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READ ALOUD

A JOURNAL OF CITIZENS' EXPRESSIONS OF STRUGGLE AND HOPE

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NIRAKAR DEEP
BHAJA TANDI
SATISH SARKAR
HEMA AND ARCHANA
BRAJBALA RAM
RAMJI MUKHIYA
VIMALBAI BAPU
NANDLAL MASTER
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NORA ABUBAKR ADAM
SALWA AHMED

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content

They can kill our sons, but they cannot take our land!	02
UPUNI JAMUDA	
We redeemed our pride!	05
NIRAKAR DEEP	
They cannot cheat us any longer!	07
BHAJA TANDI	
All we needed was a second chance!	10
SATISH SARKAR	
Nipped in the bud!	13
"HEMA" AND "ARCHANA	
We need lasting remedy, not relief!	16
BRAJBALA RAM	
The seeds ruined my life and pushed me into debt trap!	18
RAMJI MUKHIYA	
Life on the crossroads	20
VIMALBAI BAPU	
Hundreds days of protest against Coca Cola	23
NANDLAL MASTER	
Our struggle shall continue!	26
DUDHESHWAR MANJHI	
In pursuit of a socialist world order!	28
HARE RAM AND PRADEEP MEHTA	
‘We shall not allow our men to drink ever again!’	30
GIRIJA DEVI	
Perhaps now there shall be an end to this evil!	32
KIRITHBAI	
Stories from Sudan: Women in Reflect Literacy Circles	34
NORA ABUBAKR ADAM AND SALWA AHMED	



READ ALOUD

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editorial

Praxis - Institute for Participatory Practices is privileged to release the first issue of **Read Aloud** - a journal dedicated to capturing citizen's expressions of struggle and hope. In this evocative instrument for expression, these voices emerge directly from the frontlines of struggles occurring across India. The power of these pieces is encapsulated in the reality that they represent, and the fact that these are not intellectuals or 'professionals' writing "on behalf of" these communities. Instead, it is the community members, standing up for themselves, no longer accepting injustice and demanding that their voices be heard. In an environment where struggle is a precondition for survival, it is an instinctive core reaction to speak out.

The challenge the nation confronts in today's environment is ensuring that spaces for articulating these marginalised voices exist within mainstream society. Despite the transformative changes that the media has experienced in the last decade, the available spaces for the poor are diminishing. Therefore, it is necessary to popularize alternative forms of communication that are empowering, participatory, and prioritise the citizens' perspectives.

Read Aloud documents provocative stories directly from the forefront of struggles against marginalisation and poverty. As the name suggests, these are stories that need to be read aloud and spoken aloud. They should not only inspire dialogue, but more importantly concerted action. These real-life accounts transcend the comfortable spaces of academic discourse and intellectual nourishment that theorise about challenges of systemic poverty and marginalisation. These pieces document the powerful resilience, protests, and most importantly hope of communities, and are meant to inspire a response from everyone. As fellow citizens, each person has a role to play in these struggles, and should treat these injustices against their fellow human beings, as injustices against their individual selves.

The English version of **Read Aloud** is meant to reach out to each one of us. The privileged, educated, English speaking citizens of India bear a responsibility to bridge the widening divide between the dominant sections of society and those marginalised sections that have spent their lifetimes on the periphery. Listen to these voices. Apathy is no longer an option. It is time to extend beyond our comfort zones of inaction, rise up, and initiate change.



THEY CAN KILL OUR SONS, BUT THEY CANNOT TAKE OUR LAND

UPUNI JAMUDA FROM KALINGANAGAR¹

65-years old Upuni Jamuda lost his son Ati Jamuda in a police firing at Kalinganagar (Orissa) on January 2, 2006, when local tribal communities of the area had gathered at Nuagaon village of Baragadia panchayat to protest against construction of a compound wall aimed at demarcation of land for Kalinganagar Steel Complex. As many as 13 local villagers hailing from scheduled tribes were killed in the firing.

Life took a new turn on the 2nd of January 2006 for thirteen ill-fated families of Kalinganagar. Some of us lost our sons, some their brothers, while some lost their daughters-in-law. The people who killed our innocent kin did not attach any more value to human lives than those of insects or animals. The manner in which they chopped off the limbs of the victims only shows how barbaric they can be. In fact, if they hadn't turned so brutal after the firing, at least a few lives could have been saved from excessive bleeding.

My son Ati Jamuda died for a cause that all of us stand by. It is our ancestral land; we have lived on it for generations. No one can push us out just like that! So what if we are landless ourselves; barring the five goonths² of land that we built our house on! If the government must acquire land to set up factories, let it bulldoze our houses and trample our bodies! We will not part with even an inch of our land, and our campaign against injustice shall continue. We do not want the compensations that the government has offered to the kin of the dead; let the government keep the money and kill the policemen who triggered open fire on innocent people!

On the day of the firing, we somehow had a premonition of the ominous event unfolding before us. Our house is located in Chandia village, and as soon as we came to know of the arrangements going on in a hush-hush manner at Nuagaon to construct a boundary wall for the contentious Kalinganagar Steel Complex, we knew we had to react fast. When Ati and I reached Nuagaon, hundreds of people had already gathered at the spot and were shouting slogans against the police and the government. People came from all the villages in this area, which were to come under the area identified for inclusion under the Kalinganagar Steel Complex, including Gobar-ghati, Baiduburi, Champa-koela, Baramatia, Bamiagoth, Garapur, Chandia, Baligoth and Kalimatia.

We charged towards an artificial barrier created by a long rope, and just when we

were about to cross over, I heard a loud sound of a blast. This was probably meant to scare us, but it added fuel to the fire and the situation became acutely tense. Some of our people started pelting stones at the policemen, provoked by the blast and the resistance. Suddenly, the policemen opened fire. Several shots were fired indiscriminately at the crowd, and Ati - who was at the forefront of our charge at that moment - was one of the first to be hit. He collapsed immediately, along with five or six other people. Even people who were running away from the scene were hit by bullets in their backs. While the crowd was going berserk, the policemen did a quick act of removing all bodies from the spot, including those of people grievously injured, which were subsequently shifted to a hospital at Cuttack.

As if the cruelty meted out to us wasn't enough, they arbitrarily chopped off the hands and limbs of all the people killed by the firing while performing post mortem on the dead bodies. This was reasoned to be a standard procedure required by a post mortem. We were aghast to know that even some of the grievously injured people lying in the custody of police were assumed to be dead, and even their hands were chopped off bringing about their death due to excessive bleeding. In all my life, I have never heard of any barbaric act of such proportions.

Immediately after the incident, we blocked the Paradeep - Daitari main road connected with National Highway No. 5. We have decided not to lift the blockage, come what may, till the government abandons its plans to displace us. We also decided not to accept the compensation package of Rs. 5 lakh announced by the Government for the kin of the victims, and our '*Bisthapan Birodhi Janamanch*' (Forum against displacement) has rightly advised people against accepting the same. It's an issue of dignity, after all. Of late, some political leaders have been trying to foment frictions within the forum, and one of the thirteen families actually decided to accept the compensation a couple of weeks back. It is an unfortunate development! Every now and then, police people and politicians visit us warning of dire consequences if we do not abide by the orders of the government.

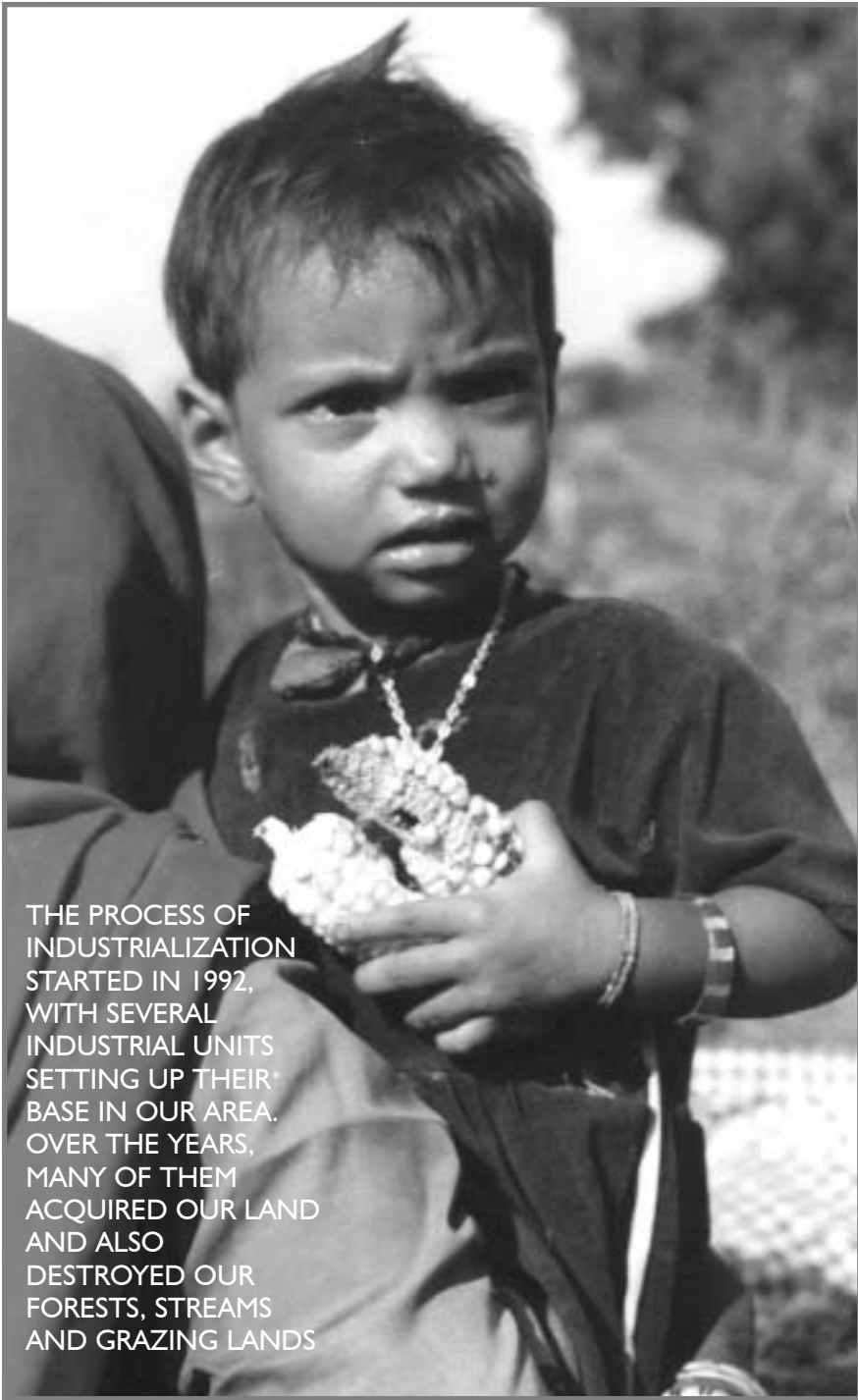
The process of industrialization started in 1992, with several industrial units setting up their base in our area. Over the years, many of them - including Nilachal Steel Plant, Mesco and Maharashtra Seamless Limited - acquired our land

and also destroyed our forests, streams and grazing lands. Our main sources of livelihood are agriculture and sale of forest produces. However, when the government started acquiring our land, they assured us compensatory employment in industries. What we finally got were temporary jobs under a contractor on daily wage terms. Today, the government is talking about providing us self-employment opportunities based on trading activities. But we cannot avail of such opportunities because we are poor and illiterate, and do not know how to manage these. They are also promising money, which has little value for us and would be spent up in no time without addressing our long-term livelihood concerns.

