarked it as a strategic priority in its Country Strategy Paper IV. Two, given that the base of BJJAS was predominantly tribal, forest rights should have emerged as a central issue once the Forest Rights Act came into force in late 2007. In 2010, BJJAS did initiate some preliminary work on raising awareness on FRA but apart from a handful of families getting a patta of forest land each, not much came out of this effort.

According to Ashok Kumar, part of the problem was the political instability that the area witnessed – especially between 2008 to 2011. “Forest rights activism of any kind was extremely difficult because forests in this area were the site of much conflict. However, in 2013, in the plans that BJJAS drafted for its future after the withdrawal of AA, a focus on legal provisions for forest dwellers under FRA was prominently brought into the agenda.”

The second concern was that while BJJAS has creditably performed its networking role at the

district level, it has not been able to make much of an impact at the level of the state by deepening its networking with other partners working on common issues. Such a process would have led to information and experience sharing which, in turn, could have helped make both the PDS and MGNREGA far more effective in a state that has performed badly largely on both counts.

As in any initiative of this kind, one that has been through the vicissitudes of a particularly politically fraught decade in Bengal, there is a great deal that can be critiqued about the Sevabrata-AA initiative. But it has to also be borne in mind that the BJJAS has had to weather a period when the region was reeling under tensions of all kinds including assertions of the extreme Left and inter-party struggles for political control. The very fact that it managed to retain an independent identity, survive this period and live to struggle another day was itself a tribute to the courage and resilience of its leaders and the conviction of the community that supported them. In many ways, it represented an important, alternative model of development and people's empowerment to the politically controlled one that had dominated Bengal over the last three decades and continues to dominate it to this day.



Food for Thought...and Action

This has been a long, sometimes difficult but always inspiring movement involving one of the country's most deprived sections for two of the most basic requirements of life: food for the stomach, work for the hands. In that sense, this has been one of the most grounded initiatives that ActionAid has embarked upon, all the more significant because tribal communities have been left out of the policy discourse, both at the national and state level. In Bengal, since they did not make up a significant political constituency as we saw, even the measures meant for them were handled indifferently. Local vested interests, like PDS dealers, thought nothing of profiteering from a community that had next to nothing and had faced long years of uncertainty.

As if in flashback, an image emerged from the Sevabrata archives of a tribal woman whose stooped form spoke of the deprivation that marked her life. The pessimism inherent in that image stood in sharp contrast to another that appeared quite unexpectedly from a community gathering in a Baghmundi village. The men, women and children



had just sat down to a freshly prepared meal. Kichidi and a tomato relish had been placed on leaf plates and everybody was eating together under the pre-winter sun. Suddenly a toddler leapt up from his grandmother's arms, even as the old woman – her face crisscrossed with the lines of a lifetime – held on to him, smiling benignly. The baby's cherubic face seemed to speak of a future free of hunger and want achieved through the articulation of an organised community and an assertion of its rights.





Case
Studies



Balladeer From Purulia

Cultural forms are often very effective mediums for conveying important social messages.

Some, among them, lend themselves even more effectively to this purpose because they are rooted in the lived experiences of people. Bengal's Purulia district is fortunate in having a very rich mosaic of cultural traditions as well as dance and drama forms which have emerged from the grassroots.

The song-and-dance routine in which both men and women participate, called the Jhumur, is a good example of such a tradition. Beloved of local tribal communities like the Santhals and the Mundas, this form is used to mark and celebrate the passing seasons. Jhumur is usually performed before large public gatherings and its folk tunes, set to the rhythm of the dhol, or local drum, have a lilt all of their own, with lyrics that convey the pleasures and pains of daily life. The recital itself is a form of recreation for people who spend most of their day doing back-breaking work in the fields or forests.

Another popular form from this region is the Chhau, a form of dance theatre with wonderfully expressive masks. A distinctive feature of the Chhau dance in Purulia is that unlike in other

pockets where it is popular – like in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district – it is sustained not by royal patrons but by the local communities themselves.

BJJAS has used both the Jhumur and the Chhau to take its message of the rights to food and work, as well as women's entitlements, to the last person. Revealed Khagan Mahato, who has been the sheet anchor of this effort, "Over the years we have composed many songs on this theme." As he spoke he broke into a Chhau song that talked about how the poor are forced to place dry thorn bushes outside the doors of their homes and depart for distant places because the drought has scorched their fields and they lie barren. The sadness inherent in that experience of departure and desertion is contrasted with an energetic assertion that these words lead up to: "Now we don't die of starvation/ Nor do we resort to migration/ All because of MGNREGA/ All because of MGNREGA."

