

# Empowering the Powerless: Uttar Pradesh Fellowships-2

## Implementation of the Government Welfare Schemes

**Site:** Chandauli, Mau and Deoria

**Years supported:** Eight

**Funding so far:** \$72,000

**Scope:** Educating and empowering villagers to access NREGA and RTI, fighting corruption, strengthening local self-governance and democracy

**Jayshankar Pandey** (jayshankarvns@yahoo.com): 9871234567

**Arvind Murty:** 1234567898

**Keshav Vairagi** (struggle\_up@yahoo.co.in): 7625245254

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act came as a beacon of hope for India's rural poor. Yet, its vulnerability to corruption was fully recognized and the Right to Information Act was to be the anti-dote. As expected, the vested interests are making every effort to sabotage these goals. Massive corruption resulting in the refusal (or inability) to deliver the benefits is the fundamental problem. Nevertheless, even though the acts have yet to deliver on their promise, there are many hopeful signs particularly in areas where voluntary groups are spearheading their implementation.

### MAIN INTERVENTIONS

1. Creating awareness amongst villagers of the various schemes and acts
2. Organizing community actions against corrupt officials to secure benefits
3. Helping individuals in dire circumstances and giving social/financial support when possible
4. Strengthening democracy by promoting local self-governance and civic behavior
5. Promoting communal harmony and spirit of collective action

### Awareness Building

Regular meetings, workshops and camps have been conducted to make people familiar with the provisions of the two acts as well as other schemes. Besides the villagers, the workshops are also involving students from local schools and colleges. Arvind's publication of the monthly newsletter, Sacchi-Mucchi, is an important tool of communicating with the local population.

### Community Actions

1. Workers in several villages in Chandauli had not received wages for their work in 2009! Jayshankar organized a rally with the workers displaying placards, showing the amount of money they were owed. Sit-in was also organized against arbitrary cutting of NREGA wages.



2. In the Bhatparrani tehsil of Deoria, there was massive corruption in the drought relief support for the marginal farmers. Officials were withholding funds. Keshav led a strong campaign that included marches to the tehsil headquarters and threat of a hunger strike.

Within a week Rs. 7,00,00 was released to thousands of villagers in 9 villages.

3. During the last rainy season, the northern areas of UP were ravaged by the excess waters released from Nepal. Yet, the local officials did nothing. It took a "gherao" organized by Keshav to prod the officials in to repairing the dams and other relief work.

4. There was wide spread corruption in the Public Distribution System in Deoria. On Feb. 27, Keshav organized a large demonstration of the villagers including blockade of the main road. It was the day of Holi festival. The administration was forced to act. They ordered the corrupt shop closed and instituted an inquiry in to adulteration and other forms of corruption. Only then the blockade was taken off.

5. As a result of consistent lobbying a large number of people in 3 villages of Kushinagar/Deoria got NREGA work.

6. The Fellows have facilitated the filing of dozens of RTI applications in several departments. They have held ongoing meetings to educate people about RTI including a larger regional meeting at Mau organized by Arvind. In the Nichlol tehsil of Maharajganj district, a three-day hunger strike and two sit-ins were required before the authorities relented by providing information about several RTI inquiries.

## **Individual Support**

### **The Story of Radhe and Shyam**

*(Village Balua in Garala-Pitpur Panchayat)*

On August 9, 2010, Radhe the wife of Shyam was engaged in tree planting under NREGA when she was bit by a vicious snake and died. Her family not only didn't get any compensation but they didn't even get the wages due her. Left alone to take care of the children and earn a living at the same time, Shyam was in desperate state till Jayshankar and his team came to their rescue. Their story was widely circulated and an appeal made to the Chief Rural Development Secretary, Manoj Kumar Singh. Eventually, the family received Rs. 25,000. Shyam plans to use it for the education of his children and save some for his daughter's marriage.



### **The Story of Shankar**

*(Village Keradih, near Sahabganj in Chandauli)*

Shankar has been working for the Forest department for over 10 years, 5 years as a guard in the Chakiyan range and 5 years as a pump operator in the Rajpath range. When NREGA came in force, his job was taken away and instead the work was handed over to NREGA workers. Out of a job, he obtained a NREGA job card (as shown) and worked for the maximum of 100 days in each of the last two years. But he got no money. In the mean time his wife fell ill and he had to borrow money for an operation. The situation became so desperate that he could not even feed his children. Battering on his behalf, the team brought his story to the public and the authorities were forced to release his Rs. 20,000. He is using this money to pay off his debt and for the education of his children.



