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REPORT

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The pathway to the present

I was brought up in a typical middle-income Gujarati family in Ahmedabad – the heart of Gujarat. I was a fairly studious kid who did consistently well throughout the school years. Though engineering colleges weren't so rampant in my time, I was able to get an unpaid seat in a top-ranked engineering institute of Gujarat. Having secured admission in Bachelors in Electronics and Communication, I wanted to 'make it count', especially having seen my father toil a bit to meet with the expenses in the early years. So, I harbored no plans for post graduation and jumped right onto Reliance Communications.

Most people, however humble, like to feel as if they are special, and I was no different. The first day in Reliance, however, made me feel a little too special! It was upon learning the astounding fact that I was one of the few first ever girls to have been employed in those office premises that year. This was my first spectacular encounter with the male chauvinistic aspect of the society, although now I know that in my own parental home, a number of small things should have been done differently.

Thereafter, a series of job changes almost each involving a new city took me to different cities and countries. It helped me understand various cultures beyond merely books and movies. Everywhere I went, my feminist attitude also accompanied me – in fact it rapidly grew on me. I would be enraged on hearing about dowries that my own well-educated male colleagues would ask. Soon, I was to discover that even an IT professional like me could help resolve not just problems relating to women, but also those of poverty and environment. I was shocked at first when I realized that my carefree lifestyle leaves adverse effect on society and ecology, also came at a huge cost to the poor. Partly, some of this enlightenment was thanks to my discussions with a volunteer group called Bharat Uday Mission in Pune (where I was working with Wipro).

Incidentally this was also the time I got in touch with Pulkit - my husband (who at the time had just been introduced to me by my persistent parents as a marital candidate!), who had already had a stint at social change. After co-founding 'Asha Kiran' – a community work wing of IIIT Hyderabad during his studies there, he had been working with HP Labs in Bangalore, volunteering as well as upholding green and ethical lifestyle. We got into a lot of interesting discussions, which kept us chatting and talking for hours. We were soon convinced that our frequencies matched well enough for to become partners for life. Since mine was a transferable job, I shifted to Bangalore with him, post marriage.

Bangalore introduced me to AID – Association for India's Development – a voluntary group started by a few (then) PhD students in the US which now has a number of chapters in US, UK, Australia and 9 chapters in India. Though I can't claim that I took part in many activities of AID in Bangalore, but it gave me a platform to connect with other groups, with whom I began volunteering in my part-time capacity. One such initiative was the awareness generation campaign against genetically modified food¹, where I could contribute actively during my stay in Karnataka. Even before my involvement with any of these, I had always believed that while it was important and natural to work on urban issues, the biggest need and scope for impact lied in rural India. That belief grew stronger with time, increasingly diverting my inclination towards problems of rural areas, esp. on agriculture, health, land and livelihoods.

Consequently, my interest in the office work was rapidly reducing, I was always more keen to do volunteering, even if it had to be through internet during office hours. So, I had to get out of the shackling job, and spend those 12 hours a day towards social change². I and Pulkit did consider financial implications (when he too is contemplating of going full-time in coming years), but as Gandhi rightly said, 'there's enough

¹Please visit <http://www.indiagminfo.org/>

²<http://sejswirlpool.wordpress.com/2010/03/15/a-defining-career-switch/>

for everyone's need but not for the greed'. We had begun doing away with our greed long ago, so there's a hope of finding comfortable sustenance to meet our 'needs' in future.

"Problems are interconnected and so must be the solution" – as a true believer of this, never could I be actively involved into volunteering for any of the educational initiatives run by AID volunteers in Bangalore or Delhi, albeit I value the need for betterment in education, for not only I find myself incapable of teaching kids and second, but also, it seemed more like wiping only the surface and not addressing the root causes. Having said that, I don't at all meant to undervalue the efforts of AID volunteers in teaching kids and trying to admit them in the mainstream schools, for that's one of the direct and significant change making processes that a part time volunteer can get involved with. Of course wiping the surface too is equally important, but I wanted to touch the root cause too. Over 3 years with AID introduced me to a variety of people. While some were passionate do-gooders working across country and really committed volunteers who struggled to take time out of their jobs and studies to change the society in whatever way they can; there were also those who were merely arm chair philosophizes and volunteers who wanted to have a feel-good effect to wash off their bad deeds. I've personally taken learning from both, positives of the former and negatives of the later.

It all begins at home!

My whole life changed drastically ever since the bug of volunteering for social causes bit me. I had been an idealist to a tiny extent, in the sense that I used to take what good things taught in my text books very seriously. Dowry was always an evil for me and I almost thought that my generation would think very differently, hence those male colleagues who boasted about asking dowry in their marriage totally lost respect in my eyes. In a matter of 2 years, such small stances expanded to the broader aspects of gender equity, and subsequently to social equity at large.

"How agonized we are about how people die. How untroubled we are by how they live!" - This speech³ by P Sainath had quite an impact on me. The famous story of Nero's guests that he mentions made me determined to spoil Nero's party. I realized how unaware I was about a lot of damages that I indirectly inflict upon fellow humans and how carefree I was in my own lifestyle. I realized how the environment is not a matter of mere academic debate relating to a distant future; scores of people are losing lives due to it and many more becoming displaced/water-starved/asthma-stricken. Yes, we all live with many contradictions, but what matters is, the openness and the courage to reduce these contradictions wherever possible. That's the first (still ongoing) task I undertook.

I and Pulkit (who had already started changing his lifestyle by buying a bicycle instead of a motor-bike) would have long discussions and debate on many of the changes that we thought we should do in our lifestyle. It started out with our marriage⁴ wherein we diverted the money we would have otherwise spent on a plush wedding to donations towards social change. Despite considerable opposition, we ensured a simple 3-hour affair involving some 30 odd close people in an Arya Samaj temple (Although both of us are atheists, we relented to that one wish of the parents). Post marriage, both of us always consciously attempted to change our consumption patterns and habits/choices in daily living⁵. For instance, we began buying maximally from small vendors as opposed to big shops or malls. We made a number of non-glamorous but effective changes aimed at ecological preservation. It ranged from minimizing water usage in daily chores to severely curbing disposables to refusing an AC/air cooler to avoiding flights. A friend had asked me once, what it is that I think is the most critical thing to do for a green lifestyle. My answer to that was a fundamental change in attitude. Just like most of us never have difficulty in ensuring that we don't spend beyond our economic wellbeing, we

³ Globalizing Inequality - <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-1560557294503313321#>

⁴ <http://pulzinponderland.wordpress.com/a-glimpse-into-my-marriage-rich-in-photos/>

⁵ <http://stimulating-videos.ideagutter.com/>

should push ourselves to a consciousness where we try not to act against our collective ecological wellbeing. A quote I read somewhere said "I've never stopped being optimist about goodness in all the human-kind". And indeed, everyone has a soft-corner that once found, one can surely be sensitive about sufferings of the fellow human-beings. A lot of volunteers (including me) I know, have undergone tremendous change in the way they see things. Sometimes it's only a matter of awareness as not many from middle or upper class even know where their food comes from or what happens to the enormous waste they generate. Perhaps they never questioned that, but after being exposed to the reality a lot of people do get disturbed and concerned.

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How I landed up with CHLP

I came to know of Community Health Cell through Prasanna Saligram, who used to work with CHC before he left for his post-graduation. During the AID India Conference in Bangalore that we had organized, I heard Dr. Ravi and Thelma and was profoundly inspired by their stories. I also met Sudha (an AID US volunteer) during the same period undergoing CHLP. Talks with Sudha also made me visit Jagruta Mahila Sangathana (JMS) and have some discussions with Premdas. Moreover the IPHU (International People's Health University) also introduced me to a lot of JSA members and CHC staff. So when I was thinking about my paradigm shift and felt the need for a platform to guide me so that my learning curve remains steep esp. during the early months, it didn't take me much time to decide that I should apply for the next Community Health Learning Program.

Overview and acknowledgments

When I left my telecom job in February 2010, I had only vague idea of how my next one year will look like. These 9 months spent with CHC and with other groups and individuals have helped me develop a lot of perspectives that I hadn't anticipated. I can't be certain if it has given me enough clarity on my own roadmap, like I thought it would. In fact, it has pointed to more questions. But then I'm glad to find these questions bothering me, because it means I am constantly evolving and hunting for greater impact.

Post the Bangalore based initial sessions; I chose food security and rural livelihoods (esp. through the NREGA) as core components to focus on. My field journey began with the Right to Food campaign where the company of veterans provided invaluable learning each day. One of them is Madhuri Krishnaswamy, who's with Jagril Adivasi Dalit Sangathan(JADS) in Barwani. From the day I met her, I was deeply impressed by the clarity of thoughts and level of simplicity with which she was carrying herself. Even though I didn't have full idea of the work of JADS, I instantly decided to spend some days with her, a decision which I couldn't be more glad about. It was those few weeks I spent with Madhuri and adivasis of JADS in Barwani, which have made me pick Barwani as a location where a good chunk of my foreseeable future will be spent! From December, the plan is to divide my time between Barwani and Delhi/Noida.



The experiences of staying in the huts of people in rural and tribal regions of some of the most backward districts of MP and Bihar were the first of their kind. During last 9 months I learnt a good deal about tribal and rural lifestyle and tried to get acquainted to it. It was, of course, strenuous for me, having been a city dweller all my life. Walking long distances and climbing hills to reach one village to another, cycling more than 40 kms on bumpy and flooded road (with an ordinary bicycle), walking barefoot through flooded fields, sleeping in a hut and getting soaked in the middle of the night due to leaking roof, helping tribal women with de-weeding in the fields— all such tiny experiences were pretty new for me. But each one of them gave me more strength and encouragement to go to the next phase. I've intensely travelled across India in this phase, from Gujarat to

⁶ <http://sejswirlpool.wordpress.com/2009/05/09/slow-death/>

Rajasthan to MP to Orissa to Bihar to Karnataka, all of them by non-AC trains. *One thing that makes me glad is that I could manage to avoid buying bottled water (disposables) in all the journeys till date!* I've also tried almost all modes of transportation – trains, buses, trucks, tractor, bicycle (also sitting on the backside carrier of the bicycle), jeeps(almost packed with 30-40 people), etc. (avoiding the fuel guzzling flights).

Due to my prior interest in the areas of agriculture, I had decided to set on this journey keeping food security, livelihoods and rural employment (NREGA) as core components to focus on. And nothing seemed more appropriate than getting involved in the matters relating to National Food Security Act, with the Right to food campaign. As I write this post after 9 months of travel involving tribal, rural and urban areas of Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Orissa and Delhi – I've come to the strong belief that everything finally boils down to high levels of corruption, flawed priority of the government budgeting (prioritizing business interests over social welfare) and fight over natural resources (land, water, trees and minerals).

I thank Kavita, Anuradha, Jean, Biraj, Vandana, Arundhati and Dipa for provided me the needed guidance which somewhere also helped me understand the campaign as a people's movement. Kavita, especially has been a great source of inspiration, for the endless reservoir of energy she possesses! I also found good friends in some of the young members like Deepika, Shreya, Trilochan , Pappu, Ashish, Prashant and Rolly!

Dr. Thelma, who was my mentor at CHC has been tremendously supportive throughout this journey in every sense and I thank her for all her mentoring and careful guidance in each decision that I took. I also thank Prasanna who also acted as a mentor of sort, besides being a good friend, providing me any logistical help that I needed☺. I also thank all the CHC members- Dr. Ravi, Premdas, Ruth, Rakhal, Joyce, Swami, Sukanya, Maria, Mangla, Pushpa and James – without whom this fellowship wouldn't have been on the right track. Needless to mention the tremendous contribution of all my co-fellows whose rich experiences brought me a good learning.

The Sangathan of Bargi dam displaced people helped me gave me a firsthand look into issues with the mass displacement of people. I thank their Karyakartas and Rajkumarji for this. Sunilji from Kisan Aadvasi Sangathan will always be an inspiration for me for the kind of lifestyle he leads. The visit to Mozda collective gave me a peep into lives of tribals in Gujarat. I am thankful to Michel Mazgaonkar for hosting me at their eco-friendly hut in the woods.