We met up with Bhavani Prasad Singha, a cultural ambassador of sorts for the BJJAS. Although Singha does not have a tribal background – he is from the Khatri community – he was drawn to social concerns through his association with BJJAS members. Songs of rights

and resistance came to him spontaneously after he began understanding the issues involved and the everyday realities of the local communities.

Recalled Singha, “From the very beginning I was drawn to two things: words and music. When I attended a BJJAS meeting in 2006, I knew instinctively that the campaigns that it was conducting were extremely important for poor people everywhere, and so I had no hesitation in being a part of that effort.”

Singha revealed that he works within the two indigenous art forms of Jhumur and Chhau. “Jhumur is a song format used for happy and auspicious occasions. It celebrates Mother Nature. I had a guru in my village, who introduced me to this form and taught me how to use it. The other form is the dance theatre known as Chhau, which has traditionally been used to depict stories from the Mahabharat and Ramayan.”

According to Singha, speeches don’t sustain the attention of local audiences in Purulia district to the extent that dances and songs do. He also believes people remember what they ‘see’ for much longer than from what they ‘hear’. “With its melody, rhythm, lyrics and colourful masks, people are kept enthralled for hours. So we used these forms extensively for our ‘Ek Saudiner Kaj’ (hundred days’ work campaign). I have composed songs on many themes. For International Women’s Day, for instance, I composed a song that went, ‘trafficking in women, witchcraft and violence against women are different forms of women’s oppression’.”



Bhabani Prasad Singha

As we left him, lines from a song he had composed and sung, came back to us: Aine re adhikar dite kabe (the law gives us the right to work)/Prati pate bhaat chai (we need rice for every stomach)/Bhaater jane kaj chai (to earn that rice we need to work)/kajer jane ain chai (to get the work, we need the law)/keu khabe aar keu kha bena (one gets to eat, while the other does not)/ta habena, ta habena (that cannot happen, that cannot happen).



A Santhal Woman Transforms Village Dynamics

There are some who term Kanaklata Murmu a natural rebel, and they are not far from the truth. Not many women from the Santhal community, living in a remote village like Kumari which is located in Purulia district's Manbazar II block, have been able to see through the hypocrisies of society with the clarity of this thirty-something mother of two teenagers.

Kanaklata understands, for instance, how restrictions on women have amounted to clipping their wings. "Everything is based on mobility, one's whole development as a person is based on one's capacity to move from place to place. But women in our society are constantly facing restrictions, whether in their parents' home or in that of their husbands," observed Kanaklata. She added wryly, "Even if they are beaten by their husbands, they need his permission to file a police complaint against him! Why are we surprised then that women keep getting beaten and get no justice?"

Interestingly, when we asked the residents of Kumari village why they considered her someone worthy enough to lead them, they say that it is her own confidence that gives them confidence.

Said Kasturi Devi who is also in the BJJAS and has followed Kanaklata's trajectory closely, "Kanakdi makes up her own mind. Whenever things go wrong for people here, they feel they can count on her to act independently and with wisdom, keeping their best interests in mind. What is more, her activism has actually produced results on the ground. For instance, she has been able to get several elderly widows in villages here a regular pension, something no one had done earlier."



But how did a woman, who is a Class VIII dropout, become an independent leader and be seen to be so? “Perhaps I was always able to think for myself, no matter what people say. In fact, I chose my own husband. He was a school teacher living right here in the village I was born here, so when I married him I did not have to leave my village like other women!” said Kanaklata.

She had been identified by Sevabrata as a potential women’s leader, when it started working in this region. She helped Sevabrata set up its first self help groups in the villages of Manbazar II. This intervention proved to be the beginning of Kanaklata’s journey. By 2006, BJJAS had been established and Kanaklata joined it as one of its first members. “Through the BJJAS we got a lot of information about various government programmes for poor people like us. The emphasis was on human rights for all, not just for some – and this included women,” she underlined.

Everywhere in the village, there was evidence of domestic violence. “Men drank and beat their wives, threw them out of their houses. Now we came to slowly understand that the food that we were getting in our husband’s home did not come for free. Every woman was working hard to keep her family going, and she too had rights to live there as an equal,” said Kanaklata.