Since the day the process of industrialization started in our area, we have been tortured and harassed in various ways by the police, company personnel and political ruffians. Their hounding acts have actually gone up with intensification of our movement for protecting our land and livelihoods. Of late, they have started planting conflicts and misunderstanding between tribals and non-tribals. They have claimed our land, forests, water and lives, and given us only bullets and sticks. During the establishment of Nilachal Steel Corporation in 1997, the local administration forcibly bulldozed our houses and arrested our people. On the 9th of May 2005, when Maharashtra Seamless Limited started work in this area, our people were mercilessly beaten up and imprisoned for three weeks. Those arrested included 26 women and 13 children, while many of us had to run away into deep forests. Two of the children and two old men died in the aftermath of that incident.

We had a meeting with the Chief Minister of Orissa a couple of months back at Bhubaneswar. He wants us to lift the road blockage. He promised to reconsider the cases filed against our people, as if it would be an act of great benevolence on his part! He also gave us the assurance of returning all the body parts of the dead people lying in the custody of the government. While they did return to us the chopped off parts of the hands later, we found those to be shorter in length. The Chief Minister also spoke about the benefits we shall get if we agree to move out of this area and resettle in the places offered by the

1. Narration facilitated by Rajesh Kumar Nayak at Kalinganagar
2. 25 goonths equal one acre of land



THE PROCESS OF INDUSTRIALIZATION STARTED IN 1992, WITH SEVERAL INDUSTRIAL UNITS SETTING UP THEIR BASE IN OUR AREA. OVER THE YEARS, MANY OF THEM ACQUIRED OUR LAND AND ALSO DESTROYED OUR FORESTS, STREAMS AND GRAZING LANDS

government. But we know how the government treats people displaced from their native lands. People who were displaced by the Nilachal Ispat Nigam in the early nineties are still running from pillar to post to claim their rehabilitation-entitlements! What kind of development is this, which kills poor people and allows the rich to set up factories?

I hope our campaign ends on a successful note. None of us will agree to give even an inch of our land, and I hope the government understands our situation. I shall shoulder the burden of our hardships only till I can, and would commit suicide the day it gets too difficult to handle.

Today, I have to take care of Ati's family and children at this ripe age. My second son - Narendra Jamuda - lost his life due to Brain Malaria about a year back. He was a schoolteacher by profession, and his wife, who now lives with her father, has been offered the support of an ex-gratia pension after his death. One of Ati's two daughters was born only a month before his death, and is only eight months old today. His widow - Hara - has been identified as a beneficiary of the widow pension scheme of the government. She also received a support of Rs. one lakh during visit of Sonia Gandhi to our area, which is deposited in her bank account and will take care of her future needs. Ati had leased in three acres of land to cultivate as a sharecropper, which we returned to the landlord after his death. My wife gets old age pension, and we value the ten kilograms of rice we receive under the Annapoorna scheme.

WE REDEEMED OUR DIGNITY

NIRAKAR DEEP³

75 years old Nirakar Podh was one of the earliest protagonists against caste-based discrimination in rural Orissa. He lives with his wife in Gurla Uda village of Bolangir. In this narrative, he recalls a historic act of protest against discriminatory prohibition of scheduled castes from entering a village temple, which catalyzed the collectivization of hundreds of dalit households in western Bolangir in the early 1990s.

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God did not make us unequal. Unfortunately, the rules of society haven't been kind to us, and we have been forced to live with humiliation for centuries. It's a destiny handed down to us by our forefathers, and even today our children have to keep a distance from other children of the village, for no fault of theirs. Many years back, we did voice our protest against an open assault on the dignity of

our caste-brethren. In fact, that was about ten years ago. On that fateful day on the eve of *Shivratri*, six women of our hamlet went to offer their oblations to the only Shiva temple in the village. They had hardly stepped inside when a group of upper caste men and women came rushing and started hurling abuses at them. Our women hadn't even finished praying at that point. They were called names and even the deity of the temple was stated to have become unholy on account of being desecrated by "untouchables". The women were fully jolted by that acrimonious scene, and became particularly upset at being called "scavengers". The people who created the scene also threatened them with social boycott.

I was at my home when the women returned to our locality, crying hoarse over the insult. By then the tension over the issue had spread like wild fire in the village and all the people of our community gathered around my house propelled by a cutting sense of indignation. We knew that we had to redeem ourselves - the insult was crossing all limits. I asked my people to be patient, and assured them of necessary action.

I called a meeting of all scheduled caste households of the village on the following day, in which we also invited SC people from Boddokla, Tentulikhunti and Nagphana villages. It turned out to be a really big gathering. We discussed at length the act of insult of our women, which infuriated everyone attending the meeting. We decided to lodge a case against the offending people in the offices of the District

3 Narration facilitated by Rajesh Kumar Nayak



TIMES HAVE CHANGED, BUT NOT MUCH IS DIFFERENT FOR SCHEDULED CASTES. OUR CHILDREN STILL FACE DISCRIMINATION AT THE BEHEST OF THEIR COUNTERPARTS FROM UPPER CASTES. ONLY A FEW DAYS BACK, THE FAMILY OF ONE OF OUR NEIGHBOURS WAS PUBLICLY ABUSED MERELY BECAUSE THEIR SON HAD PLAYFULLY TOUCHED AN UPPER CASTE BOY

Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police. We also decided to mobilize pressure on the Police to act against the offenders by involving Shri Phalguni Naik - the influential President of the District level *Sangha* of scheduled castes.

Seeing the unexpected turn of events and our resolve to pursue the incident, the offending households were absolutely petrified. Within no time, they came around and started persuading us to reconsider our decision to approach the Police. They even offered to discuss with us a “compromise arrangement” regarding the use of the temple. Sensing their penitence, we also decided not to pursue the matter any further. After all, we had to coexist with them in the same village and there was little sense in living a life of conflicts. However, we did not let them get away without paying a fine of Rs. 1051/-. It was an unprecedented moment in the history of our village, when people from upper castes had to pay a fine to our community for their misconduct. We celebrated our victory with a feast involving people from four villages and the amount collected as fine was utilized for the same.

Today, we have our own temple in Kadabeda village, where we often organize *Ashta Prahara Jagaran* (worship of the deity running through all eight parts of a day including hours of the night). In fact, we stopped visiting the temple of our vil-

lage after the incident. What’s point in prolonging the fight over a relatively less important issue when the schism along caste lines impinges upon so many other critical areas of violation of our human rights! Times have changed, but not much is different for scheduled castes. Our children still face discrimination at the behest of their counterparts from upper castes. Only a few days back, the family of one of our neighbours was publicly abused merely because their son had playfully touched an upper caste boy. When our women go to fetch drinking water from the common hand-pumps, they have to wait for their turn at the end. If they accidentally touch the pitchers of the other castes, we have to pay up for new pitchers. In our part of the world, it is common for families from scheduled castes to throw feasts for the whole village if they violate any social norms. It is another matter that people from upper castes do not consume meals cooked in our homes, but have to be given dry materials.

I fully support the reservation policy of the government favouring our community. Those who oppose reservations live in an unreal world. There is a strong need for extending more and more opportunities to our children, who are not likely to get a fair chance in our caste-ridden society.

THEY CANNOT CHEAT US ANY LONGER

BHAJA TANDI⁴

Bhaja Tandi is a 50 years old community leader based in Nagphana village of drought-prone Bolangir district of Orissa. A well-respected labour union activist associated with ‘Shramik Shakti Sangha’ for nearly three decades, he has played a momentous role in organizing poor agricultural labourers in Bolangir district of Orissa to assert and secure their rights. Bhaja hails from the socially disadvantaged Ganda caste (treated by many as “untouchable”) and is a *sukhobasi* (a person lacking vital assets like land or house) in terms of his economic standing. Lately, his efforts have been instrumental in timely initiation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in the drought-prone Turekela block of Bolangir. As many as 92 households in Nagphana - his native village of 119 households had already received job cards by end of June 2006, at a time when very few panchayats in the whole of Orissa had managed to even complete processing of applications for registration of villagers under the scheme.



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hings are changing in our backward land of illiterate people. We may be illiterate or poor, but we have decided not to tolerate injustice. If we turn out five badis of earth in a day, we must be paid an equivalent sum as per the standard piece-rate amount prevalent in the state and not merely the 52 Rupees and fifty paise prescribed as minimum daily wage under the Orissa Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Our people have understood the tricks of the game that the contractors have been playing for years. Not any more. If the government doesn’t pay us the due rates, none from our village shall turn up for work. We boycotted work last month, and they came back to us offering to increase wages. Our people have tasted the fruits of collective assertion and will not go back to settle for anything less than our rightful claims.

⁴ Narration facilitated by Anindo Banerjee of Praxis



For ordinary people like us to keep clear of exploitation, access to information is critical. I am glad that the government has passed the Right to Information Act. We keep copies of all relevant documents and muster rolls relating to employment activities and other schemes in the village. We have set up a committee of seven people in Nagphana that keeps track of all employment activities, including works implemented directly by the panchayat. Recently, when the panchayat secretary expressed the difficulty to officially pay us wages in excess of the prescribed minimum wages, the committee agreed upon a mechanism whereby the differential amount in excess of the

officially prescribed minimum wages would be credited in the name of some other adult member of the labourer's family. Whatever be the arrangement, we shall make sure that the legitimate entitlements of poor labourers are not truncated. I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with and learn from various inspiring people who have made a difference to the lives of poor people in Orissa. In 1977, when I started work in this sector, I did not know that my choice would change my life forever. Moving from village to village under the banner of Sarvodaya Relief Committee, I was struck by the miseries of thousands of poor wage labourers in the district,

many of who had to sell their labour under extremely exploitative conditions. Later, after we managed to mobilize a good number of labourers under the banner of Shramik Shakti Sangha, we consciously decided not to register ourselves as an NGO. A community-based organization seemed much more appropriate, which didn't have to haggle with everyday concerns of institutional survival. Working with a typical NGO would perhaps have ensured the daily bread and secured the future of a few people, but the incessant struggle inherent in the endeavours of our labourers' collective gave many of us a strong sense of purpose and fulfillment in our otherwise dreary lives. I didn't look back in life; neither did I regret my decision.

Here nobody cares for the poor unless a strong voice is raised. We have learnt this with hard experience. The government is yet to pay hundreds of labourers of our panchayat their legitimate compensation due against labour supplied by us under the Food for Work scheme implemented in 2003-04. For our area alone, the outstanding dues would amount to more than thirty truckloads of food-grains. It was only when we decided to file a case against the government that they sanctioned a paltry amount of 700 metric tons of food-grains, which is to be distributed across as many as three districts as delayed payment against outstanding dues of thousands of labourers in the region. I am doubtful if all the labourers with outstanding dues would receive their wages.