The decision to spend some time with Jan Jagaran Shakti Sangathan in Araria, Bihar gave me a whole different way to see things. I realized the importance of knowing the historical perspectives to understand reasons behind certain situations. Since then I've been exploring answers to some of the questions that have been bothering me about the state of Bihar. Stay in villages of Araria provided me with some insights of the society divided into various castes and fragmented because of attempts of politicization by different parties. The intriguing discussions with Kamayni Swami compelled me to make a comparison of the different Sangathans that I visited. I'm thankful to her for facilitating many informal chit-chats on different topics.

Lastly but most importantly, having Pulkit to share life with was one of the best decisions taken and I truly cherish the endless debates that have only made me think constructively and question myself. He has always been the first person who I would turn to in any difficulties or problems.

My personal involvement with the Right to Food Campaign

Right to food Campaign began in early 21st Century, during the years of drought and hunger, when PUCL filed a writ petition demanding a just distribution of food grains to the hungry that were overloading the godowns during that time. Filed in April 2001, the petition argued that the right to food follows from the fundamental

"right to life" enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution as it is impossible to live without food. It also demanded that massive food stocks (about 50 million tonnes of grain at that time) should be immediately used to prevent hunger and starvation. Going further in the demands for the relief work in drought affected areas the petition asked to (a) provide immediate open-ended employment in drought-affected villages, (b) provide unconditional support to persons unable to work, (c) raise the PDS entitlement per family, and (d) provide subsidised food grain to all families. The case resulted into some landmark judgements passed by the Supreme Court, in terms of regular interim orders related to the implementation of many schemes (such as PDS, ICDS, Mid-day meal, old age pension) under the case, after converting them as legal entitlements. This petition 196, PUCL vs Union of India is famously termed as the Right to Food case now. This PIL was the pioneering stone for the Right to food campaign, which has now grown strongly as a movement. The initial petition focused on the drought situation prevailing at that time, especially in Rajasthan, but later on, the case has been focusing on the larger issue of starvation and malnutrition for all the states in the country. Time and again, 'interim applications' have been filed resulting into 'interim orders', directing central and state governments to take necessary steps. The Supreme Court has also appointed commissioners for the purpose of monitoring the implementation of the interim orders. At present Dr. N. C. Saxena is the commissioner and Harsh Mander is the special commissioner, both of whom now have been appointed as members of National Advisory Council headed by UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi. The commissioners in turn appoint advisors in each state to assist their work. Many groups and individuals who came together at that time for the case also kicked off the campaign, which is Right to food Campaign⁷. The campaign's present focus is on the comprehensive National Food Security Act.

I had no idea what I was going to contribute to the campaign, but I had been following its websites and e-mail updates related to National Food Security Act. I also roughly went through the copy of the act drafted by the campaign⁸ to get better understanding. All I knew was about a dharna that was being organized in Delhi for the demands of a better food security act and I volunteered for the same. Trishna, a student volunteer, who was so valiantly fighting multiple tasks before dharna, was delighted to find another volunteer, and all happened so suddenly that within a day's time I found myself too running around for different things.

Dharna against proposed National Food Security Bill

A five day Dharna was organized by Right to Food campaign against the proposed National Food Security Bill, 2010. The event spanned from 15th April to 19th April, culminating in a panel discussion with various political leaders and a member of planning commission. The protests demanded the food and nutritional security for all the citizens of the country rather than targeting it only to BPL category of people which has brought the country today to a nutritional crisis⁹.



More than 2500 people from 19th states, coming from 200 various groups took part in the event, on different days. The dharna took place at a footpath place on Jantar Mantar road, where mikes and speakers were also arranged for people to come up and share their concerns and views. Almost everyone who protested spoke about issues faced by them in their states and villages and what is wrong with the current food security bill and what they see as solutions. People used folk songs, puppets etc to voice their opinions and problems. The upcoming CWG had

⁷ See campaign website – www.righttofoodindia.org

⁸ Campaign draft act - http://rtf-updates.googlegroups.com/web/rtf_act_draft_charter_sept09.pdf?gda=OQz14IAAABqHd9MXEcoroDeMVwct2Jx-Cs45PpREkyMnb8-W_c5mXQB-0jfVh5UDefrNBDSux6oQYlae-u_oV7Sr2kRBCWIVeLt2mulgCMmECKmxvZ2j4leqPHHCwbz-gobneSjMyE

⁹ Photographs - <http://picasaweb.google.com/righttofood/Dharna1519April#>

denied the citizens rights to voice their dissenting opinions and the time for dharna was hence limited from 9am to 5pm, which made it necessary for us to plan for accommodation for all the outstation participants.

Different ways were being thought out for registering protests. One of the days all went near the parliament and burnt the effigy of the NFSA. In spite of the court arrest, all of us gave speeches and kept chanting slogans inside dharna. One of them was "Sarkar hamese darti hai, police ko aage karti hai" (The government is scared of us and keeps police forward). I went ahead and distributed parchas to the staff at police commissioners' office and with a few interactions with the staff I learnt that although most of them agreed with our demands, they were duty bound and were not able to support. On the third day, the police had become quite alert and it took some bit of fooling around to get to the planning commission. Approximately 35 of protesters could get away from the attentive police staff and stayed outside the planning commission asking for dialogues with members when the meeting to decide the poverty estimate was taking place. After making some noise over it, we could get Mr. Abijit Sen and Ms. Sayeda Hameed to come out till the gate, talk to the protesters accept the memorandum from us to discuss during their meeting. The campaign had become so well-known around jantar manter that in the end of the 5 days time, most police officers knew major campaigners and some of them also helped us in carrying out rally and human chain with more than 600 people on fourth day.

On the 5th day, the event culminated with a Panel discussion that consisted of political leaders voicing their opinions. Anuradha and Madhuri presented the major points concerning the proposed food security act and showed how the universalization is feasible with proper calculations on the food grains and budgetary allocations for a universalized PDS. (Please refer to Annex I for the details of the presentation.¹⁰) Different campaign delegations met with Mr. Sharad Pawar, Mr. Arun jaitley, Mr. Rajanath Singh and Mr. Lalu Yadav. It brings laughter on my face when I picture Sharad Pawar's face described by some of the campaign members when Kavita told him "Aap ko APL-BPL ki kya padi, aap to sirf IPL ka sochte ho!" Later I also helped with preparing the report for the entire Dharna¹¹.

Personal Reflections

In two days time, I got introduced to a number of the people active in Delhi for Right to food. Though I had been staying in NCR for last 7 months, never did I anticipate so many active groups working on issues of food in Delhi itself. Anyhow, what matters the most is that one by one the tasks were taken up and shared properly and things were made to happen as planned.

A lot of women from different parts of Delhi and other states came on the first day. Many were from Rajasthan who added a unique flavour. The dharna was a lot different than I had imagined it to be. I had been wondering what will people do sitting at one place, most of whom will be on fast! But the presence of mike could keep everyone alive. A lot of innovative songs, the one especially from Rajasthan were indeed thought-provoking. Rajasthani women added a unique flavour, with their courageous tone and puppet shows. The event also had a byproduct of spreading awareness on the larger picture of food security in the country. But the most stimulating factor was the tales shared by people from diverse parts of the country. People from many small sangathans came forward to voice their opinions.

During the initial days, seeing so many people flowing in at the dharna place, I even wondered if all of them knew why they had come at the first place. But soon as I started talking to the women, and hearing them

¹⁰ National Food Security Act Primer - http://www.righttofoodindia.org/data/national_food_security_act_primer.pdf

¹¹ Most of the above excerpts have been taken from the report that I had helped with and it can be found at: http://www.righttofoodindia.org/data/report_of_dharna_cum_relay_fast_organised_by_rtfc_15th_to_19th_apri_new_delhi.pdf

speaking, I was ensured that a lot of them not only knew why they were, but they had courage to face the worst when they decided to pitch in with their time. It may have been comparatively easy for people like me to arrange the events like this, but for them, besides traveling and other costs; it also compromised their 5-6 days wages. I compared their such trip to my trips, where I usually plan where to stay, how to travel and reach the place, but that wasn't the case with many of the rural folks, who didn't even know where they would be put up for next 5 days, what they will eat and how they will go back to their villages. This gave me all the more reasons to be active in all the arrangements as it was the least I could do for their selfless contribution.

One important observation to make here is the dominance of the women in the crowd. In general also, women are seen to be more participatory in any struggle and always more empowered and sensitized about the injustices surrounding them and keen to work towards solutions. Perhaps, it's also driven by the fact that they are more downtrodden and abused section of the society and women labourers again come under the lower than the lowest strata of the society. Naturally, they will be more inclined to fight for their justice their male counter-parts in similar strata.

When I was asked to volunteer for secretariat coordination for 2 months, I took it as a means of learning on the job and kick-started with the tasks, beginning preparations for the dharna. Till date I don't regret that decision, that made me feel as a part of the campaign and I took upon myself to see that I do what was required for the good of the campaign. The passionate association with the campaign stays same today also and I believe it will only grow further.

Public hearing for starvation deaths – Gaya, Bihar

For me, the journey to Gaya from Delhi will stand memorable, as it was the first of its kind where I travelled without any ticket by train and as if that wasn't enough the train was late by some 14 hours! The public hearing too was very good learning for me, as it gave me firsthand view of the discussions I witnessed at the consultation held by JNU earlier in the month. [The full details of the public hearing is already there in the different report [Annexure I], hence I'll only capture my personal observations here.] I can't obviously judge the situation of the state with one public hearing, but whatever I heard and talked to people around, things seemed pretty worse. The mid-day meal, which generally works better than the rest of the schemes, too had been failing in the district. According to Rupeshji, advisor to Supreme court commissioners in Bihar, a number of fact finding reports had been sent to the commissioners, which was also followed by visits of Harsh Mander a few years back and even after being given regular orders, the situation hadn't improved, and the public hearing which was held was the result of all those years of follow ups. Most of all the deaths that were reported were from those blocks where there was a complete failure of the social welfare schemes, including NREGA and health facilities. Moreover all the deaths were ruled out, as per ADM, as deaths due to illness or infection, based on post-mortem reports. Harsh Mander's presence made a big difference though. The administrative members kept pouring in, on his orders. CDPO, ADM, BDO and even DDC were there to face his questions. Promises were made, but no idea how much of it will translate into honest actions.

What makes me wonder is, why should it take an SC commissioner to visit the place for the district officers to be present in the hearing and to give assurances that things will be better? The presence of Harsh Mander or BHRC representatives did make a difference, but one can't expect them to be visiting every district to have equal presence from the administrative units. This indeed has made me thinking about where things should end, and what should be the role of civil society in the long run for any of the issues, be it health, food or education. Any new scheme or act is fought for, in the end, onus comes on to civil society to make sure it works better, be it PDS, ICDS, NRHM, NREGA, RTI, Acts for domestic violence, forest rights or the latest RTE. Agreed that some amount of questioning from outside is necessary and helps to strengthen system and ensure accountability, but that has today become such a huge task, keeping everyone too busy to think

anything out of the box. In my view, the role of any civil society group should be more on strengthening the policy-making than acting as watchdog. But as of now, I see the act of being a watchdog taking primary role and very few are actually getting bandwidth to go beyond that. With whatever reading and exposure that I've got, I fail to see any improvement in recent future to this, which feels very depressing at times. This has made me seriously deliberate on what should be the real solution to the present situation and whether I'm on the right track that's targeting at such solution or not.

NAC consults Right to Food campaign members at Delhi for National Food Security Act

A consultation of NAC with members of Right to food campaign was arranged to discuss food security bill. During the meeting Madhuri Krishnaswami from JADS started it off with detailed demands and understanding of food security act on behalf of the campaign. Each of the members then presented on various issues related to food security and problems of different sections such as children, vulnerable groups etc. There weren't too many comments from the NAC members and hence I couldn't really figure the effectiveness of the consultation¹². Thereafter working group of food security under NAC also came up with very poor final recommendation under the restrictions put up by the government. The right to food campaign strongly expressed disappointment for the same. Prof. Jean Dreze who has been also an NAC member publically stated his disagreement with these recommendations.