Since it was difficult for poor families to access the formal system of justice, given the high costs and the difficulties of travelling to the nearest courts, villages here had evolved their own local systems of justice delivery, where the men of the village

sat together and took decisions on local disputes, including those occurring within and between families.

“What struck us about this process was the verdicts that had emerged in such a way were often faulty and did not consider the issue from the women’s perspective,” recalled Kanaklata. So she and other women in the village decided to set up a parallel structure where women would come together and decide cases together. “About 40 to 50 women would meet in this way at least twice a month at the village level and once a month at the block level. We found that when men took decisions they would keep out women, but when we took decisions we involved everyone,” observed the feisty tribal woman.

She cited the example of a young bride from the village who had gone back to her parental home and subsequently refused to return, much to the embarrassment of her husband’s family – and his village as well. The men in the village sat in council and ruled that the woman must return to her husband at any cost, but young woman simply refused to comply. “We women approached the issue in a completely different way. We discussed the issue at a couple of meetings and then we decided to go to the girl’s village to find out what was disturbing her. We realised that it was a small misunderstanding and assured her of our support. In this way, we were able to win her confidence and finally she did come back. The couple are now united and living quite comfortably. Women are able to understand what men cannot,” Kanaklata revealed.

For Kanaklata, taking things to their logical conclusion was important. The SHG she had started was involved in monitoring the mid day meal and she realised that a lot of food grain meant for the children was being siphoned off by a cabal headed by the president of the block. “I decided to complain about it to the BDO,” recalled Kanaklata. When her husband came to know about his wife’s action, he was extremely angry and told her to back off. But then something very strange happened. Members of the community intervened and told him that she was doing the right thing and should continue her efforts.

That was precisely what she did. She led protests and even confronted the president of the block directly on the issue. She told him, “Sir, you get to sit on a chair for five years. I sit under a tree, and I will be around for much longer.” Later, she was proved right when the man lost the panchayat election. Quite possibly Kanaklata’s mobilisation

against his corruption was a factor in that defeat.

Today, the woman who said that she sits under a tree has been able to get people in her village drinking water by petitioning the authorities for tubewells. She has also helped them access MGNREGA jobs. A nearby government work site bears testimony to this – half the labourers working on extending a local pond here are from her village and they get a daily wage of Rs 152. “Everyone in our village has a job card, and we have all worked on sites like these to keep our families going. Now we are demanding work for longer than a hundred days,” said Kanaklata.

The one thing this mother of two teenaged children regretted was her lack of education, “I am a Class Eight dropout. If had more education, I would have been able to do so much more for my people.”

Struggling Together: Khagan Chandra Mahato and Nakul Baske

The BJJAS has been fortunate to have two men, Khagan Chandra Mahato and Nakul Baske, who have anchored its activities from the earliest days when a movement for food and work was just a concept on the pages of documents. Mahato came from a Kurmi background while Baske is a Santhal, both are community representatives in the best sense of the term.

Mahato and Baske remembered the early days as if it was just yesterday. “When we began in 2004, the situation was desperate. Consecutive droughts had forced people to go deeper into the forests, scouring the vegetation for whatever it could provide in terms of sustenance. They would dig up yams, pick wild spinach, uproot wild grass



and try and subsist on very little. People were so hungry that if, by chance, they got a proper meal, their system just could not digest it, and they would throw up. That was the extent of hunger,” said Mahato.

If the search for food was getting increasingly frantic so, too, was the search for jobs. One needed a livelihood to keep one’s family alive and the agricultural fields were too parched to yield anything. According to Baske, the villages in those days were emptied out as the able-bodied had migrated in large numbers to brick kilns in the state and across its borders in states like Jharkhand and Odisha.

What typically happened in such cases was that the elderly, women and children were left behind in the villages, and their situation was particularly dire. Recalled Baske, “Just as we were taking our first steps in this Sevabrata-AA initiative, news of the deaths of Patu Mura and Anchal Mura broke out. Those deaths came as a clarion call. We also realised for ourselves how intertwined were the two phenomena of the lack of food and the unavailability of work.”

They concentrated on raising the issue at the highest levels – right up to the state assembly, where opposition parties confronted the ruling

establishment with the data that they had provided to the media. Since the PDS was hardly working in those days, pressure was also put on the BDO's office to monitor the situation and plug the leaks.