### **The Story of Khairoom**

*(Majharati of Sahabganj in Chakian range)*

Khairoom, the wife of late Safi was also planting trees when she was seriously injured in her right foot. She got no money for her 15 days work. Fellows intervened to get her Rs. 1400 for her work and Rs. 600 for medical treatment.

### **RTI Benefits**

By using RTI, in November, Jayshankar got funds released for 7 people under the old age, widow and disability benefit schemes that had been held for over two years. Now they are getting Rs. 300 per month, a small but significant sum that is the difference between life and death for these poor people.



## **Strengthening Democracy and Communal Harmony**

1. World Environment Day was celebrated with a large public rally and planting of a large number of trees.
2. A 16-member team conducted election awareness campaign covering 50 villages. By using leaflets, street plays, meetings and workshops they educated villagers about selecting good candidates.
3. They supported several candidates of high integrity. These candidates won in nine Panchayat elections.
4. Cleanliness campaigns were conducted in two villages, Odara Garopur and Kurai.
5. In the Bichhade village of Mugal Sarai, 25 youth joined to level a small hillock over 2 acre of land to create a playground and to plant trees by providing their labor over a 3 month period.
6. All the Fellows actively promoted communal harmony under the banner of Asha Parivar and the National Association of People's Movements. They also participated in a Mumbai to Lahore peace march.

## **National Campaigns**

### **Community Ownership of Natural Resources**

Under the ICAN banner, the Fellows undertook Protest Marches on 9<sup>th</sup> August, the Quit India Day. A rally in support for Community Ownership of Natural Resources was also held.

### **Forest Rights Act 2006**

A public hearing (Jan Sunwai) was held in the Naxal affected Naugarh area to further the benefits of this act. Hundreds of villagers, officials and civil leaders attended.

### **Campaigns Against Forced Land Acquisition**

Farmers in northern UP have waged a long battle against the state attempts to acquire their precious farmland under various pretexts. Keshav and his colleagues have been involved in supporting the movement against the Maitreya project that aims to acquire vast acreage ostensibly for creating a large peace park in the name of Mahatma Buddha. In March they took out a large awareness rally in favor of the farmers that are likely to be displaced. A huge meeting was held to mark the 1000<sup>th</sup> day of this agitation on 14 March.

A solidarity rally was staged in support of farmers from Assam who were beaten on their way to Delhi where they were going to protest their displacement from farmland.

### **Opposing Farmer's Debt Trap**

A campaign is being undertaken to oppose the compound interest being charged to farmers. This practice is a significant part of the debt trap that is a major cause of farmer's suicides.

### **Lok Swaraj Campaign**



This is a major nationwide effort in which many civic society groups are coming together. The goal is to empower the gram *sabhas* (as opposed to the gram-panchayats). It is expected to lead to real local self-governance or *swaraj* as envisioned by the leaders of our freedom movement. All the three Fellows have been actively engaged with the movement. Several meetings have been held throughout the year in which prominent activists such as Arvind Kejriwal and B. D. Sharma have played a key role. This message is being spread to hundreds of villages and the stage is being set for a larger revolution demanding the devolution of power from the center and the state to the village as represented by the gram sabha.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This is painstaking work with tremendous long term potential. Yet, it is hard to quantitate it in the short run. Prithvi and Surekha have visited these fellows on several occasions and vouch for the significant impact that is being created in large areas of this impoverished state. National TV channel (DD) has showcased a story on their Naugarh NREGA work for 15 continuous days two times in the last year. Jayshankar has been the chief guest at the popular "Janane Ka Haq" television show on RTI.

The work is not without its difficulties. The Fellows come in close contact with the poor and are often called upon to help them in desperate circumstances for which they don't have any resources. There is the stubborn problem of criminal politics with its culture of musclemen, alcohol and money. Lastly, while their success in attracting a large dedicated team speaks for the importance of their work, it also puts them in a quandary since many of these young people are without resources of their own and must survive on whatever Fellowship support they get. We at IFA are constantly evaluating their requirements and hope to enhance our support as much as possible.