Given the high level of exploitation of poor wage labourers in our area, there is a strong need for measures like social audits, on the lines of the well-organized event conducted in Jharnipali village of Bolangir a few years back. We shall organize more of such events in future whenever there is a need. The contractors and service providers must be made accountable for their actions to the poor people, who have no chances otherwise to have their voices heard and grievances redressed. The social audit in Jharnipali created a sense of fear amongst corrupt public functionaries, and as a matter of fact, the secretary of Juba panchayat committed suicide on disclosure of a few cases of financial misappropriation on the eve of a similar exercise in Juba, to evade humiliation in public. People need to assert their rights, and in our village, we have already ensured that wages in lieu of earth-digging work are paid in keeping with the officially prescribed units of 90 cubic feet and not

at the rate of the prevalent norm of 100 cubic feet.

During the three decades of my work in this field, I have had the good fortune of working with many inspiring people, including Shri Achyut Das, Shri Jagdish Pradhan, Shri Shyamsundar Das, Shri A.B. Swami, Ms. Aradhana and Shri Tushar Bhattacharyya. The Shramik Shakti Sangha has been like a second home to me, and we have been able to expand our work across over 19 panchayats of my area. I am grateful to organizations like Oxfam and ActionAid for giving me the opportunity to travel to different places and offer my humble support to the causes of the poor. Our struggle against injustice will continue. We shall resist every single act of exploitation of poor labourers. On the coming Wednesday (June 21, 2006), we have organized a rally at Belpara to press for speedier and effective implementation of the Rural Employment Guarantee Act. This year, most families that migrated to the brick kilns of Andhra Pradesh could not be registered under the scheme. We need to ensure that they are included and benefited by the scheme. This scheme has great potential and we need to extract maximum benefits from its provisions.

My most valuable earnings are the respect and solidarity expressed by my fellow colleagues, campaigners and community members to my work and me. It is immaterial that I have not been able to buy even an inch of land in my name, or amass any other assets. I am grateful to our panchayat members to have passed a resolution for allotment of a few decimals of homestead land to 143 landless people of our Boddokla panchayat next week. Looks like I shall finally have some land to build a small house, and my sons and their families would have a place to call their own. The tehsildar is coming to our panchayat next Friday (June 23rd, 2006) to distribute land papers, and we are looking forward to the day. I shall continue my struggle till my age and abilities permit, and I hope my efforts would contribute to bring about a new social order in which poor labourers like me can live with dignity and without exploitation.

Bhaja Tandi lives with his mother, wife, two sons and their families in Nagphana village, G.P. Boddokla, Turekela block, Bolangir, Orissa. His wife was recently elected as a ward member of the Boddokla gram panchayat in 2002.



ALL WE NEEDED WAS A SECOND CHANCE

SATISH SARKAR⁵

Satish Sarkar is the former President of '*Haranath Brahmaputra Satakuri Samavyay Society*' - a cooperative society of dalit fish-workers based in Dhubri district of Assam. The Society having a membership of 108 fish-workers was prohibited from bidding for lease rights over the fishing zones of Brahmaputra river, following a disastrous government order of 1988 debarring Societies that had incurred losses during the previous year when fishing was banned due to suspected contamination of river fauna. Satish Sarkar lives with his family in the Bahadurtary slum of Dhubri district of Assam.

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ll we needed was a second chance. Business losses are best recovered through business alone. At the time of being debarred from bidding after that disastrous Monsoon of 1988, none of us had imagined that we would never again be allowed to catch fish in the river! It is difficult to imagine that the government can be so insensitive to the plight of hundreds of poor fishermen!

We had registered our Society - the *Haranath Brahmaputra Satakuri Samavyay Society* (HBSSS, henceforth) - way back in the year 1975-76, following a government directive calling for registration of various local associations of fish-workers as cooperative societies. The registration drive was undertaken after heavy influx of migrants from Bangladesh on account of a severe drought in Sylhet that caused widespread poverty and starvation in the early 1970s. Such was the severity of the disaster that it also led to easing of measures to check infiltration of people from across the border on humanitarian grounds. Most members of our society are Bengali and Bihari migrants to Assam belonging to scheduled castes (Namashudras and Mallahs respectively), who settled down in the erstwhile port-town of Dhubri after partition of India in 1947.

Our business received a boost when a report prepared by the then Deputy Secretary in the Department of Fisheries, recommended preferential allotment of leases over fisheries only to locally based fishermen's societies (1975-76). The report

was based on his field visit to many fisheries in the state and he was moved by the poor economic condition of most communities of fishermen. In the years that followed, we enjoyed exclusive rights of fishing in one of the eight meenmahals (fishing zones) of lower Assam spread over nearly forty kilometers. The preferential status accorded to the local societies of fishermen was further strengthened by an order issued by the then Cabinet Minister, Fisheries, debarring all societies registered after 1982 from participating in the settlement processes that determined control over the fisheries. We welcomed the decision, as it upheld the spirit of '*haluwar hol aar jaluwar jol*' (land to the tiller, and water to the fishermen)!

THE FATEFUL MONSOONS OF 1988

The onset of the Monsoons in 1988 ushered in a new phase in the lives of the fishermen. The district of Dhubri received heavy rainfall during the year and many parts of the district were submerged under floodwater that took heavy toll on the lives and property of people. Most of the fishermen lost their houses and took shelter on the embankment constructed in 1974. The floods were followed by widespread epidemics that killed many people. In view of suspected contamination of the water and fauna of Brahmaputra, consumption and sale of fish was completely banned vide order of the Deputy Commissioner. The ban lasted through the whole of the peak season for fishing, and the crestfallen fishermen affected by the ban were provided relief in the form of food-grains. By the time the ban was lifted, catching even a few grams of the fish had become a daily ordeal for us. As a result, most societies including HBSSS - which had lease rights over the meenmahals of lower Assam - incurred heavy losses on account of irrecoverable expenditure made on fishing infrastructure and relating to labour payments. The losses of our society alone amounted to Rupees Three lakh and Sixty thousand (Rs. 3,60,000/-).

During the following settlement, HBSSS was notified as a 'defaulter' and was debarred from bidding for the lease rights. Little did we know at that stage that we would never again be able to stake a claim to the resource that had been providing daily breads to over 800 households based in the Bahadurtary slum alone. The only way to get the defaulter status rescinded was to make enough

earnings from a normal year of fishing to pay back the outstanding dues, for which we never got another chance! The drastic loss of control over the fisheries aggravated a long-brewing crisis for us, caused by shutting down of various livelihood avenues in Dhubri during the last few decades, including closure of a match factory, a jute factory, railway operations and an international port.

THE ENTRY OF THE MIDDLEMEN

The years that followed saw a sea change in the business environment surrounding the fisheries. Debarring of societies like HBSSS from bidding for lease rights made way for new players to enter the fray. Within no time, several new societies sprang up, mostly backed by rich and powerful people. The going rates for bidding shot up sharply, and huge amounts of money started changing hands illegally. Middlemen started entering tenders on behalf of fake societies, and on favourable settlement of a bid, they would pay the dummy office-bearers of the societies a lump-sum amount ranging up to fifty thousand rupees, to keep their mouth shut and to withdraw from fishing. Thereafter, they would take over total control of the fisheries.

Once the fishing rights went out of our hands, the new *Izardaars*, *Aroddars* and *Bazaar Mahaldaars* (managers of the meenmahals, river banks and markets respectively) assumed full control of the river, and completely debarred local fishermen from catching and selling fish independently. The fishermen who are allowed to catch fish on behalf of the Izardaar are required to make a monthly payment of Rs. 10/- and collect a receipt. They are also required to give 25-30% of their proceeds from sales to the latter, a part of which (5%) is shared with the *Aroddars*. Besides, every time a fisherman reaches the fish market, he/she has to pay Rs. 10/- to the Bazaar Mahaldaars, and an additional Rs. 5/- for every basket of fish carried to the market. The most exploitative part of the sharing is the compulsion to give the largest fish to the Izardaar, whenever the fishermen visit the market. Often the Aroddars too arbitrarily pick their choice, and any protest can lead to loss of job. For instance, when Amar Choudhary, a fisherman hailing originally from Bihar, dared to complain to the *Izardaar* about the misconduct of an *Aroddar*, his receipt was seized by the Izardaar and torn into pieces.

⁵ Narration facilitated by Kamal Medhi of CHD Guwahati and Anindo Banerjee of Praxis



The *Aroddars* also double up as moneylenders. We can borrow Rs. 500/- anytime we want, but are required to pay back Rs. 600/- at the end of a week. The fishermen who are provided with boats and nets (amounting nearly to Rupees 15-20 thousand) by the *Aroddars* are required to repay the value of the loan in installments, and till the time full repayment is made they are forced to compulsorily sell fish only to the Aroddar, often at rates falling short of the going rates in the auction market. This arrangement is akin to bonded labour practices known to exist in the agricultural sector. Working under the Izardaar can fetch up to Rs. 1000/- to a fisherman in a good week of business (corresponding to a catch of nearly 6 baskets, or 25 kg of fish), out of which he/she has to part with nearly Rs. 300/-. However, the fortunes vary, and not every week is equally productive. The fishermen visit the market on a weekly basis to save on market tax. The monthly income of a small household of fishermen is estimated to be between Rs. 1500/- - 2000/-, including the earnings of women. Most women in our community work as maidservants or in small-scale local industries, e.g. incense-stick rolling. Entry of women in livelihood activities was necessitated by our loss of business in fishing. In fact, fishing is pursued only during the months of Kartik (mid-October to mid-November), *Magh*, *Phalgun*, *Chaitra* and *Baisakh* (between mid-February to mid-May). We have to depend upon various other livelihoods during the rest of the year, e.g. pulling rickshaws, operating push carts, masonry, carpentry etc. Many of us migrate to faraway places like Jaipur, Chambal, Dibrugarh, Guwahati, Kolkata and Allahabad during months of summer to work in factories and construction sites.

These days, the local *meenmahal* is settled for Rs. 1,50,000/- and the process of settlement takes place in Dispur, the state capital. The middlemen sponsor the office bearers of dummy Societies to participate in the bidding, and do the necessary running around on their behalf. This creates room for corruption and the middlemen manage to influence the allotment process by paying bribes.

THE WAY FORWARD

We must find ways to reclaim our livelihood, and need to create pressure on the government authorities to restore the rights of the fishermen over the water bodies. The following measures can help to this effect:

THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED SAW A SEA CHANGE IN THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT SURROUNDING THE FISHERIES. DEBARRING OF SOCIETIES LIKE HBSSS FROM BIDDING FOR LEASE RIGHTS MADE WAY FOR NEW PLAYERS TO ENTER THE FRAY. WITHIN NO TIME, SEVERAL NEW SOCIETIES SPRANG UP, MOSTLY BACKED BY RICH AND POWERFUL PEOPLE. THE GOING RATES FOR BIDDING SHOT UP SHARPLY, AND HUGE AMOUNTS OF MONEY STARTED CHANGING HANDS ILLEGALLY

1. Tenders should be awarded only to locally based fishermen's societies, going by the 1975-76 report of Deputy Secretary (Department of Fisheries). The societies formed after 1982 should be debarred. This would ensure that only societies of genuine fishermen get to claim the lease, and prevent numerous fake societies from entering the fray.
2. Government authorities should not deal/communicate with anybody other than the office bearers of the registered societies to prevent the influence of middlemen. Representatives of fishermen's unions should be involved in all crucial processes.
3. Government can fix a reasonable amount of annual revenue, which the fishermen would be willing to pay through proper means, out of the proceeds of their business. This will also improve the financial health of the government.
4. Removal of the 'defaulter' criterion to pave the way for societies like HBSSS to bid for the rights over fisheries. Alternatively, a soft loan equivalent to the amount of losses incurred by the fishermen could be made available, which could be used to make up for the outstanding losses and to be thus eligible for bidding. On being awarded the fishing rights, the outstanding dues could be paid back within six months from the onset of a fishing season.
5. Abolishment of the leasing system, making it free for all fishermen to fish in the river.