National Convention of Right to food & work

Imagine around 2500 people pouring in from all over the country at a single venue so that they can all be a part of the struggle of their right to food & work! It was a unique experience to see such a convention taking place and at the same time being also a volunteer for organizing many things for it. The fourth National convention of Right to food & Work this year was held in Rourkella, the steel city of Orissa. It took me longest to reach Rourkela and that entire trip also gave me good stint at night outs at Indian railway's waiting rooms! Rourkela as a venue brought more folks from Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa, highlighting Jal-Jungal-Jameen as one of the most fundamental issues relating to food security of the nation. I heard P.Sainath in person for the first time and that too in Hindi! A lot of other speakers made an interesting convention overall. Total of 22 workshop, each having approximately 300 participants passed quality resolutions¹³ in the end for each of the subject in relation to food security. These resolutions now have become an important reference for campaign demands.

Food security - the way I look at it

Food security is seen in many different ways, though there's no doubt that National Food Security Act should not have just one aspect of food security, which is food entitlement. In my view, a nation cannot be called food secured unless it is producing sufficient for its needs without overloading its farmers and every human being is able to get two nutritious meals a day. Any amount of grain, distributed at any subsidized rate, will provide just marginal relief unless the fundamental flaw - of unequal wages and that of farmer's distress is dealt with. By this, I don't mean to say that PDS is not required. In fact it's a tool if used effectively, can indirectly make a huge difference towards addressing agricultural crisis, as it ensures procurement at fair MSP from the farmers by the system and hence encourages good production. But fair MSP will not be the panacea of the agricultural crisis. The underlying issues with the current farming methods that are influenced by green revolution also needs a critical look. We also need to address future trading and export-import related problems. Rapid loss of agricultural land to the industrial areas, declining forest cover and the

¹² Please refer to the annexure for more information on the updates with NAC work related to NFSA

¹³ Resolution of the Rourkella Convention -

http://www.righttofoodindia.org/data/resolution_fourth_national_convention_16_sept_2010.pdf

requirement of Land reforms are some of the things that need urgent attention in this decade. Some also argue that if farmers issues are well taken care of, we can as well dismantle PDS which is anyway almost non functional today. I find it a dangerous suggestion, not only because system won't have a motivation to procure from the farmers offering fair price for the produce, but I also find it difficult, without PDS, to ensure 'affordable' consumer price for essential food grains to 'every' human being in the country. For achieving fundamental right to live, it must be ensured that every person gets all the necessities required for living a dignified life. And food being one of the most essential necessities, it directly relates to the Right to dignified life. And a right cannot be different for me and for a person living in 5*5 shacks. But that's what is being done in the present system, targeting few individual and providing them subsidized food as a charity, not as their right. Such targeting also has gross inclusion and exclusion errors today. Universalization of PDS with proper accountability and transparency, along with effective agricultural and land reforms, in my view, looks to be a way forward for achieving the comprehensive food security act.

Sustainability of Sustainable agricultural method and present ways of promotion of organic food

With AID volunteers we also tried to have some interactive meetings with other AID JeevanSaathis working in Hyderabad. (A Jeevansaathi is an AID volunteer who leaves his/her present career for full time community work.) We had a good debate on issues related to agriculture with Kiran, from AID Hyderabad, who's involved with initiatives on sustainable agriculture in Andhra Pradesh. But unfortunately that debate couldn't come to a conclusive end, leaving me again with unanswered questions. I understand the catastrophic results of our green revolution, health hazards that pesticides are responsible for and reduction in soil fertility owing to extensive usage of fertilizers. Certainly we need to promote sustainable farming methods, which ends in reduction of input costs and resources required for the farming, provides healthy food and improves soil fertility. But I find the current methods of promoting organic food very objectionable. At present a lot of organic stores are trying to setup their own supply chain, removing middle man and promoting organic food to consumers as a healthy and better alternative. Clearly the target of such initiatives will be the elite of the cities. The idea behind this is to create more demand of organic food as elite. But that has now backfired in a way, as stores like Reliance Fresh, Namdhari etc have also chipped in with the same strategy. I actually see no difference between stores of non-profit organization stores and those of retail chains, in a way both operate. Both wants middle men out, branding them responsible for the price rise. Well, may be middle men are responsible for increase in consumer price, but is this the best way to bridge the gaps? Imagine one day we have most farmers going organic and then what would happen if someone attempted to scale these scattered initiatives and actually tried to bring organic food to the local shops? Will all the shop owners have luxury to have their own supply chain? I guess one would need to resort to the middle-men for procurement and transportation. Then why not think of this long term possibility and try to demand better supply chain options by the system?

Second issue that often comes in everybody's mind is the price of organic food. While discussing this matter with some of the people involved, it boils down to two reasons. One is lack of supply chain and second is attempts to give better prices to the farmers. Naturally, farmers do need better prices, but should that come at the cost of consumer price, is the question. I would prefer direct income subsidy to farmer than increasing consumer prices for food. Hence, somewhere I can't bring myself in agreement with the present models of promotion of organic food.

Our lives in our hands - Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan

JADS in Barwani, was perhaps the first community exposure of its kind where in I underwent the lifestyle in a rural ambiance for more than 4-5 days. Perhaps it was the first ever attempt at living with Adivasis in their

huts and try to get a feel of their culture and routine life. It provided me with experiences that will stay unforgettable forever. Barwani is a district near Maharashtra border and not too far from Gujarat border. So it has a mix of all the three states. It's also now famously known because of Sardar Sarovar Dam and parts of it being in the submergence area (and more will soon be). Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)¹⁴ is quite prominent in the town of Barwani.

Madhuri Krishnaswamy is a spunky social activist, who was born to an affluent family (her father retired as a top Indian Air Force official) and graduated from St. Stephen's (Delhi). Even while she was studying for her M.Phil (under a JNU professor), she had started wondering about the utility of the academic knowledge to the society. She soon made up her mind to strive to improve the quality of life for those living on the lowest fringe of the society. She has not been deterred by the frequent run-ins with the bureaucracy and the political leadership and many criminal cases have so far been slapped against her, at times when she tried to raise her voice for the issues relating to corruption, tribal atrocities or health rights. Sometimes the police would treat her like a major security threat. In late 90s, when she came to Bhopal to inform the media about the atrocities being committed on the tribals in the Sendhva area of Khargone district, soon after she had finished her press conference, she was picked up by the police and taken to Khargone to face charges under Sections 386 and 387 IPC (extortion by putting a person in fear of death or grievous hurt). However, her resolve to fight on remains rock solid.

Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan (JADS), started approximately 12 years back, before which it was a part of Adivasi Mukti Sangathan. Due to some of the internal problems with working style of its old leaders, people were repelled with the AMUS and that triggered JADS as a separate entity, initially with Pati and Bukhareta blocks. Now it's also active in Panchsemal and Barwani blocks. The Sangathan went on membership based model where each member contributes annual fees of Rs 60. Although it hasn't been collected for last 2 years, the majority of the expenses of the Sangathan are taken care of through the leftover corpus fund. There are a few members that are elected at village, block and zilla level as karyakartas by people themselves. Most important part of the Sangathan is, all of these karyakartas are local and none of them are being paid as of now and all the work is being done by members and people totally on volunteer basis. Although Madhuri and other karyakartas do understand the limitation of this model but they feel that people ultimately need to decide if they wish to pay any karyakarta to work fulltime for their Sangathan.

Due to the extensively craggy terrain, houses are quite scattered and it takes considerable time to reach from one house to the other in the same hamlet. Even when I had to reach Sawariya Parni from Kandra, it felt like literally trekking on some of the small hills at times. I was dumbfounded when Poitiram (a karyakarta who I accompanied) told me that they go over this terrain during the dark night without torch and sometimes with 50kgs of load on their back!

Majority of the details I've put down here have come to my knowledge through my interactions with people. I've attempted to find about most of the sangathan work through eyes of people who've struggled for years. Over the time, many accepted the positive changes in them. I met a lot of male workers who were proud to say that they left their drinking habits over years in Sangathan and now pursuing others in doing the same.

Jilla Meeting in Kandra

After reaching barwani and having an initial discussion with Madhuri about JADS and its work, I went to the Jilla meeting of the sangathan with her in Kandra village. The village under Kandra Gram Panchayat

¹⁴ NBA Recently completed 25 years of its struggle in Narmada Valley - <http://www.frontline.in/stories/20101119272302900.htm>



comes under Pati block. The terrain is pretty mountainous and hence houses are very much scattered. It takes a bit long to reach one house from another waling up and down the hills.

The marathon meeting that went on till two days was something that showed the commitment the aadivasis had towards their causes and struggle, which kept them running irrespective of any situation. Be it burning heat or soaking rain, the meeting would go on, people would step up and put forth their concerns, issues for further discussion and the struggle would go on.

The kandra meeting witnessed a lot of discussions amongst people from different villages and blocks, who also shared their success and failure stories with each other. The meeting went non-stop till late night and half of the next day, most time without Madhuri. There also were some focused group discussions amongst men and women differently. On the second day, they discussed the next strategy for the sangathan. Apart from inspiring commitment from people, I also observed good sense of discipline. Though illiterate, they knew how to conduct large meetings, sticking to their agenda, appointing some literate person to take notes and maintaining a bit of code of conduct during the discussions.

Village level Meetings

During the meeting in Kandra people had decided to revive the sangathan efforts with series of meetings in all the villages. A committee of 8-9 members was formed in each kshetra. Every day the meeting would be arranged in one village and all the members would go in there to witness it. I had then attended such meeting in Sawariya pani, Kandra and Bukreta villages. During these meetings people put their problems, sometimes even personal or family troubles, up for discussion. In all the meeting, discipline was once again exemplary. However intense the discussion goes, there won't be any sense of agitation in people. A lot of people during the meetings were bold enough to criticize the internal problems with sangathan too and all of them were taken in their right spirit. I was impressed by orating skills of many of them who did good job of motivating the rest of the crowd to stay united.



Azadi Siksha Kendra

The language that's spoken majorly is 'Barli', which to me sounds like a mix of Hindi-Marathi-Gujarati. The dialect changes with the region too. Panchsemal block, which is near to Maharashtra, has more Marathi in it. Even the clothing of aadivasis was different, for those belonging to bukreta or panchsemal.

'Barli' being their native language, kids here always face problems in Government schools, where in they are taught in Hindi. Moreover in blocks like Pati and Bukreta, where several parts are too high on the hills, the geographical constraints are roadblocks for kids to reach to their schools. The sangathan thus, decided to build a school of their own in the lines of another school 'Aadharsheela' in Sendhwa block. The small hut of the school was built by aadivasis themselves; hence it saved the labour cost. Two teachers from the community with nominal qualification had been identified, who are being paid from sangathan collection. The informal residential school tries to teach kids in Barli first then slowly get on to hindi so that they can gradually understand the teaching of government schools if and when they are admitted into one. At present, school has 40 kids residing inside it and the food for them is also being prepared by the family of one of the teacher, with the grains supplied by their parents. They have

also formed a school committee that takes care of all the problems and matters that concerns school. They have named it as 'Aazadi Siksha Kendra'.

Collection and Preservation of Native Seeds

The sangathan has also started initiative for collecting and preserving native seeds. As a result, there was a collection drive which yielded in numerous native seeds. With the help of seeds available from horticulture department, they also have plans to start kitchen gardens during monsoon. Somehow they still haven't been able to procure native cotton seeds, as most places I saw people growing Bt cotton, though they do understand the adverse consequences of it. Most time the reason explained by people was non availability of native seeds. Except cotton being grown by a few members who owns wells, most of the aadivasis grow makka and jowar for their own consumption.

