

HT Patna and Page 29th August, 2010

# It's hard to keep away 'crows' from 'crumbs' for humans

**GHOST MAN-DAYS** generated, ghost payments made. Corruption, falsification of records and threats to social auditors and civil society intervenors - that's the way petty bureaucracy, panchayat functionaries, post office men have responded to queries on the MNRREGA schemes, write **Ashish Ranjan and Kamayani Swami**

**K**aybee Rishidev is an angry man. The reasons for his anger are many, but at the bottom of it all is the exploitative system that has marginalised people like him.

Four years ago, Kaybee had heard on the radio, that the MNRREGA (Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act) would give families like his, 100 days of work in a year. But even though he got a job card two years later, no family in his Dalit tola including his, has got that many days of work.

In a series of nine social audits of MNRREGA works done by the Araria district administration and the Jan Jagaran Shakti Sangathan (JSS), it has been found that not even one job cardholder in the nine panchayats, where the audits were done, had got the 100 days of work

mandated in the MNRREGA.

During a social audit exercise, Government records are meticulously scrutinized and taken to residents of the panchayat. Many tales like that of Kaybee Rishidev, Ramvilas Sharma and Bhuvan Mandal reach the JSS office.

One sweltering afternoon, almost a month after the social audit in Halhalya panchayat exposed large scale fraud and misuse of MNRREGA funds, Ramvilas Sharma is visibly agitated. He has not got even a single day of work under MNRREGA, but Rs 6892 was withdrawn from his post office passbook and attached on the records were faked.

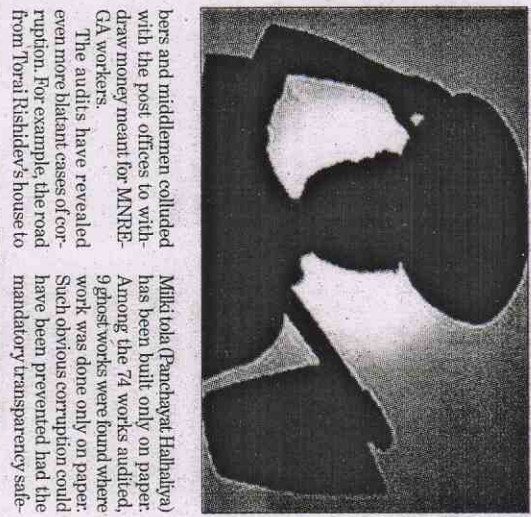
Bhuvan on the other hand had worked for 25 days under the MNRREGA and was given only Rs 1500 in cash, but his passbook shows a withdrawal of Rs 6494.

There are many more like Ramvilas and Bhuvan who

deposited at the public hearing held on June 29 last in Halhalya panchayat (Block Rohseganj) about the fraud happening in the post offices. Cases of fraudulent withdrawals and fake muster rolls came up in every audit and cases like these have been reported even from other panchayats.

In fact, in the 74 works audited, it was found that fake muster rolls (MR), which have the details of attendance and wages, had been prepared in all, except in four. It was found that for every Rs 100 shown as spent on the muster rolls, Rs 79 never reached the workers named on them. The muster roll MNRREGA functionaries, as also Mukhtyas, Zila Parishad members, panchayat Samiti mem-

bers and middlemen colluded with the post offices to withdraw money meant for MNRREGA workers.



The audits have revealed even more blatant cases of corruption. For example, the road from Torai Rishidev's house to

guards inbuilt in the law been maintained. MNRREGA man-

dates putting up of boards at work sites and social audits to be done by annually. However, only 24 per cent of the work sites had boards put up. Even when social audits were claimed to have been done, it was found that people were totally unaware of the expenses made under MNRREGA in their panchayats.

Apparently, the social audits if done at all, were only on paper. The JSS has been working on the ground since 2008 and it was in its knowledge that MNRREGA was affected by corruption, but to quantify it and to expose the nexus between bureaucrats, elected representatives and middlemen in front of the Gram Sabha by taking all the relevant documents to the public, through the social audit

exercise, was indeed a very bold step. Workers of JSS have been getting threats and warnings to stop their activities. These threats and warnings were intensified during the audits.

Therefore, it did not come as a surprise when after the very first audit in Chaunka panchayat of Jalkihat block of Araria, Rozgar Sevaks of Araria district submitted a petition against the JSS to the Deputy Development Commissioner and gave a statement in the Press that the JSS was working on a secret agenda with the help of extremist communist elements. However, the young District Magistrate Mr. N Saravanan stood firmly behind the initiative and refused to budget.

The state government has been trying to push the average number of man-days generated under NREGA which stands at 26 today but along with this what is needed is also a check on where the money is going. For unless the bureaucracy is held accountable, the increase in numbers would just help fill up the pockets of corrupt officials and middlemen.

On the people's side the ray of hope comes from the keen interest that the workers are taking in MNRREGA. In a survey conducted in 2008 by G B Pant Institute of Social Science in Kaimur and Araria districts, it was found that the overwhelming majority of MNRREGA workers were willing to work in MNRREGA schemes 365 days a year given the opportunity.

The MNRREGA has the potential to change a lot of things in rural Bihar but the question is can the Government deliver?