With inputs received with thanks from Sushil Das, Sandeep Das, Ratan Das, Nagen Das, Jamini Das, Savitri Das, Jamila Bewa, Rupbhanu Bewa, Suruti Bewa, Gulab Choudhry, Amar Choudhry, Satya Narayan Choudhry, Gourang Choudhry and many others.

NIPPED IN THE BUD⁶

HEMA & ARCHANA⁷

Every year, thousands of minor girls from poor families are trafficked across the frontiers of various South Asian countries. The issue has intensified manifold over the last few years on account of severe decline in the economic wellbeing of many poor communities of the region on account of glaring macro-economic imbalances, unprecedented natural disasters and large-scale agrarian crises. In this article, two young girls - Hema and Archana (names changed) - express their plight relating to their journeys within the dark alleys of the trafficking world.

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y name is Hema and I am twenty-two years old. I am a native of Karnataka. Four years ago I was rescued from a brothel in Mumbai and later brought to the Odanadi home for rescued girls in Mysore. My story unfolds like this: Circumstances had snatched away my parents at a young age and I was left with no financial security

and only two young brothers to call my own. Our aunt, who was the only guardian willing to take us in, took advantage of the situation and sold me off to a brothel owner in Mumbai. The price quoted for me was 1 lakh Rupees. This is how I began life in Mumbai, sold off by someone I trusted, to be commodified by an alien city. I slaved for four long years of my youth in the abusive environment repeatedly pleading my customers, which included policemen, to help me flee from the brothel. I cried, pleaded, resisted but no one heard my agonies. One day I happened to interact with a good man who rescued me and several others, with his team. Prior to that, the *Gharwali* hid all minor girls in a cramped room when she got some indication of a raid. It was chaotic. Soon, we were located by the rescue team and taken immediately for medical examination and then to the police station for statement, escorted by a lady police constable. I was traumatized with the police behaviour as they used abusive language while talking to me and treated me as a criminal and not as a vic-

⁶ The narratives were facilitated by Kirti Mishra of Development Support Team with Aparna Singh of Prayas

⁷ Names of the authors have been changed to keep their identity confidential.



tim. I was however relieved to break away from the bad environment of the brothel. In the chaos during the rescue, I could not collect my belongings, which I eventually did over a period of four years.

I chose not to go back to my brothers, as my branded status would have made life difficult for them. It has been four years since I was brought to Odanadi. I have picked up the strands of my life again, here, with support from Stanley - Parashu, the Directors of *Odanadi*. As a member of *Manavi Seva Sangha*, the rescued women's collective formed by *Odanadi Seva Samsthe*, I have developed skills in zari work and paper bag making. This is a meaningful engagement and has given me an opportunity to make a living with dignity. Remembering the past is painful. At times, I get depressed due to my critical health condition; men, who frequented the brothel where I was prostituted, had infected me with HIV. This I came to know only through the medical report at the time of my rescue. But I try to find my ray of hope in the younger ones at Odanadi as well as in my friends here.

I pray that there are more Stanly and Parashu in this world for helping people. I believe that police have a major role to play in rescuing children and women from exploitative situations. They should be sensitized to the issue of rescue and must treat victims with respect. I am at a critical stage of my health so there is nothing more to

lose. I want to help society to handle the problem of trafficking and prostitution.

I am called Archana. I am 18 years old and hail from a village near Bangalore. I have father and a sister in the family, my mother passed away when I was very young. I did not have cordial relation with my father. He pressurized me several times to marry my maternal uncle, as this is a custom in South India. I was young, around 13-14 years old and did not want to marry so left home one day impulsively, and went to Bangalore to see my other uncle. At the Bangalore bus stand I felt lost. Then I met a couple who were to change my life forever and paved way for my doom.

The couple convinced me that they would help me find employment in a garment factory in Mumbai. I was lured by the offer because my family's financial status was fragile and I wanted to be employed. The three of us then boarded a Mumbai bound bus and set on a tiring journey. On the way, the lady took away my anklets and other pieces of jewelry saying that it would be safe with her. On reaching Mumbai, I was taken to an ugly looking building. It turned out to be a brothel and not a garment factory. The couple sold me off quietly to the *Gharwali* (Brothel owner) for Rs 30,000 and they left me saying they are going to make a phone call and would come back soon. I never saw them again.

I did not like the environment there. A day later the *Gharwali* told me to be in company of other girls and learn from them what to do. I wanted to go back home. I refused customers, was beaten up at times and tortured in all possible ways. One day the *Gharwali* gave me soft drink laced with some medicine. When I woke up, I found no clothes over my body. I suffered pain and continued resisting entertaining men. Then *Gharwali* told me that if I repaid my buying price, I would be set free. But to earn that much I had to work at the brothel. I therefore complied and waited to be released one day. I worked for almost one year. During this time the *Gharwali* ensured that my clients were non-Kannada speaking with whom I could not communicate my agonies. During this period of my ordeal, another disaster struck me. I was infected with HIV.

One day I pleaded a customer and he informed the police about the prostitution of minor girls in the brothel. There were raids earlier where the *Gharwali* greased the palms of the police and was not touched. This time however, police was proactive. I was thus rescued and taken to a hospital for age verification. The age verification test was not conducted properly and the accused gave money to the concerned medical person for changing the minor's age into a major. The attitude of the police was insensitive and dis-

respectful, however, with the intervention of an NGO, I got Rs 10,000.

I stayed in a Government Special Home at Mumbai for seven months. Then a Raichur based NGO called *Saathi* visited my house along with me, as per the directions of Child Welfare Committee for repatriation. It turned out to be unsuccessful, as my father did not want me anymore. Then, I was transferred to Odanadi home in Mysore. Since then, I am living here along with many girls like me. I have undergone beautician's training as well as the training in paper bag making. These activities have kept me engaged and taken my mind off my pain and humiliation. I intend to work at the beauty parlor run by the women's collective here. I generally try to keep myself happy but feel depressed to think about the way life has shaped up for me.

I feel a tremendous anger within me for people who violate the rights of others, particularly children, and manage to go scot-free. The traffickers, brothel keepers and others in the nexus should be given strong punishment for their sins. By sharing my life-story I want to spread this message in society that no one should be lured by false promises. I want my story to become an advocacy tool to wage a war against human trafficking.





WE NEED LASTING REMEDY, NOT RELIEF

BRAJBALA RAM

Every year, hundreds of villages of north Bihar get submerged under riotous floodwaters of the Kosi River for months together. Life comes to a complete grinding halt for thousands of poor families of the area, who are rendered homeless, vulnerable to the vagaries of nature and completely dependent upon humanitarian aid and supplies of various relief distributing agencies. In this article, 52-years old Brajbala Ram - a resident of Jamalpur village and a gritty survivor - recounts her ordeals and frustrations of a vagarious life. She runs a school for small children and has been actively rallying for improving the concentration of public amenities in her far-flung village.



Every year our village gets truncated for several months due to waterlogging, which reduces hundreds of its poor residents to frantic relief-seekers. Relief is definitely not the answer to our woes; we must secure lasting remedy for our wellbeing. Unfortunately, the desolate people of this land cannot think beyond clamouring for relief. We are compelled to live the most wretched phase of our life for months together, on the congested mounds of the embankments at the mercy of God. I dread the day when our community would sink into oblivion, for all times to come! I just cannot bear the thought!

I have been teaching about eighty students of this village for the last six years. Not for money - their poor parents cannot even pay a pittance for any service - but in view of the absolutely wretched conditions of the children of this village. I feel it's my duty to help people in distress. These children - denied of nutrition, food and care - deserve much better. Their plight can be imagined from the fact that even for drinking a sip of water, they have to walk over a kilometer and miss classes. I tried my best to get a drinking water point sanctioned for the school, but some people in the *Zilla Panchayat* got it delivered in another village. This school was started with support from Shri Biharidas, a follower of Kabir, who donated two bighas of land in 1975-76. The building was constructed with support from various sources, including some money received under the MP Local Area Development Scheme. We had hoped that the school would be taken over by the government in due course of time, but it never happened. Gradually, all the teachers left the school one after the other, and the last

of them quit in 2001. That's when I started teaching the students. The school building collapsed a few years back. Since then I have been running the school under a plastic sheet. This year, several people have encroached upon the land around the school. They have sown seeds of paddy, and I need to find a new place. They have been after us to get the school relocated somewhere else, and I am accused of eyeing the land. It breaks my heart! The village also has a teaching shop where children of a few families who can afford to pay a fee study. There is a strong need for a good high school in our area; the one that exists here isn't registered yet.

I had to go through a difficult phase in my life after my husband - Dr. Jagatpati - stopped living with me. Ours was an inter-caste love marriage, and I had to overcome a good deal of social pressure for marrying him, as he hails from the scheduled '*Chamar*' caste. My father and family never approved the marriage. My husband was employed in an additional primary health centre, and it was due mainly to the influence of his pro-

fession that I became sensitive to the health conditions of many women of this area. As a matter of fact, it was because of my wanton interest in the social issues of my area, that our marital life took a beating, leading to our separation. Even today, I find it very fulfilling to speak to the women of this village about issues relating to their health.

It seems the recurrent floods and the prolonged waterlogging would sink our village into oblivion one day and I shudder at the very thought of this scary prospect. People here are too engrossed in running after relief supplies and do not listen to me! However, my struggle would continue till I reach my grave. My father - Dr. Mahendra Pratap - was a noted freedom fighter from Samastipur, and I was born on the Independence Day. This is my country, and my endeavours for my people shall continue, despite my disability.



THE SEEDS RUINED MY LIFE AND PUSHED ME INTO DEBT-TRAP

RAMJI MUKHIYA⁸

Ramji Mukhiya, a sharecropper based in Gangapur village of Nauhatta block of Saharsa district of Bihar, is one of the thousands of farmers in the Kosi region who suffered from severe crop failure during the last *Rabi* season. In this article, he emphasizes upon the need for a comprehensive agricultural policy and greater regulatory role of the government towards safeguarding the livelihood interests of poor farmers. The brunt of the steep fall in the yield of wheat during the current year has been borne by a large number of landless labourers in Bihar, who are left with no option but to migrate out of the state.

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he harvesting phase of any agricultural season is normally the happiest time of the year for any farmer, and nothing represents the promising side of life than the sight of a plot full of standing crops. However, things have been completely different for many farmers of Bihar during the last few years. This year, for instance, most farmers who cultivated wheat in the Kosi region were taken for a ride, with a devastating

crop-failure blighting their fortunes for a long time to come!

During the onset of the *Rabbi* season last year, many landless labourers and marginal farmers of our region leased in land for cultivating wheat. They made all possible efforts to arrange the necessary inputs. For instance, I started sharecropping on 2 bighas of land leased in from a local landlord. My total investment was of the order of Rs. 7000/-, including a contribution of Rs. 2500/- received from the landlord. I had a saving of Rs. 1000/- from the previous year's earnings as a wage labourer, the whole of which I invested in the crop. The remaining part of my investment was arranged from different sources, including a borrowing of agriculture inputs worth Rs. 3000/- from a local seed dealer and a cash loan of Rs. 500/- from a local moneylender.