Watersheds

Years ago, people themselves had taken up watershed programs in the villages which were extremely successful with shram-daan from villagers themselves. Being a hilly region, conservation of water and afforestation has become very important from them. Pati block, which used to be a densely forested area some 25 years back, now looks miserably de-forested. People do accept that a tiny percentage of it is also removed by themselves for their houses and agriculture, but most part of it is taken off by the forest department illegally for the industries. When it was raining everywhere in MP, hills of barwani stayed thirsty. People have understood the importance of forest, and hence there have been efforts to grow trees. Kids studying in the school have taken this as one of the assignment and more than 100 trees had been planted near the school itself. Other blocks too have done a tree plantation drive, some of it through NREGA too. JADS activists had played an important role in the struggle of NREGA, and people of barwani see NREGA as their right to livelihood and also a tool to develop their own village, their farms and land, water sources and forests. Almost everyone is an activist in itself when it comes to problems with NREGA. People now know their way out to the solutions, and strategies of struggle.

Forest Rights

Since these blocks are majority of forest areas with some patches of revenue land, people have been trying to get their land ownerships under Forests Rights Act (FRA) for a few years now. The land disputes between revenue and forest land are frequent and one question often raised is, that the dalits (who are actually aadivasi, but not recognized in government data) don't get the ownership of their land even when they have been living in forest area. I was surprised to find the extent of unity in people when I heard one aadivasi, who asked if there's any difference in their blood. If not, then why there is this differential treatment for both of the castes. Aadivasis, who have their houses in revenue land and farms in forest land, also face a lot of issues in getting ownership of their land and houses.

NREGA and PDS

JADS has been well-known for being first to obtain an unemployment allowance in the country. The level of awareness in here is one of the best known as people were equipped with all the ongoing matters of NREGA since the time it was going to be drafted. People are almost self-reliant here in fighting for their wages. In order to avoid the corruption with PDS shops, all the women go together to get their ration. The BPL list that was revised in a recent survey got many people out of the list. An application was made with signatures of all such people as per one of the Supreme Court orders and as a result, recently all those people got themselves

back on the BPL list. Anganwadis do function there, but the difficult geography doesn't generally permit villagers to drop their kids to anganwadis on daily basis. Many do get take-home rations though.

Health

The health situation is troublesome in the area. It's not the case of awareness but the access to the services is difficult. Saathi, one of the NGO working in barwani, has taken up awareness generation for the health services in the sangathan people. Saathi started with training rural women as community health workers, calling them 'swasthya-saathi'. They were trained to handle approximately 12 diseases and earlier were using medicines supplied by LOCOST. With NRHM, many of them turned into ASHAs. Villagers don't find it favorable though. For them, now ASHAs have been loaded by NRHM's own agenda. Instead of 12, now they only take care of 6 diseases. Still they do provide significant health services to villagers. Other than that, SAATHI also tries to put health as an issue in the Sangathan's meetings. If needed people also arrange dharna and protests for addressing some of the issues. One such dharna they arranged for CHC in barwani where in Saathi had a doctor of their own sitting outside CHC, re-checking the patients coming out of it, to ensure they are diagnosed properly by the doctor inside it. Many men and women mentioned the role of sangathan in awareness generation that has resulted into smaller families in the later generations.

Gender and Bride Price

Aadivasi, in general have the custom of Bride-price. Unlike how it works in Dowry, here the father of the groom has to give some gift or money to the bride's family. The amount in members of JADS used to be quite high, although after years of follow up and discussions amongst members facilitated by some sensitized karyakartas people have agreed to put a ceiling of Rs. 5000 on this. One might think of bride-price as a progressive step, for gender equality and women's empowerment, but with mainstreaming of tribals, and influences of outer world, this is only striking back on women. Women in some families after marriage are made to work more as money was 'invested' for them in the form of bride-price. Although the rigid forms of patriarchy and its after effects such as male child preference, lack of education in girls etc are not prevalent here.

Aadharsheela – School in Chatli, Sendhwa

I also went to Aadharshela, a school run by Jayashri and Amit in Sendhwa block. Basic concept was to educate kids who are coming from aadivasi background, most of whom fail at understanding hindi at the first place with government schools. The school initially teaches kids in Barli, and then shifts to hindi gradually. The teaching is done through alternate education methods. The school that's been running for last 10 years, now is fairly developed with multiple classes, library and computer room etc. They also have their own garden to grow most of the vegetables. The running cost of the school is taken care of by the fees of kids and grains given by parents for their meals. Other than that, they do accept funds of the infrastructural expenses.

Valsinghbhai arrested

Towards the end of my stay, one of the oldest karyakarta Valsinghbhai was arrested¹⁵ on false charges of robbery. Soon after the news was spread, a meeting of major karyakartas was arranged in one of the village, and it was decided that protests will be held at 6 police stations¹⁶. People held individual block level meetings

¹⁵ To get more details, please refer to the appeal that was issued upon his arrest at annexure II

¹⁶ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/states/other-states/article546185.ece> and <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article555755.ece>

too. I went to Bukhreta meeting, where most of the aadivasis had walked over 2-3 hours in the morning to reach the place. People then decided to protest at 6 of the police stations asking for Valsingbhai's bail. The case was up for hearing in Sendhwa court soon. The SP that Madhuri met for the bail proudly told her stories of how he had killed people from both sides during some hindu-muslim riots so hence he was not worried as to how many people protest for this. Later the protests were held at places, but unfortunately I had to leave for the Rourkela convention before that. Madhuri had to give convention a miss due to this emergency. From what all feedback I had gathered from Madhuri and some journalists that I met later, I figured that more than 7000 aadivasis had protests outside 6 police stations, which ended up in some charges against 1000 of them. Sendhwa court judge refused to grant bail anything by merely seeing the charges on Valsing. I was in Bhopal when Madhuri had come to appeal in Indore High Court. She had signature collected by people of Barwani in more than 500 A4 sized pages (filled on both sides) with heading 'arrest us' on the top of all. We felt it was essential to put the number of people who signed in there and we almost spent whole day numbering them and it came around 7500 people. Finally I had got the news from Madhuri and others that Valsingbhai got bail from Indore Court.

Urban groups & members/volunteers of AID (association of India's development)

At the meetings of AID, we had organized interactions with Pushpaji of Bhalaswa Lok Shakti , a group supported by AID (US) in Bhalaswa, a resettlement colony in the worst landfills on the outer periphery of Delhi. The people's struggles primarily are to fight displacement before eviction, and then once settled, for obtaining the basic necessities such as water and sanitation, ration shop supplies, schools etc.

Visit to Harola Basti at Sector 5, noida where Mobile Creche works

Mobile Creches (<http://www.mobilecreches.org/>) has been involved with some ICDS related interventions in Delhi and one basti in Noida. I happened to visit their Noida basti where in they have been working since 2004. Gangaben, who's supposedly the community leader and Krishnaji, who is the supervisor from Mobile Creches, showed me around. They had started their efforts in 2004, with awareness generation using puppets, street theatre, songs etc, related to child care, after which a few interested women gathered for the child care training. Some 5 balwadis were setup after that with those trained women and in parallel they started exploring the possibilities of anganwadi setup by the Noida authority. The women's group in the community went to Noida authority who registered an application demanding anganwadis in their basti. After one year of consistent follow up, at present, they have 3 anganwadis and one balwadi (by MC), in the basti. The women, who were trained by MC, become AWW later on. However due to more number of kids, they still required a balwadi, for which they were charging nominal fees for one kid. The awareness levels have increased in the community, as Krishna mentions, basti women had started questioning her for these fees as nothing's charged by the government for anganwadis!

Slums of Noida Sector 16

AID volunteers in Noida have been running an education center where they try to get the drop-out students back to school after teaching them for some time. The slum area, often called as Juggi Jhopadi in Noida, is situated along side Sahadara sewage line coming from delhi inside Noida. Some of the present residents say that the land was earlier in Delhi some 30 years back and later moved inside UP. To some, it's still a disputed area since the sewage is under Delhi flood control department. The ration cards and other residential proofs, however, have Noida Sector 16 as its address. I keep going to these slums with Pulkit whenever I'm in Delhi and converse with people there. Almost all of these are migrant, majority from Bihar. But all of them have local ration cards. These ration card is of different nature, that has 'Pradhikaran Patra' written on it, with a

note that they are only valid for 3 months. I tried to find more information about this type of cards, but in vein. Finally I sent an RTI applications to DSO (District Supply Officer) and still awaiting its response. I had also make an application for "Anganwadi on demand", which yielded in no response. Follow up on this is in my list of pending items when I go back to Noida.

Celebration of 20 years of MKSS struggle on May-Day at Bhim

I didn't have to think twice before nodding in approval upon listening to Kavita's suggestion to visit Bhim on May Day, where MKSS was to organize a celebration of their 20 years of struggle. After an eventful journey in a jeep packed to the rafters (actually much more!), I reached the mela-ground in Bhim, overflowing with a massive gathering of over 7000 villagers from across Rajasthan (along with many others having assembled from various parts of India). People from different villages poured in with the banners of their unions and were cheered on their arrival by the vociferous crowd, chanting slogans. The day was filled with tales from the illustrious journey of MKSS, the singing of legendary songs (on all sorts of issues) authored by Shankar Singh, puppet shows and experience sharing by other veteran activists. The ground was surrounded by a variety of stalls that sold books, art-works, clothes, food items, etc., apart from providing services for assisting with RTI applications.

It was quite inspiring to listen to people like Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, Kavita Srivastava, Harsh Mander, Shankar Singh and many other stalwarts, sharing their tales of endless struggle and many success stories. More intriguing were the experience sharings by the villagers who have been working with them for 20 years. Aruna introduced some of the old ladies, who, supposedly have been well-known story-tellers and have even given a taste of her tongue to some of the District officers. Amongst all the fascinating stories, one of them was of Lalsinghji from Soham Garh who met Arunaji in 1987, after being thrown out of his job in police force for attempting to unionize people there! He expressed that his desire to generate union of people was fulfilled at MKSS :-).

Seeing such an overwhelming crowd I took the opportunity to spend some time interacting with the villagers that had gathered. Sitadevi, a woman from Kishangarh, Ajmer had instantly come up with very impressive folk song, the moment I told her that I come from Ahmedabad and live in Delhi! The problems that were discussed were mainly of NREGA wages. Almost every woman complained that they were being paid shabby Rs 30/- of wage for the working under scorching sun with hot sand. Unemployment allowance is a distant dream for some of them. One can only imagine the consequences of working in the heat of Rajasthan with no water being provided at worksite and not enough food is affordable to meet the nutritional requirements to perform such type of work. Most heart-wrenching for me was the innocent yet profound question by Sitadevi as it simply put in her own words "I and my husband are more than 50 years old, and barely able to work in the field, have no land of our own and no kids. Still we are denied of BPL card. Can you help us getting it?" I wish I could have a definite answer for her and I also wish our shameless politicians and administrators who are currently discussing about definition of 'poor' and how best to exclude them by limiting quotas, can hear Sitadevi and more people like her.

During the same period, like it happens in any big gathering, I was approached by a few kids who beg for food. Generally I try not to go for short-cuts by offering something, for if given something to one, I know, the rest will follow. This time I made an exception, but as expected, 3 more kids came running to me. I now bought two dishes of pur-bhaji and asked all the 4 kids to share. Shockingly, one of them flinched, said he wouldn't eat with the other three! Though the reason became evident to me, still I asked why and here came the dreaded answer "Main Thakur hun, aur vo log nichhi jaat ke hai" [I am Thakur, and those people are from lower caste]. Until this point, I'd only heard about level of castism in kids but now an example of it was in front of me. With all the debates over castism around, only logical conclusion that I can draw is that even though one can erase today's caste based fundamentalism and start all over again, the society will still have

some people who would be working as manual scavengers, cobblers, etc and some will be white-collarists. If the basic dignity of work is not maintain, we will again end up with the discrimination – if not of a caste, then of a class - so the real solution seems to provide dignified wages to any type of work so that every human being is able to live life of basic comfort and dignity. That sounds the ultimate path to equity for me. But when I asked the profession of these kids' parents, all of them were daily wagers, the caste discrimination here didn't seem to depend on the type of work. I still don't go back to re-think, but now I do agree that even before getting such a system that I envisaged, we need to erase the current system, where the discriminatory thoughts are so deep-rooted and that has also been brainwashing little kids, the youngest generation we have that can make an impactful change if addressed today.

Just as I had observed in the Delhi Darna, here too, the overall crowd contained more women than men, for we all know, that women are the least paid workers irrespective of their castes or class.