It helped that both men were from the region and had seen hunger and deprivation from up close. Baske came from Chhatri village in the Ayodhya Hills, the ground zero of starvation in the region. He said he grew up hungry because his family was too poor to afford even two meals a day. "From early childhood I was aware of these issues and would think how unfair life was to our community. Those days Santhal villages hardly had any educated children - perhaps one or two in a few villages. I myself gave up schooling after completing my 10th because of health problems." As a young man Baske even tried to get other unemployed youth like him to form what was called the 'Bekar Samiti' (organisation of the redundant), to demand jobs for unemployed youth.

Mahato, too, was a discerning observer, not just of external injustices but of tribal customs and practices that were also often highly discriminatory – especially to women. Getting BJJAS functional as a network, however, required more than just skills of discernment. It demanded leadership qualities and a commitment to work oftentimes 24 hours a day. "In those days, nobody had any idea of a concept like 'rights'. They did not know that India was a democracy and that it had a constitution that had guaranteed the right to life," remarked Mahato. Mobilising the community

on both the right to a livelihood and right to food required personal interactions with people. "Every meeting organised on a mass scale had to begin with consciousness raising work at the village level," Baske said.

Both men have faced repression for the work they did but, thanks largely to the full-hearted support of the community, they have been able to overcome the traumas of false charges and police repression and proved their true credentials as committed community workers rather than the political extremists. Opposing superstitious customs and derogatory practices against women within the communities have also had difficult moments.

Mahato, for instance, took up a witch hunting case in the village of Kalabari in Arsha block, against stiff opposition from local leaders and even personal innuendoes being made against him. It was a Santhal village and the case involved a young mother called Turbi Soren. She had happened to visit a pregnant neighbour. Later, the infant the woman had given birth to fell ill and unfortunately died. Turbi was then accused of being a witch and casting a spell on the baby. The local decision making body in the village, after conducting its own 'inquiry' into the case, ruled that the woman had to be expelled from the village. Even her husband and his family did not dare to support her under the threat of expulsion themselves and the woman had no recourse but to leave the village and support herself and her young son through wage labour. When she returned to her village after a while, her

husband's family still refused to accept her. She had taken shelter in the outhouse of a government facility when Khagan heard of her case. He then approached the villagers and told them in no uncertain words that there was a law against hunting women as witches and that it would be used against them if they continued to rule that the woman be expelled. Mahato had to face a lot of pressure after he did this, with people even asking him what his connection was with this woman. Finally, an FIR was lodged at the Arsha police station and the BDO took up the case. He threatened the village elders that if they did not behave, they could face arrest. In this way, the woman and her son could finally be reunited with her family.

Explained Mahato, "There are always vested interests behind such practices. In Turbi's case we discovered that because the local ojha could not cure the infant, he blamed the child's death on witchcraft, making Turbi an easy scapegoat. Invariably it is the weakest woman who gets targeted in this way." The connection between developments like this and the low status of women in tribal societies was major learning for the BJJAS.

Over the years, even when political extremism and state repression in the area was at its highest, Mahato and Baske kept BJJAS going and could organise at least one major district level rally or convention at Purulia every year. Baske enumerated the various events, "In 2004, we held a hunger rally; in 2005 there was that major congregation of the community which saw the birth of BJJAS. In 2006, we did a six-day rally on MGNREGA followed by a public hearing. In 2007, we organised another public hearing. There have been public conventions every year from 2008 to 2012." These events were used to shore up the BJJAS base and take its core concerns to people across the state.

Today, both men are not ready to give up their activism. Said Baske, "There is so much to be done. One concern I personally want to address is to extend the knowledge of the laws to every single man, woman and child in the community."

Mahato spoke for both men when he remarked with a smile, "This rights-based activism has become our second nature, a habit that is difficult to overcome! So, we have no recourse but to continue."



Purulia's Grey Zone

Distress migration has many impacts – and not just on the lives of the able-bodied who are often forced to live and work in sub-human conditions. Those they leave behind, many of them too old to earn a living or even care for themselves, are now bereft of the support of younger family members in their years of infirmity. Hunger stalked the old much more than any other section of the community because children are accorded priority in the distribution of scarce food within the household. This is especially during the starvation months of August, September, October, when household stocks of food grain run out and the new harvest has not come in. Among this already vulnerable group, it is the plight of deserted women and widows that is particularly grave.

As local activist Kanaklata Murmu put it, “Old people of the village particularly have a very bad deal. If their families take care of them it is well and good, but many poor families – under various burdens of their own – just don’t bother. You will find very old people bearing firewood on their heads or dragging a pitcher of water for their daily needs.”

