

NREGA didis of Kurhani

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As Jean Dreze recently observed, one of the key ideas behind NREGA was that it would serve as a platform for increasing the overall political capacities of workers. It was hoped that people would organise themselves to collectively demand work and, in the process, learn about other legal and constitutional provisions. While learning about the latter has been patchy, it would, however, be reasonable to say that the NREGA workers, known locally in Kurhani Legislative Assembly in Muzaffarpur district, Bihar as “NREGA *didis*”, have grown to assert their rights under NREGA and the National Food Security Act (NFSA). The NREGA *didis* are members of a people’s collective called MNREGA Watch (MW).

An independent candidate in this constituency is Sanjay Sahni, a migrant-worker-turned-activist. Sahni’s unusual trajectory has received some media attention. Very briefly, during a casual visit to his village Ratnauli from New Delhi in 2011, he learned that workers — largely landless Dalits — were being cheated of their NREGA wages by the local elites in collusion with the administration. Sahni managed to get senior state government officials to conduct special social audits in his village, leading to perpetrators being penalised. The workers, perhaps for the first time, felt that upper-caste masculinity could be challenged. Sahni relocated soon after, educated himself about people’s rights under NREGA and began organising workers around these rights. This led to the birth of MW — the majority of its members are Dalit women, who have put their weight behind Sahni.

Compared to Bihar's average of 50 per cent women's participation in NREGA, the panchayats where MW is active have consistently registered over 80 per cent women's participation. Numbers aside, there is substantial experiential evidence demonstrating women's empowerment among NREGA *didis*. Consider this anecdote concerning Mandeshri Devi, a 60-year-old Dalit woman, who was one of the first to join MW. While cooking dinner one night, she remembered that she had not received her pending NREGA wages. She immediately called a senior district official but the call went unanswered. The next morning, while she was at the market buying vegetables, the official returned her call. She responded to him saying that she was busy at the time and disconnected the call. There are several important registers of empowerment here. Primarily, for the first time the official's number was made freely available by MW for workers to call directly. Second, a worker calling a senior official at night time demanding her wages is largely unheard of in rural India. Third, and, perhaps, the most illuminating is that she felt empowered enough to disconnect the official's call and assert her priorities. The likes of Mandeshri have emboldened thousands of other women in Muzaffarpur district (and some neighbouring districts), each of whom continue to negotiate struggles at home to participate in MW activities. Several women have had to disregard "orders" from their husbands to participate in meetings and numerous campaigns. Many of these meetings, held in the MW office — a modest mud hut — run well past midnight, much to the chagrin of the husbands of the attendees. The NREGA *didis* went from panchayat to panchayat across many blocks and districts, conducting meetings with other women and educating them about their rights.

Gradually, but surely, MW has grown to more than 1.15 lakh members in just eight years and MW soon became an incubation centre for learning about rights under other public programmes such as the NFSA.

Access to food grains at ration shops is a lifeline for most MW members. Ration dealers would routinely deduct at least 2-3 months' worth of rations in a year. Since 2014, the NREGA *didis* spearheaded the struggle to get the full quota of rations. Till then, getting a lower amount of rations wasn't even considered a breach of their entitlement. When repeated complaints at the district magistrate's (DM) office and through the Grievance Redress Cell fell on deaf ears, the NREGA *didis* started staging protests outside the DM's office in Muzaffarpur. Such political claim-making was new to all of them. The village elite and administration sought to divide the villagers by promising a full quota of rations to those who broke away from MW. None of them budged and the struggle forced the administration to yield. Some corrupt ration dealers were suspended and as a peripheral benefit, not just the MW members but every ration card holder started getting their full entitlement. It was a massive victory. The news spread and more women joined the crew of NREGA *didis* and their struggle gained further legitimacy.

As one would guess, this almost ragamuffin struggle for rights has met with many obstacles. The hardest of which was a spate of false FIRs against Sahni and a few MW workers. Some of these charges were grave and even included attempt to murder. Even Mandeshri was

detained in jail and questioned but her resolve and commitment to justice remained undiluted.

During the lockdown, Sahni was instrumental in working with the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) in assisting thousands of stranded migrant workers in providing relief when the entire political establishment turned a blind eye. Dharmendra Ram, from Ratnauli panchayat, was one such worker who was stranded in Nagaland with no food or money. In a state of utter despair, he called his mother, an NREGA *didi*. She connected him to Sahni who then helped Dharmendra Ram. Later, Dharmendra Ram went to Gujarat for work and now he has come to Ratnauli to campaign for Sahni. Numerous such migrant workers have returned to campaign.

The real force, however, is the support of the “NREGA *didis*, who walk each day, some bare feet and some with kids in arms, raising slogans in support and solidarity. This is despite having no income and little food. NREGA *didi* Indu Devi’s foot came under an autorickshaw recently and Mandeshri fractured her hand a few days ago. When we asked Indu Devi about it, she casually said, “We have now learned that even we have rights. If we can do so much without being in power, imagine how much more can be done if we have political power”.

Regardless of the outcome of the election, the complex journey from not knowing what their ration entitlements are to conceiving that they can have a say in the Legislative Assembly is almost like a fairy tale. The resilience of the NREGA *didis* presents much hope. It is also a demonstration of how NREGA can expand political possibilities.

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