Aruna mentioned that they had also sent the demand of increasing NREGA wages as per inflated rates in Rajasthan. The signatures were taken for the appeal and the demands will be sent again. Some of the demands that were mentioned are¹⁷:

- Payment of at least the minimum and full wages to all.
- Those who've finished their work should be free to go to their homes (specially in the summer when sun is at its peak in Rajasthan)
- The minimum wages have been at Rs. 100/- for last two years without accounting the inflation thereafter. The demand was made to take inflation into account and increase the wages periodically.
- Job card should be issued when demanded and should be in the name of each eligible individual in the family as opposed to one job card for the whole family.
- Mobile phones are now easily available in the rural areas hence the demand was raised for a toll free calling service for immediate resolution of the issues.
- Old age pension included with NREGA wages: The suggestion was to cut Rs. 5 from the wages and match it with equal or double amount and deposited it in the pension fund for that person which can be utilized in the old age.

*“Har hath ko kaam mile,
kaam ka pura daam mile
aur bhdhape mein aaram mile”*

Sangathan of People Displaced by Bargi Dam and Kisaan Adivasi Sangathan

From Rourkela, I went to Bargi, a place in Jabalpur district to know more about the sangathan of people who were displaced by Bargi dam. I felt the need to understand this a little more from those who are displaced by dams rather than just reading from various sources. I stayed in Bargi, and visited the villages of the Sangathan for a week.

Bargi comes under Jabalpur district and is 2 hours away from the Jabalpur city. From Rourkella, I had to go to Jabalpur via Bilaspur. Only 5 hours of train journey from Rourkella to Bilaspur showed glimpses of destruction that can happen due to mining and industrialization, and explains the issues with Orissa and Chattisgarh. Just from the small window of the train, I saw plenty of coal loading sites, numerous big ash Mountains and more than 6 big industrial plants, grossly polluting the land & water in the surroundings as well as air.

After reaching Rajkumarji's house in Bargi I first studied the report of Human cost of Bargi dam. Bargi was the first dam built as series of Narmada Dam projects. The work that was conceptualized in 1968 was started in 1974 and completed in 1990, making it 20 years at present for the dam. Initial plant states that expected

¹⁷ In the months of October-November 2010, MKSS and other allies in Rajasthan also kicked off Mazdoor Huq Yatra and Satyagrah with these and many other demands (primarily for NREGA wages) – Please refer to <http://srabhiyan.wordpress.com/> for more info.

irrigation should be 2.98 lac Ha but today after 20 years, It provides irrigation to little over 9000 Ha of land. The work of two left and right main canals are not even completed, let alone sub canals. The total cost was estimated initially as 69 Crores and was escalated to 566.31 crores in 1989, excluding canal cost (1665.60cr). The 26797 ha reservoir of the dam ended up displacing more than 7000 Families (over 35000 people approx.) from 162 villages of Mandla, Jabalpur and Seoni districts (out of which 82 villages were completely submerged and 8478 Ha or forest land was gone). Most of the displaced were forced to dwell in slums of Jabalpur, some have gone to Patan Tehsil of Jabalpur, Gotegaon in Narsinhpur and even to Baigachak districts in search of work after losing their land. Many people have been displaced multiple times due to miscalculations. A few hills have become islands and some people are still staying there and commuting with boats. The compensation for private land was meager and wasn't even given to most of them. Even those who had money to buy a tiny piece of land couldn't buy as land prices due to dam were suddenly escalated. The refugees of the peripheral forest land were fined and harassed by the forest departments. I was accompanied to the dam by one of the Sangathan karyakarta and was mesmerized seeing the size of the reservoir, which enabled me to imagine what a massive destruction would it have been. Later next day I also visited to villages of Jabalpur and met a few members of fishermen co-operative that was formed by sangathan to help generate livelihoods for some of the displaced.

The wrong estimations by the irrigation department had also resulted into over-acquisition of the land. Over 150 acre of land was stayed unused after being acquired and hasn't given back to people who owned it. Some of them have anyway started cultivation there even after a lot of threats by the concerned officials, but people say that this land will be used for the garden by tourism department. People are also hearing about plans of a national park on the reservoir, which will again displace them.

With Shardaji, another sangathan karyakarta, I went to villages of Mandla district, which has witnessed highest amount of displacement. It took 4 hours to reach Tatighat village (Narayanganj Vikaskhand). The direct route length to this place from bargi is approx. 35 kms, but due to the dam reservoir, it has now increased to 100 kms. I had some informative discussions with Shardaji enroute, where he explained me about his initiatives of organic farming in Mandla district. After getting training for a few farmers from a place in Maharashtra, they had converted to organic farming and this is now 5th year for some 40 farmers in Mandla district.

A lot of the farmers in Mandla whose land was gone in the dam had settled and started using some unoccupied land in the uphill areas and today they have been able to get the ownership under forest rights act. It seems they did cut the forest for agriculture, but again Shardaji mentions, they were careful enough in not cutting bigger trees. One quarter in a year, when the water level of the dam goes down, some of the land that is freed of water is used by villagers for farming. People have also worked out a plan for getting ownership of this land for farming, with cap on the maximum allotment of 7 acre for those who used to own big chunk of land in that area, hence ensuring equitable distribution for everyone. But this also ends up hurting some of the ex-big farmers, often generated into internal frictions or even violence. There have even been incidents of such disputes getting till court and still staying unresolved. The hemlets that were formed of displaced people after dam had a lot of challenges for people who started living there. It took lot many years of struggle to get basic facilities such as health, schools, anganwadis, roads, water, electricity, ration shop etc. A lot of villages are still not recognized as forest or revenue villages and things like NREGA hasn't begun there yet. Tatighat was one of the many villages that didn't have electricity for a long time. But due to efforts by people of Tatighat they could get free solar panels for themselves. Today also they are able to run most of their electricity needs through these solar panels, even when they have grid connection.

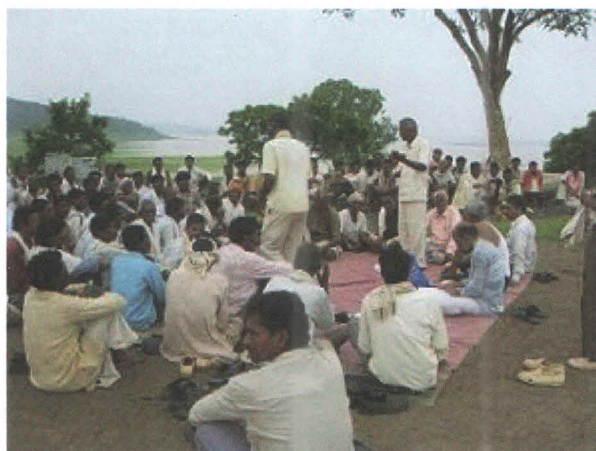
Chutka Parmanu Sangarsh Samiti

300 families from Chutka, a village in Mandla will be displaced for the 3rd time now. First due to the dam reservoir, then because of the wrong estimation of the submergence area and now for the third time when

Madhya Pradesh will have its first nuclear plant on the banks of this reservoir. The promises are made to the villagers for electricity, but government can't answer that why even after having two hydel power plant units on the Bargi dam, people get hardly 1-2 hours of electricity in the day (Many villages aren't even getting that much). The Chutka Parmanu Sangarsh Samiti that was formed by people struggling against the power plants since its conceptualization. People did not let the survey happen for the initial few times. The last time they found a few people secretly conducting survey for the reservoir land, they got suspicious and snatched their bags asking them to go to their seniors and get them to have a dialogue. The district collector too had gone to the people and did a meeting with them, where in one of the female member simply told them that people are ready to give in writing that they have been doing okay without electricity and they don't want electricity for next 100 years. So please stop the plant now. During the meeting one female commented "Why don't they make the plant on the banks of big lake of Bhopal, that too has a lot of water. But they wouldn't want to spoil health of city dwellers, we villagers are the only guinea pigs." I did study some of the press reports of the nuclear plant. The nuclear power corporation document favoring nuclear power plants has an interesting line in it. About Chernobyl nuclear disaster, it does accept that the impact on health, human lives and environment was huge, but it also foolishly adds "Even this accident involving massive release of radiation did not result anywhere comparable to an atomic explosion." – So, according to NPCL, one should only object when the disaster is as huge as an atomic explosion! I also heard some of them wooing villagers about benefits of power plant in their own lives and bitching about Rajkumarji outside the meeting. The new Tehsildar though seemed cooperative, when he was sitting in the meeting, busy taking notes.



Barela Thermal Power Plant



Another thermal power plant that's already under construction is in Barela in Jabalpur District. We had a visit to the power plant site where the work was going on. The Sangathan hasn't been able to stick its feet here as the village is not one of the displaced. A few of us went and talked to the villagers and got to know some details on the scenario. The Jhabua Power Limited Company that is building the plant (2 units of 600MW each), had declared 5 lac per acre as compensation for the private land. Since the area was mostly agriculture and not residential, there has not been any displacement. People did protest initially but later took the compensation. Now, due to lack of awareness and

literacy, a lot of them were cheated on the compensation and were given only 50000 or 70000 per acre. The tea-stall owner near the plant site told us that a few of them who came to know about this, did stage the protest, which also went violent with lathi charge etc from the company goons. Not many could buy the land from the compensation money as money in itself wasn't enough to buy same amount of land plus the land prices due to sudden demand had also increased multifold. Many of them today regret for selling the land as money is nearing its end and they do not still possess any land for future security.

The power plant construction gives employment to total of 1000 people, out of which some of the unskilled labour is taken from Barela. But they haven't given employment to people from any other nearby villages. The operational employment is only 300 'skilled' people, so villagers now fear that they won't get anything

after the plant is constructed. Moreover we saw that the distance between plants and the residential area of Barela was only one separating road. The tea-stall owner mentioned that the realization of the sufferings they will have due to pollution next door, has only come now for the villagers. Some people standing there also told us about proposals that have come to Panchayat Samiti for the cement plant besides this power plant and this time it seems people don't want to part with their land after bitter experiences with JPL power plant. I got hold of EIA document of JPL plant from Rajkumarji and a lot of new facts came to my knowledge. It was shocking to know that some 86 trucks are employed to make rounds with ash from the power plants to the ash loading place and some 56 Ha of area is only built for ash storage for 9 years. It's important to note here that the ash that's generated is more than 150 tonnes per hour (both fly and bottom ash combined). I was reminded of those ash mountains I saw from train on my way to Bilaspur. Coal requirement of this plant is approx 365 tonnes per hour and water requirement is 2362 cubic meter/hour, out of which they are planning to treat and re-use only 392 cubic meter/hour water.

Now the water for this plant, that's obviously going to come from Bargi reservoir, will be taken near village Baragadi in Seoni district. Normally the villagers living on the banks of the reservoir aren't permitted to lift the dam water by any means for agriculture. But permissions are loosened always for power plants and industries. Baragadi is one such village like Tatighat, where every evening people sit on the banks of massive reservoir and keep staring at their lost land in floods of water – water that they aren't supposed to use even after sacrificing their lands. Once displaced, a family goes 20 years back in their life, where they have to start from point zero again for all their basic needs, be it food, housing, education, water, electricity or health. They feel they have a right to the bargi water, for which they were made to give up these precious years of their lives. So, people of Baragadi do not want their water to go to the Barela power plant, and they are ready to fight for this. They had organized a meeting where I went along with Rajkumarji and other Karyakartas. Mammuji, aadivasi of this village interestingly taunted that "These days, for any kind of work, it's difficult to find any tehsil official in their offices, but now we know where to go if we want to meet them. They all have opened new office at the power plant site."

A lot of them had issues with pattas of their forest land, and most of them had been cheated by pattas for lesser amount of land than the one that was calculated using PDA. One woman complained that even to give appeal for such issue, she needs to go to Seoni, and when she didn't have money for transportation, she asked her son to go and ask for some work at the power plant site, but he was denied.