I had high expectations from this year's crops, similar to those of most other farmers of my village. Most people had struggled hard to arrange the necessary inputs, and a good crop was critical for revival of their fortunes. I was hoping for a yield that would leave for me an adequate share after offering the landlord his share of half of

the produce. I also needed to pay back the loans borrowed in cash and in kind.

Little did any of us have any premonition of the misfortune awaiting us. Days before gearing up for the harvest, we were shocked to see the grey-turned cobs of the standing wheat crops all around us, with extremely low levels of germination. In a large number of cases, there seemed no germination at all, and it took us no time to know that all our hopes had been quashed. My own yield was of the order of 3.6 quintals, about one-tenth of my harvest during the previous year.

This heart-breaking development had posed several uphill challenges for most of us; I, for instance, needed to pay back my borrowings from the seed dealer and the moneylender, share half of the paltry produce with the landlord; and most importantly, ensure the daily bread of my family during the lean months. It seemed like a Herculean errand. Eventually, I mortgaged 10 kathas of land for a loan of Rs. 5000/- to cope up with the situation. Though this helped me repay the loan of the seed dealer, I do not know how soon would I be able to get rid of this new loan burden on my head. At the end of the day, I lost all my savings, had to mortgage a fertile part of my limited land holding, and became indebted with no surety of being able to retrieve my mortgaged land!

We have never experienced such a severe failure of wheat crops in the past in our region. It is definitely due to the spurious quality of the seeds supplied to us, or else the damages wouldn't be so widespread. Though the seed dealer is attributing the damages to adverse climatic conditions, it definitely calls for a thorough inquiry. I am not surprised that these dealers avoid issuing proper receipts against the sales, which saves them from being held accountable. A similar failure of maize crops has ruined the lives of thousands of farmers of north Bihar in 2003, after which the government of Bihar had decided to ban Monsanto - the multinational company manufacturing the spurious seeds. This year, we have not only been denied the food security of our poor families for the months ahead, but many of us have lost all their savings. Besides, most of us have been pushed into severe debt trap, and shall have to pay mas-



sive interests over the loans borrowed from moneylenders to tide over the crisis. It is a criminal negligence of the lives of millions of farmers.

The issue has affected several other people of my village far more severely than me. For instance, Hatma Katun, a landless widow of our village, depends solely on the harvest of crops for a living, and gets a meager, but significant share of one bundle out of every eight or ten bundles of her harvest as her wages. This year, when there were no crops to be harvested due to poor germination, the livelihood of her family was severely threatened and she had to contend with only 25 kg of harvest, i.e. less than a sixth of her earnings of the previous year. Nabisha Khatun - wife of an ailing landless labourer of our village was less fortunate, having only 3 kg of harvest. She had to sell off her goats to tide over the lean months between *Ashwin* and *Magh*. Fellow farmers like Maheshwar and Mohammed Mehruddin have had to borrow loans carrying a rate of 7% interest per month to repay their outstanding debts.

The government must have an effective policy for dissemination of reliable information about alternative agricultural inputs, timely certification of seeds, and for payment of compensation against such unwarranted losses. The extension agencies of the government and the numerous agricultural research farms must get their act together and enhance their relevance in the lives of poor farmers like us. If the government is so keen on promoting hybrid varieties of seeds, it must make necessary arrangements for reducing the risks of poor farmers.

⁸ Narration facilitated by Manish of Sajhia Samang and Jay Kumar Verma of Praxis



LIFE ON THE CROSSROADS

VIMALBAI BAPU PAGAR⁹

Vimalbai - one of the hundreds of poor migrants living under the sky near a *Naka* (check-point) in Nasik city of Maharashtra - has seen many shades of life. Maimed by leprosy in advanced stages of deformity, Vimalbai experienced humanity in the compassion of her fellow street-dwellers, despite being abandoned by her own family members. In this narrative, Vimalbai delineates the glaring deprivations of life on the street, and mentions how a ration card - secured with the help of DISHA Foundation, a local organization - created new hopes in the lives of disadvantaged people like her.

I am Vimalbai Bapu Pagar, aged around 45 years. I wonder why people often ask me my age, when it doesn't tell anything about my destiny! Today, I am living through an advanced stage of Leprosy, a disease that has left me completely burnt and maimed. It's not contagious any longer - only putrescent, which will claim my limbs one after the other. It has already claimed my fingers, and the companionship of my near and dear ones along the way!. I was born at a place called Kalwan in Nasik district. I was the only daughter of my parents, and therefore I received a good deal of attention during my childhood from my relatives. I studied till the 4th standard, and then my parents discontinued my education on the ground that I had acquired enough education for a girl. I wanted to go to high school, but couldn't dare ask my parents. I started taking care of various household chores, and my parents arranged my marriage at the age of thirteen to a boy from Satana, who hailed from a good family. That was 1973; a calamitous year when Maharashtra faced a severe drought, and a large number of people became dependent on the Employment Guarantee Scheme of the government. Any poor person could work as a wage labourer on employment projects of the government, and get red *jawar* (sorghum) and *sukadi* (wheat mixed with sugar powder) as wages. I had been newly married into my in-laws' household, which was fairly well to do and wasn't greatly affected by the drought. In fact, those days were like spring to me and I was very extremely happy with my husband and in-laws. The two following years were the best period of my life.

Unfortunately, someone's evil eyes spoiled my happy days at the age of sixteen. I fell severely sick and my hands became infested with white spots. My in-laws and my

husband spent a lot of money on my treatment, but to no avail. They also took me to local quacks and various temples, which didn't work either. Finally, I was diagnosed with *Maharog* (leprosy). I was all of sixteen years at that time, and as some people rightly say, nothing is more perfidious than the sixteenth year of one's life! I became very angry on my God, and even today I wonder why did he give me such an incurable disease! It must be due to any of my misdeeds during my last birth, which I have to atone for now.

This *Maharog* (leprosy) is an absolutely awful disease - it distances people from one another. Nobody minds mingling with patients of TB or cancer; but this *Maharog* is utterly unacceptable! This is because people love their body; nobody wants to become susceptible to this *Maharog* by being in the company of a *Maharogi*. As soon as my disease was confirmed, our neighbours stopped coming to our house. Even my in-laws and my husband started keeping a distance from me, and soon turned me out of their house. I had to leave without any of my belongings, and I came to Nasik carrying nothing but my disease!

When I reached Nasik, I did not know where to go. Got down at the railway station and sat there for two hours. A beggar woman came to me, and asked me my whereabouts. I told her that I was alone, didn't know where to go, and that I had the *Maharog*. She gave me the address of the civil hospital. When I reached the hospital, doctors asked me about my husband. I couldn't speak a word. I suppose they understood my predicament, and admitted me.

Somehow, I didn't like environment of the hospital and decided to leave. I saw some people staying in makeshift huts opposite its campus. It was a ray of hope for me and I decided to start living there. However, I had to face the hatred of people there as well, and most of them would stay away from me because of my deformities. Gradually, I started getting used to their avoidance. As a matter of fact, I stayed there for nearly 15 years and many people became very close to me over time. I became their '*akka*' (elder sister). Today, I am the *akka* for all the inhabitants of the Civil *Naka* area. This is my home, my everything! There are about 200 people who live here and work as either rag pickers or masons. None of us have our own homes, but we live a happy life. Several children of this *Naka* have even got married while living here. Not that we don't ever have any quarrels, but those are only passing instances.

Our Civil *Naka* is a very important place in Nasik. It is located very close to the Trymbakeshwar road front and the Central Bus Stand, while the Civil Hospital is right in front of us. The prestigious Golf Club ground is located on the other side, where all the mega programmes of the city take place, e.g. circuses, public meetings, morchas etc. We like circuses a lot; many of us get work in them, and the lighting arrangements look very in the night. Many fat men and women come to the jog in the Golf Club ground in the morning to lose weight.

However, it pinches me to see the plight of the migrants living at the *Naka*. None of us have a house, a voter identity card or a ration card. We are not allowed to use basic civic amenities; our children don't go to schools; there is no water tap for us. Our children work as rag pickers or waiters. Although we live in the same area where Nasik Corporation parks its mobile toilet vans, we are not allowed to use them. While we can take bath near the toilets, we are required to pay the Corporation Rs. 5 per day. Therefore, we prefer to cross the road and fetch water for drinking and bathing from the '*Kusumagraj Pratisthan*' - a memorial named after one of Maharashtra's famous writers. The watchman of the memorial is a kind person, and allows us to collect water. At times I marvel at the number of cars and scooters while crossing the road; I wonder where do so many of them come from! The amount of petrol people use for their cars must be much more than the water we use. My heart bleeds when the earthen pitchers we carry water in break while crossing the busy roads!

Our houses are directly under the blue sky. In my house, I have two big boxes for storing food-grains and flour; one stove; one grindstone for pounding spices for curry; some clothes and a kerosene lamp. All women of this *Naka* use my grindstone. It becomes particularly difficult for us during anti-encroachment drives conducted by the police. When they come - they seize all our belongings and order us to leave the place. We do, and always come back to this place a few days later after their drives come to an end. Sometimes, we manage to get prior information about such drives, and are able to pack things up before they come. Dealing with such drives is a humiliating experience. They go on abusing us endlessly, and beat up the boys. By now we have learnt to live with it.

Last year I dared to go and speak to the local

⁹ Narration facilitated by Anjali Borhade of DISHA Foundation



of adopting a child, but my income is too meager for that. When I can't handle my own anxieties, what future can I offer the child? So, I dropped the idea. There is a boy living on this Naka itself who calls me 'aayee' (mother). He takes good care of me and is like my son. I too care a lot for him.

I am worried for my old age. I wish I could get the old age pension from the government. Recently I received a ration card with support of Disha Foundation. Disha made me feel like an important person! When I got my own ration card with my photo on it, I was swept off my feet! All of us who received the cards started get-

authority of our Corporation. I discussed the idea with our *Naka* people first and took six or seven people with me. We requested the lady in charge to allow us to put plastic or tin sheets on our houses during rainy season. For this we had to visit her office 6-7 times, but she didn't meet us. When she finally did, she scolded us for assembling outside her office in large numbers, and made a sneering remark that nobody had died in her house! All of us felt very bad! We apologized to her and requested her again for allowing us to put covers over our temporary hutments. She finally agreed and gave us the permission to put the covers over our makeshift houses, but not before strictly reminding us to remove them after the rains. She warned to get us thrown out of the place if we didn't. This made us very happy; for the first time we had an official permission to put covers on our houses. We went to the market, purchased plastic sheets, and helped each other to cover our makeshift houses. It was a great feeling to be saved from the rains!

Since then, life has been going up and down. I have been working as a rag picker. I leave my house early in the morning at around 5 am, collect scraps, sort and sell them in the market, and earn between 30 to 40 rupees everyday. Sometimes I also work as a labourer in construction-sites. I had a wish to have a baby, but destiny played a wicked game with me. Sometimes I think

ting 30 kg grains every month at a minimal cost! It is a big help for all of us. Two families among us couldn't get the cards, so I share my quota of grains with them. I don't require the whole of 30 kg in a month. The District Collector of Nasik distributed the ration cards to us. It was one of the happiest day of my life when the Collector visited our Naka and spoke to us. No important person ever visited us during the last 15 years, but the Collector himself came and spoke to us, to me!

