

Empowering the Powerless: Uttar Pradesh Fellowships

The central region of India continues to lag behind the rest in economic development. The causes are, no doubt, manifold though the ideologically driven can point to their favorite villain; lack of education, over-population, caste hierarchy, corruption, etc. Whatever the causes, poverty remains entrenched, particularly in the countryside. No region stands to benefit more from schemes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. However, for the act to have the desired effect, it must be properly implemented.

IFA has allocated substantial funds to several Fellowships in this region with this very objective. Over \$60,000 has been contributed since 2003. Average Fellowship is \$4000 per year. The Fellows have used both the Right to Information Act as well as the NREGA to empower these communities in a variety of ways.



On a recent visit, Surekha and I traveled to Deoria where we met IFA Fellow Keshav Vairagi and his team. We were joined by Jayshankar, another Fellow from Chandauli. We traveled to five different villages in a radius of about 100 miles. We met dozens of supporters - activists, concerned citizens, intellectuals - and learnt about the ground reality. The picture that emerges is that of a callous system manipulated by those in authority, all the way from the Village Pradhans to the highest level of the administrative-political machinery. Against this dismal background, Keshav and his team of volunteers are creating a sort of mini revolution. The impact of their work is much larger than the help provided to the few people noted below for once people become aware of their rights and powers, they are in a much better position to defend them, particularly if they work together.

STEALING FROM THE POOR

Our first stop was Devgaon in the Gauribazar block where we heard from many villagers. Amavas is a young man from Mansaiya village whose father became disabled when he was 12. Dirt poor with no means of



livelihood, he tried to get some state assistance. Ten years later, that has yet to materialize. He has somehow managed to care for his parents with the 50 cents a day he earns as a day laborer. They are entitled to a BPL (Below Poverty Line) card that provides them subsidized rice, etc. There is also a pension scheme for the old as well for the disabled. Sadly, these all are diverted by the local bosses to their own relatives and friends unless one can come up with a hefty bribe. They somehow scraped together Rs. 1200 but even that was lost. The going rate for old age pension that will pay 300 rupees per month is 1500 rupees.



These women can't get a BPL card because they don't have 500 rupees for bribe. This old man had paid 200 rupees but was still not able to get his old age pension.

Then there is the housing scheme for the poor that provides Rs. 35000 each for a limited number of very poor families. 7000 of that is taken away as bribe. Moreover, we heard numerous stories about how the funds are misappropriated by the powerful to build mini mansions while the poor stay in their broken down huts. The corruption in education is phenomenal. Government teachers get paid handsomely (Rs. 15000 a month starting salary vs. as little as 1500 for a private school teacher) but hardly do any teaching. Instead they function as agents - running elections and doing the bidding of the local politicians. They also become conduits for stealing public funds by functioning as builders for public schools or doing other business for the state.

MAKING AMENDS



It is heartening to learn that Keshav and his team have made great inroads by using RTI and NREGA. In this village of Dumri for example, Keshav's colleague Udaybhan Yadav waged a sustained struggle using RTI to expose corruption in the building of a local school. Built with over half a million rupees the school serves barely a dozen or so kids. 50000 rupees were allocated for a toilet that got started only after the RTI application was filed and even now is not functioning properly. 75000 rupees were allocated for school benches (and then additional sums for their repair) while in reality no benches ever arrived at the school until after the application was filed. 50000 rupees were spent on music department while all they bought was a harmonium and a dholak, used mostly as the teacher's personal property. Even the lowly mats for seating the students had been taken away for home use. This expose has forced the authorities to take action although, as so often happens, some low level functionary has been suspended. More is needed.

In Turantolia, Vijay Yadav has galvanized his fellow villagers to push for full use of the NREGA. They have about 300 families, two-thirds dalits. Most are landless day laborers. In 2006, they had 195 job cards. The activists managed to get 100 more, thus covering pretty much all households. Using RTI they found that the cards had as much as Rs. 20,000 payment against their names while most had received little. Armed with this data they approached the DM. An inquiry followed. 58 people were interviewed. The truth came out. The secretary was suspended and an engineer dismissed, a rare case of a senior officer being punished. Villagers got paid for their past work. In the first half of 2009, they have already received Rs. 170000. This is not a handout. They have built a good road and over 5 kms of new canal. And this is 5 to 6 days work per household; the Act has provision for 100. If fully implemented it could mean a capital infusion of Rs. 3,000,000. Vijay and his friends are determined to get this for their people.



Abhay and other volunteers in village Suhrana Padri sat on a prolonged hunger strike to force the Pradhan to fix their broken road. The strength gathered from this Gandhian action led them to help their fellow villagers avail of the NREGA. This woman, for example, having no livelihood, had been reduced to begging. With NREGA work and 500 rupees in wages she can now sustain herself with dignity.

There have been numerous other actions against the misuse of NREGA funds. The demonstration at Gauri Bazar block office resulted in the residents from three villages getting work as well as payment. In another such action in Bhaluvani block, villagers from Kusuma, Karaudi, Nakadah and Phulvarian joined in a camp and as a result got jobs through NREGA. Hundreds of people got work and lakhs of rupees were disbursed. Rampur Natvaliyan got Rs. 900000 disbursed in three months. 200 villagers have worked here in building canals.

REST OF KESHAV VAIRAGI'S YEAR

- Co-chaired a national level public hearing on NREGA along with Aruna Roy.
- Part of the on going struggle against rampant exploitation of ground water by Coca Cola.
- Continuously involved with the agitation against the forced appropriation of land for the Maitreya project in the Kushinagar area of Uttar Pradesh, part of the nationwide action on March the 14th
- Joined the Ayodhya to Ajmer peace march organized by, amongst others, Asha Parivar
- Organized RTI camps in Gauri Bazar, Khairantiyan, Vansahiya and 7 other villages as well as in the two districts of Maharajganj and Baliya

Organization of a National Youth Conference

This was a major step. Violence against women, RTI and Environment awareness were some of the issues discussed. As a result, strong women's organizations have arisen in 16 villages.



These young girls from Naugaon village study in the local schools. In their spare time, they give remedial education to the children and adult literacy training to their mothers. In a unique example, they go to their homes and take care of their chores so the mothers can attend literacy classes.



Shiv Chand, Reena Singh (to his left) and others of Devgaon - by door-to-door surveys and by the use of RTI - are exposing the corruption in NREGA and providing life saving benefits to villagers such as this abandoned wife in the red sari who can now sustain herself through NREGA.

The dedication and enthusiasm of these young men and women is truly inspiring. It is also instructive to realize how much can be achieved with such few resources. The key lies in the careful selection of candidates who are mentored by well-recognized leaders. Keshav Vairagi is clearly one such individual and along with the other three Fellows - Jayshankar Pandey (Chandauli), Arvind Murty (Mau) and Faisal Khan (Delhi/Haryana) - forms the core of IFA support for Asha Parivar led by Sandeep Pandey.

--Prithvi Sharma