Hazardous Effects of Coal fired Thermal Power Plants

I had vague idea of the pollution due to coal fired thermal power plants since I had been following some of the writings on reasons behind saving electricity. When we talk about the pollution of coal power plants, we also have to consider huge water required for generation of electricity and impacts of mining on environment. Moreover, the damage caused due to the cutting of forests mining also has to be accounted for. (Ironically, just as I type these lines, perhaps a lot of middleclass citizens are buying stocks of Coal India, one of the biggest coal giant.) Here's what I could compile with the help of the information gathered from various sources.¹⁸

Major impacts of coal fired power plant on environment

- High concentrations of Sulphur Dioxide, Oxides of Nitrogen and SPM around coal based power plants.
- Rise in respiratory disorders in the population living within a 2-5 km radius of the plant.
- The high amount of carbon dioxide emission from thermal power plants contribute to global warming leading to climate change is significant.

¹⁸ Majority of this information is compiled from various documents provided by Leo S (from ESG)

- Massive fly ash generation that contains a toxic brew of dangerous chemicals and is the largest contributor to mercury pollution.
 - Fly ash contains as main chemical components SiO₂ (51.4 wt%), Al₂O₃ (22.1 wt%) and Fe₂O₃ (17.2 wt%; ignited weight basis). Many toxic elements and heavy metals are also highly enriched in the fly ash relative to the original coal.
 - Water slurry is used to take the ash from the power plant to the ash pond for disposal. Water may contain harmful heavy metals like boron, which have a tendency to leach out over a period of time. When fly ash comes into contact with water, leaches into groundwater supplies which get polluted and unsuitable for domestic use.
 - Large amount of land is used to dispose flyash from the coal based plants. Due to this there is change in natural soil properties. It becomes more alkaline due to the alkaline nature of fly ash.
- Power plants emit around 50 tons of mercury pollution annually. Coal is naturally contaminated with mercury, and when it is burned to generate electricity, mercury is released into the air through the smokestacks.

Kisan Adivasi Sangathan – Kesla

I went to Kesla to meet Sunilji from Kisan Adivasi Sangathan for a day. He and his wife Smita have been working there for last 25 years. Sunilji himself has been one of the displaced from dam on Chambal river. But since his father could hold good education he was able to get the job of lecturer/professor in Government College and since then they have been travelling with transfers. I was awestruck to see the amount of sacrifices the couple had made for the cause and to live up to their ideals. Though being graduated from one of the most renowned institute, he has chosen to live in a mud hut, with even getting rid of the needs such as LPG cooking stove. The only difference in his lifestyle and that of normal villager was the mini library he got in his hut.

Major section of Kisaan Adivasi sangathan comprises of the people who were displaced from Tawa dam, national park and the space created for army firing. As Tawa dam was the first one to be built in Narmada valley, around 40 years back, this couple entered in lives of people much later. Besides his work with Sangathan, I had other meaningful discussion about the history of various movements in India. He elaborated on the emergence and the need behind the political party – Samajvadi Jan Parishad – that he is affiliated with. Well, to an extent I too agree that a strong political movement is an effective tool for bringing in the real change, but it's also evident seeing BJP, how difficult it is to unite people - even that of the well-aware civil society itself - that fighting the deeply corrupted system holds a huge challenge. I wonder if replacing the existing system altogether is a better deal or repairing the existing one. A lot of such questions stay unanswered, and a few will always be.

Mozda Collective

I had heard a lot about Michel Mazgaonkar and Swati Desai from AIDers and was thinking of giving them a visit for long. Recently I got to know that Michel will be in US for 2 months, so I decided to visit there Mozda before that on my way back to Bangalore.

Mozda is a village situated in Dediapada Taluk near Rajpipla. Michel and Swati, both have parents coming from gandhian and JP movements. After a journey together to understand India, they



had stayed in Rajpipla for 2 years and later shifted to Mozda. Since then it has been 20 years of their stay with this community, a collective that they proudly call 'Mozda Parivar'¹⁹. The first thing I noticed after reaching was their house, with Bamboo and mud/cowdung that looks similar to any other house in the surroundings has a lot of things worth noticing. They do have several amenities of city-dwellers that they've collected for last 20 years, but living in the harmony with nature is the observation to take backhome. Michel, basically an engineer, has been into a lot of different types of innovations relating to appropriate energy. Their house does have a connection to grid, but most of their needs are managed with solar panels and wind-mill installed outside the house. The solar cooker that he has made generates heat at 400 degree and can cook food for 15 people easily in 1.5 hours when the sunlight is enough and has a clock setting that rotates its big focusing mirror with the movement of sun after initial calibration. I also saw the much-talked about Pedal power generator that he made with two of his friends Ravi Kuchimanchi (one of the founding members of AID) and Roni. But due to its maintenance requirements and bulky design, it could not make its way through the community.

Their work throughout these years has been widespread but based on the demands from community that they cater to. They have been encouraging watershed development and collective of women for tur dal. Other than that Michel with his innovations, also produces LED lights, recharges batteries of the people that they use to light up their houses (with the help of wind-mill), etc. They also have been giving workshops or trainings on RTI to people that they use to some extent to resolve issues of corruption by people in their routine life. Recently they have started addressing ownership issues related to forest rights act also.

Jan Jagaran Shakti Sangathan, Bihar

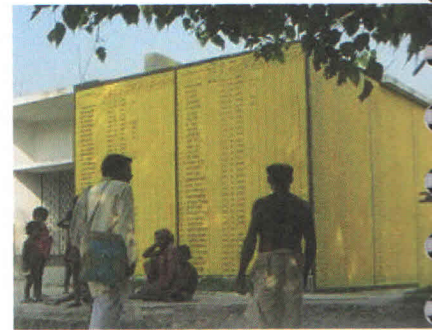
Kamayani Swami and Ashish Ranjan, a couple who has been associated with AID in US and India (Bangalore) for over 3 years, later shifted to Bihar and initiated process of Jan Jagaran Shakti Sangathan(JJSS) in Araria. Kamayani, who spent 2-3 years with MKSS in Rajasthan earlier, has been involved full time with the Sangathan work and Ashish, who's a lecturer in BIT in Patna volunteers during the weekends and holidays. JJSS aims to bring holistic change in lives of rural population by empowering them for 'Sangharsh' and 'Nirman'. For now NREGA stays their central focus, as they've found it a binding force for the people. The seeds of JJSS were sown during the intensive survey of NREGS carried out by Prof. Jean Dreze and other students during the year 2008 in districts of Araria and Kaimur. Ashish and Kamayani had volunteered for that and later decided to get involved further. Due to this, their current focus has been on the implementation of NREGA while building the Sangathan and they plan to expand the focus and make it more holistic in future as the Sangathan grows stronger. After the survey initially the team consisted of a few dedicated volunteers and later they started receiving funds as some of the volunteers begun contributing full time. At present 4 of them are being paid minimum wages for their work. Soon after they started work, they faced massive Kosi floods and had to juggle with relief work, which also in a way helped their team to grow further with more committed volunteers.

JJSS has been using Padyatra as an initial mobilization tool. The team of 10-12 people walk from one village to the other for 5 days with mike and band, carry out meetings with people and try to put forth the idea of the Sangathan along with NREGA awareness generation. JJSS villages are the first to obtain unemployment allowance in the state of Bihar. During the months of June-July, Sangathan along with district administration, organized social audits in 9 blocks and has been following up on them since then. The investigations carried out thereafter even resulted in sacking of 4-5 PRS. The student volunteers who were helping with social audit process, in some cases found that the passbooks of people, lying in post office where in some cases being distributed just before they met the villagers. I spent most of my time helping with follow-up work on the

¹⁹ For more details please refer to <http://www.mozda.net/reports.html>

unemployment allowance, late payment and new work applications in 9-10 villages of Araria and Raniganj blocks and 2 villages of Katihar district.

Ranjit, who's been with JJSS since its inception as a volunteer and now as its full time karyakarta, is a politically inclined fellow, Having been tied with LJP (Lok Janshakti Party) initially, he then went with CPI-M after being influenced by th the party ideology, though hasn't been much of an active political party member. I went to Chatar Panchayat with Ranjit and together we prepared applications for the late payment. The operational guidelines (2008) of NREGA(2005), mention that in case of delay in payment, the worker is entitled to the compensation under payment of wages act 1936. Sangathan decided to use this to push the administration in order to resolve the problem of delay in the wage payment. I found a lot of villagers whose passbooks were still with the postmaster, who apparently felt them at risk in huts of people due to rats and assured people of better safety in the post office!



With Aravind, another karyakarta of JJSS, I went to Katihar district. "I was a 'badmash' fellow before I began volunteering with JJSS" he says. He was introduced to the Sangathan by Ranji and since then his life changed. In Katihar we first met JE of the work done in convergence with flood control department to inquire about the advices that need to be sent in order to push the timely payment. Thereafter we went to Chitoriya gram panchayat with Jiten, a local sangathan member. At Chitoriya Panchayat, I saw series of wall paintings in the community hall building as well as outside Panchayat building that aimed at transparency in terms of budgets of all work plants, number of days each person works for etc.



Chitoriya is situated quite nearby to Katihar city, but still has no electricity connection. The electricity poles are standing tall and wireless since 1985, but I heard they were connecting wires to it before elections! During the night when I stayed at Jiten's hut, I chatted with women including Jiten's wife. Also tried to reason out with people regarding need to have a Sangathan. The seriousness that's given to education was clearly seen by the night tuitions of Kids being conducted in the candle-light by a boy studying in 10th class. Jiten also told me how they've been monitoring the construction of the new school building, giving credit to the presence of the Sangathan.

There was a state order sent to all the Panchayats asking Mukhiyas and Panchayat Rozgar Sevaks(PRS) to hold Gram Sabha on 2nd Oct, in order to discuss the work plans for the next year. The recent social audit for the koskapur had shown very abysmal status of the NREGA works. Hence JJSS karyakartas decided to participate in the Gram Sabha there. I along with Kamayani and others travelled to Koskapur on cycles. This was my first bicycle-ride (perhaps same for Kamayani I guess) that went longer than 40kms with an ordinary bicycle; on flooded, muddy and extremely bumpy rural roads! Koskapur dwellers tolerate the after-effects of kosi-flood almost every year. Almost every half a kilometer, we had to get down of our cycles and walk barefooted through knee-deep flood water, containing matters and species that I didn't want to think about! On our way we stopped by different hamlets to inform people of different meetings. In Rishidev Tola (hemlet of a dalit caste) where we had breakfast, women told us that no child from there was accepted in the school! One child who was earlier admitted in the school said the teacher doesn't let Rishidev kids to enter in the school.

Post lunch I had some conversation with men and women working as agricultural labour. Before NREGA implementation, they used to get meager Rs 20-30 a day for more than 12 hours of drudging in the dirty water and fields. Once they came to know about NREGA through Sangathan Padyatra and then demanded

work. Today because of Rs 114/- of minimum wages of NREGA, their wages of agriculture work has also increased to at least Rs 65-70 a day. Like Koskapur, a lot many parts of Araria district have patches of flood water during monsoons, that are used by landlords for soaking Jute-sticks. Jute sticks have to be macerated in water for over 20 days, after which the fibers are detached. For this, one had to work in the dirty water barefoot and people while doing this get all kinds of diseases. They get one bunch of jute out of every 7 they separate, which they sell at market price. It seemed to me that they end up spending more on health than what they get.



Men and women soaking Jute in water



Flooded roads and fields

Shivnarayan is another interesting JJSS karyakarta. Originally from of Araria, he had been working in plywood industry as a contractor for labour supply for 8 years. Besides that he had special interest and passion for singing, which played significant role in changing his life and introduced him to JJSS during the first of its Padyatra when he heard songs of justice. He started volunteering right after that and now has been working with the Sangathan full time. After Koskapur, with Shivnarayan, I further went to many other villages of Raniganj block. For preparing work-application and late payment compensation application, we went one village after another and did meetings during the nights in different Hamlets. During the nights I discussed at length about plight of landless labour and their causes of migration. During the evenings, I tried to gather a few women to have some female centric conversations. I found that most women I talked to had lost at least child either at birth or before 5 years age. A few had also lost 4-5. Majority of women didn't want to bear multiple pregnancies. Very few, in fact mentioned male-child preference as the reason for multiple pregnancies. It's insecurity of poverty at the old age and the high child mortality that is driving them to have more kids. Educated women were rare to find, but whenever I bumped into one who had even passed till 5th class, I invariably found that they had less than 3 kids and were bolder in communication with me. During one of those days, I ended up with torn cloth and had to borrow a sari from a woman whose house we stayed in. Next day, I pillion rode a bicycle wearing that sari 😊.