Recently, when authorities came to our Naka during an anti-encroachment drive, I showed them my ration card and told them that the Collector has himself given it to us. On seeing the card, they allowed us to stay in our corner of the Naka. This card has given us our identity and has increased our confidence. With the help of this card we have also got ourselves insured under LIC's schemes. We feel much more secure now. Nonetheless, I hope to get pension for my old age. I also wish to devote my time and my life to some social organization like Disha Foundation. I really want to do something for my Civil *Naka*. This *Naka* has given me shelter and people to call my own; it has taught me to live life. I am so attached to all the people of this Naka that I cannot think of living without them.

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HUNDRED DAYS OF PROTEST AGAINST COCA-COLA

NANDLAL MASTER

An uproar that rocked the nation a few years back after disclosure of hazardous substances in bottles of aerated cold drinks manufactured by companies like Coca-cola and Pepsi snowballed into a nationwide public outcry, with various community-based organizations taking up cudgels against the irresponsible companies. In this article - Shri Nandlal Master, an activist associated with protests in Mehndiganj (Uttar Pradesh) in Uttar Pradesh where Coca-cola operates a bottling plant, articulates the need to hold the company accountability for the detrimental impact of its plant on the lives of local people.

For the past four years, organizations like *Lok Samiti* have been backing a community-led struggle against the Coca-cola bottling plant in Mehndiganj with solidarity and support from the National Alliance of Peoples movements and various other groups, in order that the government cancels the license of the Coca-Cola plant; ensures adequate compensation for the farmers whose land has been affected by the effluents discharged by the plant; stops Coca-Cola from exploiting lakhs of liters of groundwater in Mehndiganj; makes the company return the encroached land that belongs to the panchayat of Mehndiganj and pay stamp duty; and ensures withdrawal of the false charges filed by Coca-Cola against community-based activists and the workers who tried to unionize.

To put forth these demands, we have held demonstrations before the Coca-Cola bottling plant, the Pollution Control Board, the District Collectorate and the Legislative Assembly. We have met with representatives from the district administration as well as the central government and have explained the impact of the plant on the community, but no action has been taken so far, except issuance of a directive by the government to the Pollution Control Board to set up an investigation committee. As a matter of fact, the investigation has been completed and the government has acknowledged that the plant is exploiting a vast amount of ground water damaging the lands of the farmers in the region and that the sludge and effluents released by the company on the farmers' fields contain hazardous elements such as lead, cadmium and chromium. The Central Pollution Control Board has given a notice to the State Pollution Control Board to initiate action against the company with regard to the outcomes of the investigation. The High Court, in response to a case filed against Coca-Cola, has ordered the company to return to the Mehndiganj community the



land encroached by it, and also pay stamp duty amounting to Rs 3,01,50,000.

However, no penal action has yet been administered against the company. Instead, police personnel and security guards of the company lathi-charged and jailed the activists and local people who had gathered outside the company to lodge their protest. To intensify our protest, we initiated an indefinite protest since March 23, 2006 in front of the Coca-Cola bottling plant.

THE PROTEST

The protest started on the day of Bhagat Singh's death anniversary. 400 women and men from the Mehndiganj community, besides noted activists like Dr. Sandeep Pandey, Father Anand and Aflatoon, gathered outside the Coca-cola bottling plant for a public hearing and put forth the demands. In response, representatives of Coca-cola offered to talk to one of us, but we turned it down and demanded that they meet with the public at the protest site. Finally, three of their representatives, namely Mr. Kalyan Ranjan (in charge of public affairs), Mr. Sharat Kumar (General Manager) and Mr. Sheetala Singh (Plant Manager) addressed the people on Coca-Cola's behalf.

Mr.Kalyan Ranjan contended that the water table in the community has not dropped but has actually risen, since Coca-Cola established the plant in the area! On hearing this, the women and men from the local community started booing the speaker, and responded by narrating how their hand-pumps, wells and bore-wells have been going dry. Mr. Kalyan Ranjan also mentioned that the plant recharges 70 lakh liters of groundwater in a year using rainwater harvesting structures, while the amount of water extracted by them amounts to 2.5 lakh liters per day. He also contended that Coca-Cola has not released any effluents outside the plant and has not caused any pollution in the village. In response, the community - especially those who have been affected by pollution - explained to the gathering how their crops died due to damages caused to their land by pollution created by the plant. They also showed the report of the Central Pollution Control Board to the representatives of Coca-cola, who left the site without answering any of our questions.

During the days that followed, activists from *Preran Kala Manch* from Varanasi performed plays and sang songs highlighting the issue and com-

mending the movement. The local communities took turns in protesting outside the plant through an arrangement whereby every village of the area would send between forty to sixty people on successive days one after the other. Women sat at the protest site in the mornings while men sat in the night, so that they could all attend to their household duties with minimal effect.

On the 30th of April, sixty youths from thirty villages of Arajiline block took out a cycle rally starting from the protest site to the Rajatalab market. Earlier, a reflection meeting was held on Dr. Ambedkar's birthday on April 17 involving over 300 people, in which noted speakers, including Mr. Dharapuri, Mr. Deepak Malik, Mr. Ram Awadh Rai and Mr. Arvind Murthy expressed their solidarity with the movement. Twenty-five of us also sat on a fast on the 8th of April in solidarity with Medha Patkar's fast unto death at Delhi in protest against continuation of construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam pending rehabilitation of people displaced from the Narmada valley. In the name of progress, the government is taking precious resources like water away from the people and displacing them on the advice of international institutions and multinational companies. Whether it's Narmada or Mehndiganj, the issue is one and the same. A protest meet was also organized by *Sajha Sanskruti Manch* at Varanasi - the district headquarters, in solidarity with Medha Patkar's ongoing fast in Delhi.

On the 28th of May, a meeting involving over 500 people was organized to discuss issues relating to conflicts over water and exploitation by agencies like Coca-cola and Pepsi in India. Magsasay Award winner Mr. Rajendra Singh of Tarun Bharat Sangh presided over the event, and refuted Coca-cola's claims of working with him on water conservation in Rajasthan. Earlier, university professors, lawyers, journalists and local civil society groups staged a protest in Varanasi demanding that the government should withdraw the license issued to Coca-Cola plant.

On the 11th of May, our movement completed three years of struggle against the Coca-Cola plant. This was also the 50th consecutive day of protest in front of the plant, and we organized a public meeting, which was attended by Sandeep Pandey and many other activists. To counter the growing resentment against the plant, Coca-Cola hired some people from a nearby village, paid each of them Rs. 200/- and made them take out a rally against our movement wearing black ribbon

around their mouth and carrying computer-printed placards. As a leader of Lok Samiti, I tried to talk to them, and after initial hesitation, they told us about the money paid to them and that they did not know why were they here! When asked about the status of water in their village, they acknowledged that they had water scarcity in their village too, but had been instructed not to admit it. After listening to the issues and demands raised by the movement, they threw away their placards and apologized to the public. At the end of the meeting, a rally was taken out between Asi Ghat and the Banaras Hindu University, led by people like Sandeep Pandey, Swathi, Kunwar Agarwal and Nithi Bhai. During the following days, Lok Samiti's Kala Manch (a forum of artists) regularly performed street plays in the nearby villages highlighting the adverse impact of Coca-Cola plant in Mehndiganj. Similar plays were performed by organizations like *Preran Kala Manch* and *Sajha Sanskruti Manch* from Varanasi in other villages. Fifty Volunteers from Mehndiganj took out a vehicle procession from the protest site to the district headquarters on June 5, the World Environment Day. The ACM of the district assured them of action against the company soon.

In response, the company resorted to false propaganda to stop the protests and to weaken the movement. It released pamphlets accusing me - the local leader of the campaign - of having received and misappropriated funds from foreign sources. It also started publicizing its water harvesting structures and nurseries to divert people's attention from its unethical practices. But people continued to support the protests, and not even one person left the movement.

Not so long back all the panchayat presidents and members of the area were on the side of the Coca-Cola company for their own vested interests. During the last panchayat elections, all the candidates known to be on the company's side were defeated, and new representatives were elected. Today, none of the elected representatives are on Coca-cola's side for fear of losing their goodwill in the community. Unfortunately, while the panchayat representatives are learning from their mistakes, honorable minister Mr. Surendra Singh Patel and Member of Parliament Mr. Rajesh Misra are today taking the side of the company publicly. The latter had earlier supported the struggle against Coca-Cola, has turned completely around. Soon they will have to face questions from common citizens and clarify whether they

have been elected to serve the interests of people or those of the Coca-Cola. Our protests have received enthusiastic support from the regional and international media, and there has been good support from the local media as well.

Unfortunately, even after three months of protests, no strong action has been initiated against Coca-Cola. We have met with authorities of district administration several times, but to no avail! The official response seems to indicate reluctance to initiate action against a big company. We finally decided to sit on a relay fast starting from the 23rd of June, in which fifty people sat on a fast on the first day. Shri Banwari Lal Sharma of Save the Freedom movement initiated the event by tying a white ribbon on the hands of the fasting activists. From June 27, my fellow campaigner Mukesh Kumar, the panchayat president of Nagepur village and myself initiated an indefinite hunger strike. Several activist leaders such as Medha Patkar, Sandeep Pandey, Amarnath Bhai, Uma Shankari, Mukta Srivastav, Arundathi Dhuru and Gopalakrishnan visited the protest site. On July 1, a public meeting was held at the protest site, in which thousands of women and men gathered together and requested the movement leaders to end their hunger strike. They also demanded action against the company. Earlier on the morning of the same day, the activists and about a hundred local women and men came together at Mehndiganj to construct a pond by contributing their labour. Noted activist leaders like Medha Patkar, Sandeep Pandey and Amarnath Bhai, besides the President of Mehndiganj panchayat Ms. Poolkumari, also attended the event.

With the promise to intensify the struggle and to take it to the state capital, we ended our hunger strike. Ms. Medha Patkar and Taradevi, a community representative, offered us juice to end the strike. The movement gave an ultimatum to the government to initiate action the company within the next two months, failing which we shall organize a people's march to pressurize the state government and the pollution control boards to act against the company. The protest ended with the slogan '*Ladenge, Jeetenge*' (We will fight! We shall win!)

The movement deeply appreciates the support it has received from all the quarters.



OUR STRUGGLE SHALL CONTINUE

DUDHESHWAR MANJHI¹⁰

50 years old Dudheshwar Manjhi of '*Ekta Parishad*' has been actively involved in a campaign for land rights in Bihar for many years. Hailing from the socially disadvantaged 'Musahar' community, Dudheshwar, like many of his fellow community members, is landless himself and has played a key role behind emergence of '*Bhoo Adhikar Sangharsh Morcha* (Front for Struggle for Land Rights)'. In this article, he emphasizes upon the urgency of land reforms in Bihar as a non-negotiable imperative for empowerment of dalits.