In 2004, after the initiative with AA was mainstreamed, Sevabrata looked at whether the

extremely modest sum of Rs 100 under the National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS) even reached the intended beneficiaries who were, according to Supreme Court orders, supposed to get it on or before the 7th of every month. It was then found that there had been no attempt, either by the administration, local politicians or panchayati raj institutions, to identify beneficiaries. There was also no general awareness about the existence of such a pension and no effort had been made to circulate information about it in the local media or on public boards. The other problem lay in the design of the scheme: there was only a limited quota for such beneficiaries, who also had to hold BPL cards. It was only after those in the list had passed away could new names be included. This meant that many remained out of the list, sometimes up to the time of their own death – in other words, they did not benefit from the existence of the NOAPS.

Among the recommendations suggested was that the list of beneficiaries should be carefully drawn by the gram sabha after making proper inquiries with village development committees allowed to inspect the cases and recommend applicants if necessary. There was also a general observation that the quota system needed to be reformed.



Over the years the BJJAS, realising the links between old age and conditions of hunger, took up the non-payment of pensions as one of its important concerns. In 2008, for instance, the issue of some elderly persons from Hensla village in Arsha Block, who had not received their old age pensions for the five months between April 2007 and September 2008, was taken up. Many complaints were made to the BDO, but they fell on deaf ears. That was when the RTI route was decided upon. Finally, on the directions of the Information Commission, the BDO of Arsha arranged a hearing which lasted well into the night, after which the panchayat secretary gave a written undertaking that the pension of five months would be paid in installments. In August 2008, 269 beneficiaries were paid Rs 500 each. Over the next few months their entire outstandings were cleared because of the pressure applied on the authorities. It was to circumvent such problems that today, these payments go directly into personal bank accounts.

Over the years, thanks to BJJAS activism, the number of beneficiaries of pensions has grown considerably. While in 2007 only 55 women in the project area received their entitlement under the Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme, by 2012, this figure had risen to 1269. Similarly, those who benefited from the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme was 547 in 2007 but rose to 1929 by 2012. What was also interesting to note was that attempts were made to bring in the elderly into MGNREGA projects. Revealed Abola Chalok, of Baghmundi village, who is around 70, with great pride, “Yes, I too could earn some money like others in my village by providing drinking water to the workers on an MGNREGA site near my village.”

The campaign for old age pensions had touched a chord and it has been decided to keep it as a core activity for the BJJAS in the future too.

About the initiative

This story, the fifth in our series of “CRITICAL STORIES OF CHANGE”, brings to the fore the struggles and resilience of Dalits and vulnerable tribal groups such as Lodhas and Birhors from the Purulia district of West Bengal. Purulia is considered to be one of the poorest districts of India. Most members of these communities are landless, marginal farmers, who often migrate to nearby places in search of jobs. Lack of food security and livelihood options are among the several reasons that pushed them migrate in distress.

ActionAid India decided to step in with a short term initiative in the year 2000 with a focus on improving the local governance system, which would lead to solutions around food security and livelihood. After partnering for 3 years it was felt that the partnership had long term potential and hence from 2004, Jamgoria Sevabrata became a long-term partner of ActionAid. The partnership focused on issues of food security and livelihood and accountable governance in 11 blocks of Purulia district.

With over a decade of intensive work with the communities, it has been very heartening to see the emergence and establishment of a strong community organization Banchita Jana Jagarana Abhikar Samity (BJJAS) that has taken the issues of the community to a different level i.e from local to state level platforms. Later a separate women’s wing also came into existence, as well as village platforms known as the Gram Unnayan Manch (GUM) who worked closely with BJJAS. The biggest achievement has been to win over administrative and government support in facilitating processes leading to accessing quality entitlements and citizen’s rights in the backward district with the strong presence of community based organizations. Success in building leadership from the community was the biggest gain of a decade of hard work. The strong community based network has brought to the fore at least 50 local grassroots leaders with a good understanding of several laws aimed at the welfare of excluded communities. They are also confident about themselves and have the respect of their people.

This has been one of the most successful initiatives that ActionAid India has embarked upon, all the more significant because tribal communities have been left out of the policy discourse, both at the national and state levels. After a decade long work and various ups & downs notwithstanding, we firmly believe in the contribution of community based organizations in making the big changes in the lives of the members of the community.

We hope that this story will be as encouraging and inspiring for the readers , as it has been for us.

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