It's comparatively difficult to unite people and generates awareness looks pretty difficult in the state of Bihar that is extremely divided into castes and religion and has the highest rates of illiteracy, corruption and migration. Every hamlet in each village is divided based on a particular caste. I observed worse living conditions in Mahadalits and Muslims. Feudalism has its own history here, which still prevails and majority of the rural population is landless labour. Poverty also results into abysmal living conditions and sorry health of people. More than half the kids I saw were carrying swollen bally indicating high grades of malnutrition and hunger. Instinctively, I feel partly Bihar's present situation has specific historical reasons. Yet another perspective to be gained is in pipeline.

CHLP Orientation in Bangalore and visits to Hannur and Raichur

Classroom sessions

A lot many interesting sessions arranged throughout 9 months of CHLP (including orientation) were helpful in understanding various dimensions of health and health care. Sessions involved matters such as People's Health Movement, NRHM, community medicines, Drugs and role of IPRs, traditional medicines, HIV-AIDs, maternal and child health, disaster management workshops, sharings from ex-fellows and endless discussion on various issues.

Raichur visit

Untill 1948, Raichur, along with other 4 districts were under Nizam of Hyderabad, due to which this zone is often referred to as Hyderabad-Karnataka. The district has Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers passing through north and south of it respectively. Cotton, Paddy, Sunflower and Jowar are the main crops being grown here.

A lot of castism issues prevail in the district even today. 'Lingayata' and 'Gowda' are the major dominant upper caste. 'Nayak' which are not originaly tribals, somehow have got themselves classified under ST, hence they act as a dominant part in ST. 'Chaluwadi' (funeral services) and 'Madiga' (skinning dead animals) consist the majority of the untouchable SC population. Raichur has grossly unequal land distribution. Many gowdas own big chunk of land. An MLA, even today owns 4000 acres of land.

Jagrutha Mahihila Sangathana (JMS)

JMS was started in the month of October 1999 and is managed by Navnirman Trust. The basic objective of the group was to represent the voice of the voiceless, that is women from the SC/ST caste. It currently operates in 3 divisions – Potnal, Balganur, Bagalwada and consists of 2 sanchalaki and 1 karyakarta (co-ordinator) in each division.

Today, it has become a collective of total 40 Sanghas, operating from different villages, primarily by dalit women. These women work on various issues like NREGA, NRHM, PDS, livelihood generation, fighting for other oppressed women etc. For instance, one of the noteworthy struggle by the women was for the loss of jobs due to machine harvesting during the draught years. Protest against that was successful & jobs were given back to peasants. This prevented migration and also the wages were increased. An incident involving gang rape (by 3 upper caste men) of a girl who goes house to house to collect hairs and give a hair pin in return (one of the local form of income generation) was protested by 600 women. By local protests, they could get the rapists into the jail though later they were freed on bail. The women have even protested for upper caste women who were burnt alive.

Chilipili school

Chilipili, the sound of bird, as the name suggests, is the school that was initiated with the intentions of admitting ex-child labourers back to mainstream education. In early years, school was run as a temporary school with different communities on yearly basis. For last 2 years, it has become a residential school under NCLP (National Child Labour Program) and found home inside the JMS hut. Apart from Rs. 11/- for meals (which consist of 3 meals in a day!), kids also get Rs. 100/- per month stipend and books under NCLP. The stipend is deposited in the bank account which opened in the name of each child. Most of the kids, prior to their admission at chilipili, were involved in agricultural labour work. Majority of the kids were working as agricultural labourers or grazing cattle of the land lords. A few of them, we found, were pledged as bonded labour by their parents for the loans taken from landlords. While asking questions about their past, we

hesitated a bit with the thought that it might disturb them, where as nothing of that was true when kids seamlessly shared their background. Perhaps, they would've become immune to such questions, having been asked frequently by the visitors. The teachers are trained in teaching with innovative methods of learning. One of the teachers is also ex-chilipili student who studied till PUC after being admitted back to school by chilipili. A few of the ex-students have applied for Anganwadi workers with the help of JMS karyakarta. So far the school is cattered to approximately 350 kids. The kids, at Chilipili are taught to be self-reliant. Activities such as washing one's own cloths, cleaning of rooms where they sleep, plastering the compound with cow-dung are efficiently taken care of by kids.

Herbal Medicine Unit

Herbal medicine unit of JMS was started by Mita, who after her travel through Raichur villages went to Hyderabad for one month of training in Harbal medicine. She then gathered 80 women from 40 villages to disseminate her learning in the form of training. There was a lack of interest from many women initially but when they found the worth of the knowledge many came forward to learn more. Two women were then sent to Mysore for further training of 8 days, who ended up training 8 more women (2 women from 4 villages) after coming back. With such trainings, the unit has now 16 trained women, who on every Thursday, which happens to be the market day for Potnal, these women open Herbal clinic for the other villagers. JMS Hut gives them space to grow herbs. In the initial period, many women lacked confidence to approach people with their skills. To overcome this, for 2 years, they started using the herbal remedies in their own house first, where they observed quite an improvement in their family health which gave them enough courage to approach the other villagers. Chinamma, who happens to be very good healer, explained us various herbal medicines and their benefits. It was impressive to hear them narrating their stories of cases where they could successfully heal numerous cases of headache, migrain, paralisys and white skin patches.

Terracotta Income generation group

Nearly 80-100 women from different sanghas were trained for terracotta jewellery products during drought years (2001-3) by Koshi, who did his diploma in Pottery. The training was started to generate means of livelihoods when mass migration took place due to severe drought. Half the women dropped out in the end due to difficult nature of the work. It took around one full year to stabilize the group which finally consisted 12-14 women who were determined to go on. During farming season, these women work as agricultur labourers and for the rest of the days they create the jwelleries. They produce depending on orders and go for exhibitions to several places (such as Dastakar exhibitions). The wage standard followed is of the NREGA where in each women draws Rs. 110/- per day as per the number of days she works. Gangamma, who knows reading and writing, manages accounts. The women during our interactions, shared how they have gained more confidence after working independently for years now, and even with the challenge of aging vision, they are determined to go on.



Interactions with Sangha women at Amreshwara camp

Despite the fact that it was late evening when we visited, all the sanga women took time out of their routine schedule gathered at one place for a meeting with us. Their sangha consists of 15 women who have been saving Rs. 20/- per week for last 2 years. The money is deposited in a farmer's co-operative bank and the account is managed by 2 representatives. From the money accumulated in the bank, they provide low interest loans and hence, it helps them avoid loans from money-lender or from banks. "Earlier we used to hide our face with 'pallu' before formaing sangas, but now we simply tie it across our waist and walk

anywhere." a profound fact, most effectively put by one of the Sanga women, upon asking about the changes that formation of sangha brought into their lives.

Nav Jeevana Mahila Okhuta (NJMO)

On the last day of our stay at Potnal, a few women from NJMO visited us and all of us had a good discussion about the splendid work that the Okhuta women have been doing for last 6 years. Navjeevana Mahila Okhuta was started by Abhay Kumar with the initial focus of Devdasi rehabilitation and gradually expanded their intervention into other women's issues. Mokshamma, Dhyamma and Yelamma from NJMO first started with explaining about the devdasi tradition.. (Some bits of this interaction and other learnings about this are captured in a blog post²⁰.) In the initial years they tried to organized women in 4 taluks in Raichur district. Some of the major issues addressed by Okhutta are of wages/employment, housing and education for kids of devdasis. With other partner organizations, they facilitate the vocational trainings of such kids. Some of the orphan kids or the girls that are to become devdasis in near future are sent to Visthar in bangalore, that runs residential school for children at risk. One of the surveys carried out by NJMO, showed more than 300 devdasis living home-less in Raichur, which was sent to the Rajiv Gandhi housing board in Bangalore. After hefty follow up for nearly 2.5 years they could get 280 houses sanctioned, building which again required tremendous amount of work with individual Gram Panchayats and local authorities.

NJMO also intervened in the NREGA related issues for all the oppressed women, including devdasis. Apart from awareness generation about the NREGA, they also helped women to get their job cards, unemployment allowances (when applicable) etc. For example, a 15 days dharna opposite to the DC office which could get women their pending unemployment allowances.

75 SHGs of Lingasur Taluk, under guidance of NJMO, formed a co-operative society which now has 1050 members. It's called as Swabhimana Janapara Vividha Uddesha Sahakara Sangha. It works as a bank that gives 0.5% interest per month for deposits and charges 2% interest for loans. Membership fee is Rs. 125/- and share value is Rs. 100/-. So far the members have put together 9 lac Rupees.

PRA Workshop at Hannur

We went to Hannur for a workshop of PRA (Participatory rural Appraisal), conducted by Dr. Sam Joseph. The most important learning from the workshop I've gathered is not to turn PRA into 'Poke and Run Away' exercise. PRA is not just about drawing several maps and figuring out the situation in a short duration of time. The actual 'participation' can happen only when one becomes a 'stakeholder' into the whole activity. Participation takes a long time, and one needs to be ready to give that much of time. One can't teach people about nutrition unless one tries to understand why people are under nourished at the first place. And it is always important to figure out who's sovereign, people or the government? It always have to be people. I personally could not find much worth in the mere PRA exercises unless one keeps a goal of a true participatory process in the longer run.

Future Plans

It's still difficult for me to come to a decision about my ultimate future plans, but for the time being I've decided to give my time to Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan (JADS) in Barwani. I will primarily be focusing on the school, agricultural and reforestation methods, besides taking part in the usual Sangathan work.

²⁰ <http://sejswhirlpool.wordpress.com/2010/03/23/servent-of-god-or-victim-of-lust/>

Annexure I - People's hearing on starvation deaths and food related schemes in Gaya

19 May 2010 (at 10AM to 4 PM)

Organiser PUCL, Gaya

Co-organizers: Ekta Parishad, Bihar Dalit Adhikar Manch, Lok Parishad, Roji Roti Adhikar Abhiyan, Voluntary action forum, Gaya

Chief Guest

Justice Shri Rajendra Prasad, Honb'le member of Bihar State Human Rights Commission

Jury Members

- Shri. Harsh Mander Commissioner's of Supreme court food related Schemes
- Ms. (Dr.) Ritu Priya, Nutrition Expert (JNU, New Delhi)
- Shri Tripura Sharanji, President of Khadi board and a member of Bihar State Human Rights Commission
- Dr. Diwakar, Director, A. N. Sinha Institute, Bihar

Advisors of Jury: Vinay Ohdar, Nand Kishore Singh, Arjun Singh., Akshhay Kumar, Balramji, Rupeshji (Advisor to the Supreme Court commissioner for Bihar)

The proceedings started with a short introduction of the chief guest, jury members and advisors. The cases that were to be discussed at the public hearing were identified after an intensive survey done in the Gaya districts and all the proofs were collected which showed them clearly as deaths due to slow/acute starvation. The time span the most deaths was around 5 years. Jagadbhushanji read out the description of all the cases one by one from the survey reports first being taking them one by one for the jury discussion.

Rupeshji clarified the basic purpose of the Jan Sunvayi, mentioning that a lot of reports have already been prepared and submitted to the high court with recommendation of the Supreme Court commissioners in the past, but not much had come out of it. Hence this Jan sunvayi is the result of that year of such process. The Jury is also chosen such that those members can put pressure on the government once they have given their recommendations for the particular cases under discussion.