NOW, THE REAL CHALLENGE FOR US WAS TO ACQUIRE ACTUAL POSSESSION OF THE LAND HOLDINGS. SOME OF THE BIG LANDLORDS GOT ORGANIZED AS WELL, TO THWART OUR EFFORTS TO SECURE CONTROL OVER LAND CONTROLLED BY THEM. DURING THE COURSE OF THE EVENTS THAT FOLLOWED, SIX OF US, BACKED BY THE CONFIDENCE OF BEING THE LEGAL OWNERS OF THE LAND, LEAP FORWARD

Bihar was one of the first states in India to initiate legislative efforts towards land reforms several decades back. Yet, despite passage of nearly sixty years since independence, a large number of families hailing from socially disadvantaged castes have no land in their name. In our Lalganj Sehada village itself, most of the Musahar families, including my own, are deprived even of homestead land, and have been living a nomadic life for several decades. The order of the Supreme Court entitling every landless household 4 decimals of land hasn't taken effect in Bihar and we shall continue our struggle till it is actualized.

Our efforts towards claiming our legitimate share of land resources started during the late nineties, after 32 Musahar families of our panchayat failed to acquire possession over a stretch of gair majoorwa land flanking the Sone canal, which had been formally allotted in our names by the government in 1997-98. This stretch of land had been under the control of big landlords of the area for many years, who resisted every attempt of Musahar households to settle in the area. Earlier, we had lived on the sides of the canal for several years without any authorization, before being driven out by the officials of the Sone Command Area Development Authority.

On failing to establish control over the holdings allotted in our names despite persistent efforts made over two years, we decided to step up pressure on relevant government authorities to ensure the actual transfer of the land in the name of the allottees. Few of us met with the state unit functionaries of '*Ekta Parishad*', who convened a meeting to chalk out strategies to this effect. One of the decisions taken in the meeting was to bring together all the landless Musahar households of the area in the form

of a formal collective. During the following months, many of us worked hard to bring the landless people of our panchayat together. Our efforts bore fruits and we could mobilize as many as 25 people to come together to demand their land rights. We thought of various names for the forum, e.g. '*Mahila Ekta Manch* (Women's Unity Forum), '*Samata Manch* (Equity Forum) etc., but finally settled on '*Musahar Vikas Manch*' (Musahar Development Forum). In the course of time, some more landless people hailing from various socially and economically disadvantaged castes joined the forum along the way, and the name of the forum was changed to '*Bhoo Adhikar Sangharsh Morcha*' (Front for waging struggle for land rights) - to make it representative of other socially disadvantaged castes like Chamars, Pasis, Paswans and Koiris as well.

Under the banner of '*Bhoo Adhikar Sangharsh Morcha*', we conducted a survey of all gair majoorwa land in our panchayat, and rallied before the Circle Officer demanding provision of land deeds to all the 36 households of our village who have been sanctioned land in the year 1997-98. This worked, and the CO visited our panchayat, arranged a camp in a local school and distributed deeds of 1.5 bighas of land to six landless families. This happened in 2004. Now, the real

challenge for us was to acquire actual possession of the land holdings. Some of the big landlords got organized as well, to thwart our efforts to secure control over land controlled by them. During the course of the events that followed, six of us, backed by the confidence of being the legal owners of the land, stormed into the fields and forcibly harvested a part of the standing crops. This was a huge leap forward, and sensing the mood of the big crowd backing them under the banner of '*Bhoo Adhikar Sangharsh Morcha*', the big farmers relegated to the back seat and allowed the six landless people to secure possession over the land.

For us, the battle had only started. We needed to continue our fight to restore the land rights of many more families, and couldn't be content with the success achieved for only six families. We staged several rounds of demonstration outside the offices of the Block Development Officer, the Circle Officer and the Subdivisional Officer. Subsequently, 4 more landless households were each granted deeds for 1.5 *bighas* of land in the year 2005. Our campaign shall continue, till each and every landless family of our panchayat manages to own a piece of land to call its own.

¹⁰ Narration facilitated by Jay Kumar Verma of Praxis



IN PURSUIT OF A SOCIALIST WORLD ORDER

SHRI HARE RAM AND SHRI PRADEEP MEHTA^{II}

Shri Hare Ram and Shri Pradeep Mehta have been involved in various local level development initiatives in Patna, and are active protagonists of the campaign for decentralized urban governance. While Shri Pradeep Mehta is the elected counselor from Ward No. 40, Shri Hare Ram has been an active socialist leader since his youth, and was instrumental in the turn-around of Cooperative Consumer Federation as its Director. In this article, they articulate their visions of decentralized municipal governance, and express their conviction in the possibility of turning around the Patna Municipal Corporation within two months, if elected representatives are vested with greater decision-making powers in the governance of the Corporation.



The days of true socialist leaders like Shri Ram Manohar Lohia and Shri Karpoori Thakur seem to have gone forever. These days, only self-serving financial interests seem to drive the political leaders of our times. We can never forget the simplicity and resolve of leaders like Karpoori Thakur in championing the causes of the poor. In those days, political workers used to command true respect of the masses, on account of their compassion and determination to make a difference in the lives of the people. Nowadays, even a police constable doesn't need to heed to an elected representative of the people!

When we started our political journey during our days of youth, little did we know that we would ever face such an acute crisis relating to camaraderie and respectability of political leaders. When some of us were jailed for showing black flag to Indira Gandhi for pronouncing the emergency, we were lionized everywhere we

went. Those were days when an ordinary party worker would do anything for a cause and for the leaders. The kindness of leaders like Ram Bahadur is still etched fresh in our minds, who would arrange warm blankets for even an ordinary political worker in jail. In those days, some of us had helped George Fernandes escape a raid of the police after being implicated in the Baroda Dynamite Case. Karpoori Thakur used to speak of the importance of whole-hearted participation in politics with an interesting metaphor - *saanp ko chhedo to chhedo nahin, aur chhedo to chhedo nahin* (don't tease a snake if you let it away, and don't let it away if you tease it)!

We had to struggle a good deal during our days of youth to reach where we stand today. I (Hare Ram) graduated from selling newspaper to selling tea in my endeavours to stand on my feet. Inspired by Lenin's Bolshevik revolution of the early part of the 20th century, which started with only five people, we established the *Janata Seva Samiti* in the late eighties, which was a motivated group of ten young people of our neighbourhood taking up constructive work of various kinds, e.g. cleaning the streets of the neighbourhood by self-help. This group remained active for several years before some of our political rivals planted feuds between some of its key youngsters. However, the local people of the area recognized our good intentions, and Pradeep went on to win the election to Ward no. 40 subsequently. I too contested from Ward no. 17, but lost the race to a contender from Communist Party of India by less than a hundred votes. In those days, electoral malpractices were a common practice, and my competitor had the backing of a large battery of young people who went on the rampage to rig the elections. Subsequently, I also narrowly lost an election to a seat in the local *Zilla Parishad* of Begusarai - my native place, but I got noticed during my electioneering and was subsequently invited to head the Consumer Cooperative Federation by the Rashtriya Janata Dal government. During my three years of leadership of the Federation, I managed to turn it around from a decaying unit to one with a net profit of Rs. 50 lakhs. One only needs a strong willpower to bring about any desired transformation, and my success was due mainly to an institutional linkage we manage to develop with the National Textile Corporation.

We feel very strongly that the Patna Municipal Corporation can also be similarly turned around in only two months. It was well evident in the

performance of the former Municipal Commissioner who managed to generate revenues to the tune of Rs. 49 crores before being transferred. Since his ouster, the Corporation has not been able to generate more than Rs. 28 crores. Today, residents of the city cannot get the mutation of their house properties conducted without paying bribes to the Corporation authorities. If processes like mutation can be made more citizen-friendly, it can yield substantial financial resources for the Corporation. It calls for a lion's heart to sound a bugle against widespread corruption in the Corporation. Shri Ashok Yadav - the former head of the District Water Board - had it in him to call a spade a spade. He could have been the Member of Parliament from Patna today, had his rivals not eliminated him last year for spilling the beans about a scam relating to purchase of pipelines.

In the light of the provisions of the 74th amendment to the Constitution of India, the elected representatives of urban local bodies need to be vested with more powers and autonomy. The role of Ward Counselors is extremely limited in the current scheme of things, and needs to be substantially strengthened. There has been no effort on the part of successive governments in Bihar to orient newly elected counselors to their powers and duties, and it is common for vital decision making processes to bypass the elected representatives. We haven't even had the necessary number of standing committee meetings involving the counselors since the last elections. The new Municipal Act of Bihar needs to incorporate provisions to ensure a meaningful role of elected representatives in all vital decision making processes. We hope the collective effort of '*Patna Nagar Swashasan Manch*' goes a long way in lobbying for this. We are trying to understand the provisions of the 74th amendment, and the specific arrangements favouring empowerment of ULBs in other states of India as the next step. We are living in an age of extreme contradictions. One wonders what do the millions of poor people of our country stand to get from the irresponsible trends favouring rampant privatization of essential services and common property resources! This is an age of opportunism, and concerned citizens need to come together and collectively resist the anti-poor agenda of right wing political parties.

^{II} Narration facilitated by Jay Kumar Verma of Praxis



WE SHALL NOT ALLOW OUR MEN TO DRINK EVER AGAIN

GIRIJA DEVI

Girija Devi, a firebrand woman living in Bhirikhiya-Chhipulia village of East Champaran district in Bihar, has been spearheading an active campaign against alcoholism and feudal excesses. Associated with the '*Musahar Vikas Manch*' (Musahar Development Forum), she has galvanized hundreds of Musahar women of the area to assert their rights and ban consumption and sale of alcohol in the villages of the area. Her persistent efforts have also led to substantial increases in the agricultural wage rates in the area. In this article, she acknowledges the encouragement received from a local NGO and restates her conviction to continue her fight against injustice.

My name is Girija Devi. I was born in a Musahar family of Makadi Tola in Sahebgunj block of Muzaffarpur district in Bihar. Forty five years ago my father Shri Nathuni Manjhi got me married to Sidheshwar Manjhi of Bhirikhiya-Chhipulia village that comes under Pipra Thana of East Champaran district. Since then I have been living in this village and have been earning my livelihood as a daily wager. Situated on the western bank of Budhi Gandak River, our village is prone to floods. However, a greater menace facing our community is the highhandedness of landlords and baboos (influential persons) of our area. Agricultural wage-rates have been too low in our area, and we have been forced to accept the same for ages causing economic hardships to many families of our community. The difficulties get further aggravated due to a high level of alcoholism prevalent amongst the men of our community. This has not only caused severe indebtedness to many households, but has also forced many children to forego education and to work as daily wage labourers. For many years, we had no option but to accept our misfortune as preordained by destiny!

About three years back, with the encouragement received from an agency based in Mehsi, namely *Samajik Shodh evam Vikas Kendra*, I tried to bring together people from our community to discuss some of these problems for the first time. That was the very first time we came together and realised our strength. The excitement visible amongst the women of our community boosted our morale, and for the first time a collective of our own - namely the *Musahar Vikas Manch* - came into being in April 2003. We now had a platform to start thinking about ourselves, our children and about the development of our society. We met together many times, and realized the

root cause of our backwardness i.e. excessive addiction to alcoholism, which was felt to be one of the key causes restricting children of the Musahar community from accessing education. Issues like domestic violence under the influence of alcohol also came up during our meetings and we realized the urgency to act against the menace to prevent erosion of our hard-earned savings. This was also seen as the main cause of indebtedness of many households and the root cause of poverty. One day we called for a meeting and decided that no one would be allowed to consume or sell alcohol. Further, we decided to impose a fine of Rs. 500/- on the defaulters and to make them walk across the village wearing a garland of slippers around their neck. Subsequently, we took out a procession across the village and appealed to the whole community not to drink any more. Incidentally, one Ramdev Manjhi came home in an inebriated condition on the same day, beat up his wife Sunarpati devi and made fun of all the women of our society. The women responded immediately by assembling together. Sunarpati lodged complaint against her husband in the police station, and Ramdev Manjhi was soon arrested. He was later released from police custody only after he apologized for his misconduct and promised to give up drinking.