The relatives of the victims were called up one by one for all the 10 cases under consideration. Several villagers and relatives could not be there as they were not allowed to leave their village as order by the Mukhiya or BDO (as informed to the organizers on phone by the villagers). Each person put his/her plight in front of the jury and then the case was open for jury questions. Below are the some of the major points captured during the case proceedings:

- Murtidevi died on 9th October, 2009, when her son Kishoriji migrated in nearby city in search of work. He had kept 3-4 kgs of grain for her as food but no money was given to her. She had BPL card but she did not get any ration on that. The Card was shown to the jury which had no entry from July 2009 to May 2010. She was eligible for widow pension but wasn't paid ever. Just before 2 days of her death a detailed letter was given to the BDO of her block, complaining about no grain distribution in the block, and expressing the concern of expected deaths due to starvation, that may happen if the administration didn't take any appropriate steps. Kishoriji, her son who was there to present the case to the jury, was asked by Harsh Mander if they possessed Antyodaya card. They did not have the antyodaya card though a few members in their community did possess them. Shri Harsh Mander also asked a few other questions about his migration for work and the status of NREGA in his block. Kishoriji does not have NREGA job card and complained about the fatal status of all the government schemes in his block.

- In 2007, Phulkumari lost her new born baby as she couldn't produce enough milk due to lack of food required to provide her proper nutrition to meet her needs. She too couldn't survive longer than 15 days after her pregnancy due to slow starvation. Her husband Ramvilas, who presented her case, mentioned they did not possess any type of ration card, nor did they have any NREGA work in their village. One hearing what he had to say, Shri Rajendra Prasad (jury member) expressed his concerns about the status of the administration in the district, and also asked the advisors if they can still call the respective officers in their block. He recommended Rupeshji to file a detailed complains with required reports attached, for this and all the cases that they had been discussing, at NHRC and he assured to take required actions for the same in order to provide justice to the right people.
- In another case, it came out that the anganwadi for the particular dalit community of 300 people, even after recommendation by Harsh Mander some 3 years back, kept running in the neighboring village. The CDPO for that block was called, who arrived a few minutes later. On being asked to clarify about the dispute and her actions taken for the same by Harsh Mander, she tried to justify initially mentioning that the other village had higher population and they had proposed a mini anganwadi for this dalit community but the proposal did not pass through. But when Harsh Mander mentioned that there can't be a valid reason for the rejection, as per Supreme Court orders every dalit community is entitled to a separate anganwadi and he had already ordered for the same when he visited a few years back. The CDPO immediately apologized for the delay in action and assured an immediate action in a day's time!
- Jury also questioned BDO about the status, who was helpless in answering all the questions as he had only taken charge 2 days back! He could only give an assurance of looking into all the issues and took a note of the cases being discussed.
- In cases such as Manjudevi's, the anganwadi only existed for mere physical presence but no food supplements were being distributed. Her husband was not even provided with the job card. Shri Rajendra Prasad suggested getting him help with applying for the job card under NREGA and the BDO was asked to take a note of the same by Dr. Diwakar.
- The ADM, Rajiv Ranjan Singh, during his clarifications mentioned that every mukhiya has 100 kg of grain with him to be used for cases of acute starvation, but upon further probing by Shri Harsh Mander about the actual utilization, he did not have much of the information. The members present there explained that grain stock was never released for any of the villages, and always stayed unutilized. However the utilization did exist on paper for the records.
- The ADM was asked by the Jury was were the steps taken by him and his team for the starvation deaths, to which he responded with the results of the post-mortem reports that showed the deaths as caused by illness. This gross misconception was dismissed and proved invalid to him by Dr. Ritu Priya, by the reasoning that when the person cuts down on his/her food intake from what's required for staying away from starvation, due to slow hunger, he/she is prone to catch any illness, but the ultimate root-cause of the death still remains the lack of enough food for the survival! Dr. Rajendra Prasad also added mentioning the Supreme Court orders that stated that post-mortem reports should not be taken as important evidence results to assess the deaths as caused by starvation. ADM also mentioned that after the visit of Shri Harsh Mander (which happened a few years back) they've been looking into the expansion of anganwadis.
- It was noted in most cases that Mid-day meal scheme did not work properly in the schools in those particular blocks. The respective officers from the district education department were absent.

- The District Development Commissioner (DDC) joined half-way through the proceedings who was also questioned by jury. Unfortunately, like BDO, he too was just 15 days old into the district and couldn't respond to the question much to the satisfaction of the jury. He blamed the delay in the NREGA payments to the post office and the bank account processes. The note was taken that there has possibly been no social audit in the Gaya district so far. DDC did take notes of a few cases and assured the immediate action. The issue of dates of the payments, not being entered in the job cards, he said will be taken care of from now on. He also accepted the fact that till date no unemployment allowance has been given in the Gaya district. On leaving the hall, he urged the people to apply for their job cards and assured that unemployment allowances will be given to all those who deserved. He also provided his mobile number (9431818518) to everyone for direct complaints. The FIRs will also be filed for a few of the cases that were discussed.
- In the end of the hearing, the verbal survey was done by Shri Harsh Mander asking questions to the people present such as: Who all have BPL Card, antyodaya card?; Do they get ration regularly on their card?; Do they get payment of NREGA in time, or unemployment allowances for that matter?; Who all were entitled to the old age pension and actually received the same?

In most questions, responses did not seem to show positive indications of the situation of the district.

Jury Recommendations:

Dr. Diwakar

Our constitution gives the right to live to each individual but it seems clearly how it is given to these people who were under consideration today. The schemes are not seen to be reaching to the people who deserved them. There's a lack of awareness from the part of authorities as well as people about the entitlements under the schemes and the relation to the local ground level issues part from theoretical understanding. People too need to be mobilized and get united to fight for their justice. The measurement process should also include the people who are starving.

Women as always seen are the most deprived in every case. And the system though with a lot of provisions still needs to be more sensitive towards the needs of women.

This Jan Sunvayi needs proper documentation and be carried out in all the places likewise.

Dr. Ritu Priya

She reiterated her point that the definition of the starvation death followed by the administration is flawed and post-mortem reports should not be taken as an important evidence for the reasoning process.

Shri. Tripuraji Sharan

He stated the observation that most cases were from the blocks where majority of the government schemes were total failure. And such a disastrous status for any block/district can only exist due to carelessness of the administration and corruption.

Shri Harsh Mander

He has been visiting around various villages as special commissioner of Supreme Court for the Right to food case but sadly noted that his observations at Bihar are the worst. The government schemes in Bihar have been most unsuccessful consistently and have failed primarily due to corruption. The distribution look good on paper but benefits are not at all reaching the poor. He recommended that to start with all the dalit bastis should be assured with benefits of all the schemes, which is the least that can be done to be on the path of justice and later it should be scaled up to other bastis.

Annexure II- Appeal: Condemn arrests of adivasis in Barwani, MP

Three *Adivasis*, including Valsingh Sastia, senior leader of *Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan*, have been arrested on serious non-bailable charges, on a complaint filed by the Forest Department. In May, villagers of Karanpura and other villages of Pansemal range had got together to donate some wood to their comrade, Valsingh Bhai, the roof beams of whose house had begun to rot. These were slender logs taken from trees that they had grown and protected on their own land. When Valsingh Bhai was transporting this wood to his home, he was stopped by Pansemal forest range officials. He explained that he was carrying this wood for house building and that it had been given to him by his comrades. The forest officials first said that they had called the SDO who would take a decision in this matter. When the SDO failed to appear, but word started spreading in the area that Valsingh has been wrongfully stopped and local people started gathering at the spot, the forest officials disappeared.

Two days later, a case of loot and robbery, obstructing and harming government officials was registered against Valsingh Bhai and 2 others- Bhaisingh Davar and his son Shera Davar(392, 353,332 IPC). The latter two were arrested last week and Valsingh Bhai was arrested today. Bhaisingh Davar's tractor has been confiscated.

Valsingh Sastia has been leading adivasis of Barwani district in their struggle for the realization of their legal and constitutional rights, including rights under the Forest Rights Act.

There is great anger among the adivasis of this predominantly tribal district. This incident has roused an ancient anger against forest-police violence. Kacharsingh Dudwe, Tarkibai, Bilatibai and others are protesting asking "do adivasis have the right to a roof over their heads? When we do not even have enough food to eat how we can build cement houses. All adivasis live in kacha houses with timber roof beams. So they should arrest the entire adivasi community. This was wood from trees grown by us, why is the government harassing us with false cases? In any case it is the forest department that has destroyed the forest. Even today illegal forest timber is being openly sold under the very noses of forest officials with their full connivance." The Forest Rights Act acknowledges the "historical injustice" done to adivasis and acknowledges their right to dwellings in and around forest areas.

Thousands of adivasis affiliated to Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan, including women and children have already started a sustained agitation against these arrests. Around 2000 adivasis participated in a two day protest dharna at 5 police stations of the district on 27-28th July. Pansemal range was gheraoed, though when the forest officials saw the people coming, they locked their office and homes and ran away. Adivasis are planning mass courting of arrests at least 6 police stations within the next few days.

Please condemn these arrests and join us in our protests.

Annexure III - Right to food Campaign – April 2010 to November 2010

Chronological updates of the Right to Food Campaign since the time I started volunteering as a part of CHLP.²¹

Dharna for National Food Security Act - 15th to 19th April

- 15th to 19th April - 2010 - Dharna for National Food Security Act - Protests spanning for 5 days included people burning effigy of NFSA outside parliament, human chains and protests outside planning commission. The event culminated in a Panel discussion on food security act with the members of parliament and planning commission.
 - [Report of the dharna](#)
 - Campaign documents
 - [Presentation to MPs on NFSA](#)
 - [Open letter to PM](#)
 - [Campaign statement on estimating and identifying poverty in India](#)
 - [Letter to the members of Parliament](#)
 - Campaign Draft for National Food Security Act
 - In media :
 - NDTV: [People's protest](#)
 - WSJ : [Protest alert food debate simmers in delhi](#)
 - [Other media clippings](#)
 - [Photographs](#)
- 18th April, 2010 - [Planning commission revises BPL estimate as per Tendulkar committee guidelines to 37.2%](#)
- 20th April, 2010 - [Press conference held at Women's press club to state campaign demands on NFSA](#)
- 22nd April, 2010 - [RTF campaign's letter to EGoM before it's meeting on NFSA](#)
- 25th April, 2010 - [35kg of food grains to be given to BPL families](#)

RTF campaign and NAC

- July, 2010 - [National Advisory Council formed](#)
- 14th July, 2010 - [NAC meets on food security act](#)
- 15th July, 2010 - [Campaign Responds to NAC press release](#)
- 30th July, 2010 - Right to food Campaign consultation with NAC for Food Security Bill
- 23rd September, 2010 - [An open letter to NAC members](#)
- 28th October, 2010 - [NAC finalizes it's recommendation](#) and Prof Jean Dreze publicaly sends a [disagreement note](#)
- November 11 - [Campaign responds to NAC recommendation and announces protests against it during November 25th-26th](#)

National Convention on Right to food & Work

- August 6-8th, 2010 - [4th National Convention on Right to Food & Work](#)
 - [Photographs](#)
 - Resolutions : Hindi, English ([detail](#), [Summary](#))
 - Primers on National Food Security Act : [English](#), [Hindi](#)

Rotting Grains, Supreme Court orders and Campaign Protests

- August-October 2010 - Supreme Court orders on Rotting Grains and campaign action
 - [12th August \(Hindi\)](#)

²¹ In case of printed version of this report, where in hyperlinks cannot be accessed, please refer to this weblink - <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/links/updates.html>

- 31st August (Hindi)
- 6th September
- In media
- RTF Campaign's response on SC orders
- September-October - Nation-wise protests over grains rotting in godowns [summary]
- Sept 13 - Right to food campaign's statement on PMs views regarding SC intervention in the realm of policy [more]
- Court: Can Centre supply grain to 7 crore BPL families left out of PDS?

Important Articles:

The task of making the PDS work - Jean Dreze

Loosing their nerve - Jean Dreze

Jean Dreze interviewed by Tehelka

Frontline: Food Insecurities - R Ramakumar

No right to food yet! - Praful Bidwai

A right denied - Jayati Ghosh

Toads for breakfast - Biraj Patnaik

How right are you, Dr Singh - P Sainath

Food Security - by definition - P Sainath

The muddle in Food Security - Himanshu

Give them right to food - Mohammad Anis

The early Kalidasa Syndrome - Utsa Patnaik

The wrongs about right to food