During the following days, several people in the village were similarly rounded up. While Darshan Manjhi had to be put behind bars, Jamuna Manjhi was made to walk around the village with his head shaven off. We also shut down many wine shops in the village, took all the wine bottles in our custody and lodged complaint against the shop owners in the police station.

Our struggle did not stop here. We also started a fight against the unjustifiably low rates of daily wages prevalent in our area. We decided to fight against this and resolved to go on a strike. Many women of our community stopped going to the fields of local landlords and the number of striking women swelled within a short time. There was no alternative for the landlords and eventually they had to increase the wage rates from Rs. 15/- to Rs. 50/-. However, a few days later they avenged their defeat by setting 36 striking households of the community on fire. The



affected families had to spend several nights in an open field, and it was only after we went on a hunger strike in front of the offices of the Block Development Officer and the Circle Officer of our area that the government arranged relief materials and housing support for the 36 families.

We are now trying to reach out to many more women from our community living in nearby villages. While the campaign against alcoholism is gaining ground in other villages as well, a good number of men have begun realizing the advantages of relinquishing liquor. Not only are we able to save money for our families, many poor families are also able to initiate preventive measures against *Kala-azar*, which takes a heavy toll in our area every year. In addition, women of our community are able to practice cleanliness and to keep children well dressed. Many children of our community have started going to school.

Of late, our efforts have been recognised at various levels. The District Collector of Nagpur presented me an award at the behest of an organisation called Ghantanad, which adorned me with '*Jaahir Satkar*'. I was also felicitated by the Rahman Memorial Trust and honoured with the title of '*Champaran Ka Gaurav*' (the pride of Champaran). Recently, I was invited by a US based women's organisation to share my experiences, but unfortunately I could not undertake the visit due to delay in issue of necessary papers.

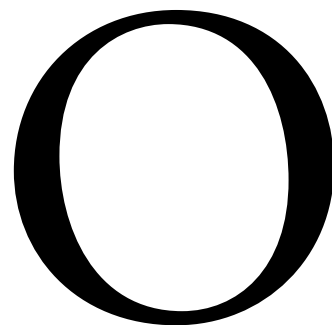
I shall continue my struggles. We have resolved not to fall back into the inglorious life we have lived for decades. We now have an agency of our own - the *Musahar Vikas Manch* - to address our woes and to extend our collective support to other needy people.



PERHAPS NOW THERE SHALL BE AN END TO THIS EVIL

KIRITHBAI¹²

Witch hunting - one of the most barbaric forms of violence against women - is prevalent on a large scale in Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Jharkhand. According to figures available with the 'Andhasbraddha Unmoolan Samiti' - a committee of citizens for eradication of superstition - 180 cases of branding of women as 'Tonhi' (witch) have been reported since 1995 in Chhattisgarh, and the victims were murdered in a number of these cases. Women branded as witches, often at the behest of devious quacks or local priests, are held responsible for all ill luck befalling any person in the village, and are subjected to physical and mental assault of the severest nature. In this article, Kirithbai, a woman based in Lachkera village of Raipur district in Chhattisgarh, narrates the inhuman treatment meted out to her by twenty men of her community, after she and two other women were identified to be witches, and hopes that the newly enacted legislation against witch-hunting in Chhattisgarh shall help in uprooting the evil.



n that fateful morning five years back, life took a new turn for three women of my village. None of us had even the slightest of inkling of the turn of events that were waiting to unfold out of the blue and change our lives forever! Till that ominous morning, my house was the hub of intense social activities and gatherings. We had good neighbors and a fairly happy life. However, everything changed that morning when an agitated group of men gathered outside my house and started calling me out. The angry tone of their voice took me by surprise.

There was no one else in my house at that time and I was having food. However, the angry men were insistent that I came out of the house immediately. Hiralal said that the elders wanted to speak to me. I did not understand why; it would be more appropriate for the men to speak to the men of my house! I requested them to wait till the men of my house returned and I finished my food; but to no avail. What happened next was beyond my imagination! They started pushing me out first by dragging my hand and then by pulling my hair, which was still wet, as I had just finished my bath! I was dragged almost up to the enclosure meant for worshipping Goddess



Durga, when I saw Shyambai and Bisahin, two of my fellow village-women, also being brought in the same way. While the three of us were being dragged, the men were beating us and spitting on us from all sides. The merciless torture went on from 10 am in the morning till 6 pm in the evening, at the behest of about twenty men of our village belonging to different age groups! In fact, one of them was the son of my brother-in-law. I got no answers to my repeated pleadings to find out our fault. When we started begging for mercy and cried for help from others who were silently watching the whole act, the rampaging men threatened all the bystanders with dire consequences, if any of them came ahead to our rescue! One of the men vowed to behead anyone who would dare to help us! Scared, no one came forward to save us seeing the rage of the men. One of the angry men took out a live wire from the street lamppost, forced it into my hand and ordered me to keep holding it. As if it wasn't enough to burn my palm and fingers, some of them made a bonfire and started pulling out my sari and all the

jewelry that I was wearing. The same humiliation was meted out to Shyambai and Bisahin as well. We struggled hard to hold on to our clothes, but had to finally give in to their brute force. They took off all our clothes, and threw them into the fire. Then they made us go around the village, naked, and kept us continuously beating with a cord made of tamarind creepers. Every now and then they would lift us by our hair and hit us hard. We were bleeding profusely, and our bodies had become fully marked with wounds. Bisahin, who was having her menstrual periods, was in a particularly bad shape bleeding all over with shame and humiliation. Shyambai too was wailing with pain and shame, and when she pleaded for some water, one of the miscreants climbed on her chest and pissed in her mouth forcibly!

When the ordeal came to an end in the evening, we found ourselves slipping into unconsciousness, vomiting intermittently. Our family members brought us clothes and quietly took us away. I remember feeling like a dead person. Next day, I went with my husband and other family members to the nearest police station at Fingeshwar and lodged a First Information Report. During the days that followed, the incident flared up into a major scandal and our assaulters were put behind bars. However, they managed to come out of jail within a year!

Today, almost five years after that shattering incident, we are learning to gather ourselves and live life in ways that can help us reclaim our lost dignity. We have formed a self-help group in the name of 'Ma Saraswati Swa Sahayata Samuh', and have been saving money since the last three years. I was once a very popular person and am regaining back my associations gradually. In addition, we have been managing a mid-day meal centre for a school for a year, the responsibility of which has lately been assigned to another SHG group. Our group has also bagged a contract for managing a fish-pond for three years, of which we have successfully completed two years.

The recently enacted legislation seeking to prevent such atrocities against women in Chhattisgarh, i.e. the Tonhi Act of 2005, is a welcome development. However, it will make a difference only if perpetrators of violence get the strictest of punishment.

¹² Narrative facilitated by Dr. Mukul Mukerjee of Disha, Chhattisgarh



STORIES FROM SUDAN: WOMEN IN REFLECT LITERACY CIRCLES

NORA ABUBAKR ADAM AND SALWA AHMED ¹³

REFLECT (Regenerated Frierian Literacy by Empowering Community Techniques) is a community-based approach to impart literacy skills to adult learners using methods that seek to relate literacy inputs to the immediate environment of the learners. This article brings together the reflections of two women participating in REFLECT circles located in Sudan. While Nora Abubakr Adam, a fourteen years old girl, writes about her enhanced status in her household on account of her newly acquired ability to write letters, Salwa Ahmed, a woman of 24, reflects on the usefulness of learning ‘first aid’ in a camp for internally displaced persons located on the outskirts of Khartoum. The original text was written in Arabic and then translated into English.

I am Nora Abubakr Adam, a fourteen years old girl. I live in Block 61 in Omdurman (north Khartoum) with my sister. She took me with her when she got married to help her in the house at Khartoum. I had never been to school before and so my sister thought there was no need to enroll me; besides, I was already over the school age (10 years old). One day, my sister, who is also illiterate, told me that she would have liked to join an NGO-promoted literacy circle called REFLECT but that she didn’t have enough time. I immediately thought of joining this circle myself and convinced my sister to let me go. I felt so happy when I held my pen and wrote for the first time. Initially, attending the circle meetings was for me a means to get out of the house and escape the heavy daily works. But later on, when I realized the importance of having an education, it became a serious end itself.

I joined the REFLECT circle in August 2005 and now I can read and write well. I can proudly read for my sister who is still thinking of attending the circle.

In May 2006, my father came to Khartoum to visit us. He told me that I was already a woman and that one of my cousins had asked to marry me. I replied to him that I was attending school and that I would like to continue my education, given that I already knew how to read and write. It was such a big surprise for him that he could not believe it. So, he pulled out some letters from his pocket and asked me to read the addresses. I did it perfectly. He, then, opened one of the letters and asked me to read it for him. I did that perfectly too. He became so happy and proud of me that



Despite all that, my active participation in the group gradually increased as well as my literacy skills.

Until I finished the first stage, my father did not know about my involvement in the REFLECT circle. When he discovered it, he became very angry and beat me. He prohibited me from attending it again and the same warning was given to my mother. I remained unhappy about this for more than a month while my mother kept trying to persuade my father, but in vain! My mother used to look at me, sitting cheerlessly and waiting for my colleagues to visit me and support me, till she decided to let me go, secretly.

I continued to attend the circle for another year. We did a lot of activities and exercises on reading,

he accepted to leave me in Khartoum to pursue my education.

I was so glad to be able to continue my studies and more glad that this saved me from an early marriage. This event has also increased my self-confidence and the ambition to proceed further.

My name is Salwa Ahmed and I joined the REFLECT literacy circle in 2001. I started reading and writing after 7 months and I felt that, being in the meeting with women from different tribes and discussing topics relevant to our daily life, was very enjoyable. During this period, I found myself changing. I began to use my time at home more efficiently in order to attend the REFLECT activities.

When I joined the circle, I had strong doubts about my abilities because, having missed school when I was a child, I thought it wouldn’t be easy to learn to read and write now at an older age. There is a very well known proverb in Sudan that says, “learning at old age is like writing on the surface of the sea; it can be easily forgotten”.

writing and numeracy. Courses on ‘First Aid’ and ‘Home Nursing’ were also organized, which had great benefits for our community where health care posts are insufficient.

One day my father fell sick. It was night and he urgently needed an injection. We looked for a nurse or a medical vehicle everywhere, but failed to find any. All my family members were worried and in real tension until I forced myself and, in a very low voice, said “I can do it”. My father agreed and I did it. After he recovered, he asked when and where I had learnt such skill and I told him the story of my lessons in the circle. My father was very pleased and started calling me ‘Doctor’.

Since then, both my relatives and my father have been involving me in the family decisions and my father, who is also illiterate, often asks me to help him read and write his documents. My newly acquired skills made me a respected person in my family as well as in my community!

¹³ Articles generated with support from Raffaella Catani, who spent two years in Sudan

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