A MEDIA FOR ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT
ANSA-SAR

Affiliated Network for Social Accountability – South Asia Region (ANSA-SAR) was initiated in 2009 by a seed grant from the World Bank Institute. The primary objective of this network is to enhance and scale up social accountability initiatives in the South Asia; and create linkages and synergies between different actors and institutions to synergize and enhance efforts on the demand side of governance. Over the past years, ANSA has provided small grants for experimenting and scaling up micro-level social accountability initiatives by existing and emerging actors, especially civil society organizations that work at the grassroots; have conducted and supported research, development of knowledge products on specific social accountability; and helped build capacities and competencies of civil society as well as public institutions through workshops, conference and peer-learning efforts. These are complemented with deepened initiatives in-country, with a significant knowledge and innovation component – to serve as an “incubator” of new ideas and approaches to social accountability in South Asia.

GOVERNANCE NOW

Governance Now is a multimedia initiative for participatory reportage and analyses related to governance of all institutions and processes that are vital to public life in India. Currently, it is available as a fortnightly magazine and a website. Launched on January 26, 2010, it has established itself as a platform for people-centric and reader-friendly journalism. Taking this new brand of engaged journalism a step further, it started an initiative called Saranda Governance Laboratory to track state efforts to counter Maoism with development – by stationing Sarthak Ray, our reporter, in Jharkhand forests for months. His reportage, often critical of the establishment and the sluggish implementation of the plan, was appreciated by rural development minister Jairam Ramesh, the force behind the plan. At a lecture in New Delhi on grassroots governance, Ramesh especially mentioned how some of Sarthak’s inputs enabled the government to change rules that became hurdles in the implementation of the plan. Our own take-away from the initiative was that a journalist living there, moving around, mixing with people, enquiring and reporting on the implementation of welfare schemes did make a difference, minor though it may have been. Towards the fourth month of his stay, Sarthak found that more and more tribals were aware becoming aware of the Saranda Development Plan, were willing to demand their rights and even engage with a government machinery that was known only for its absence from the area and abdication of its duties for a decade and more under Maoist influence. Sarthak will keep visiting Saranda regularly to keep tabs on the implementation of the plan.
THIS INITIATIVE

Buoyed by the few positive signals from Saranda and supported by ANSA-SAR, we expanded the project to four new areas across the country. Most of our discourse about rural lives, livelihoods and grassroots governance is shaped by touch-and-go journalism. Journalists and researchers make whirlwind tours of these areas and come away with some assumptions which are then extrapolated to the level of national stereotypes which then become—with repeated use, reuse and overuse—national truths. When two moving objects try to assess each other, it is not unusual for perspectives to get blurred. That is what happens when journalists parachute into rural areas for a few days to record the changing face of the hinterland. Change can be appreciated best by a constant. The ANSA SAR-GOVERNANCE NOW AT THE GRASSROOTS project is that constant. Under this project four Governance Now journalists stationed themselves in four rural or semi-rural locations—not for a week or a fortnight or a month, but a full six months. They lived and worked out of there and reported regularly for six months from the vantage position of a perspective gained from the stability and stillness of their long stay.

THE OBJECTIVE

These four reporters and their locations are:

- Brajesh Kumar: Abu Road (block), Sirohi (district), Rajasthan
- Pankaj Kumar: Noorserai (block), Nalanda (district), Bihar
- Sarthak Ray: Sheraga-da (block), Ganjam (district), Odisha
- Puja Bhattacharjee: Salboni (block), West Medinipur (district), West Bengal

Each one of them identified a few villages in a block, stayed in a place close to these villages and monitored the implementation of four or five priority welfare schemes of that area. Once they identified the important schemes to monitor, they started reporting about the progress of the schemes on a regular basis to see what kind of impact sustained media oversight had on their implementation. That should give us an idea of the efficacy of delivery of public policy at the last mile of governance. (Sorry, change that to “the first mile of governance”.)
Hills are alive with the sound of changes

It is at the panchayat and block levels that the impact of big government schemes are seen and evaluated, and thus it is important that the good and the bad are reported at these levels.
As the Delhi-Ahmedabad Rajdhani Express chugged out of the New Delhi railway station and caught pace, my heart began to race too, soon outpacing the clunky wheels of the train. I was leaving for Abu Road, a small tribal block in Sirohi, one of the most backward districts of Rajasthan.

My editors had decided to send me to this remote location for six months on a Governance Now-ANSA SAR project, under which I had to report on major government schemes and study the impact of sustained reportage. “You are being sent to kala-paani,” a colleague told me. “You are sent tadipaar,” another chuckled.

The jests apart, I had my own misgivings.

Unlike earlier outstation assignments, this was going to be different on many counts. First, it wasn’t going to last two-three weeks, as most outstation assignments had till then. Second, since I was going to live in the place for six months, interacting with the community, officials and other stakeholders, my reports would have to be well researched and in depth. And, this assignment would have to have some impact on the ground.

Until now, I had moved from one story to another, devoid of any attachment to the subjects in my copies, and had rarely kept track of any impact any of my stories had created. But Abu Road would be a different ball game.

“Don’t worry much about it. Once you spend time with the community and start following their lives, you will automatically want your stories to have some kind of impact,” a friend counselled as he saw me off at the station on September 17 last year.

As I left Delhi behind, the steady, rhythmic sound of the train soon lulled me to sleep as I mulled over the last comforting words of my friend.

I reached my destination at 6 the next morning.

One of Sirohi district’s five blocks, Abu Road has 25 panchayats and 85 villages. While 50 percent of the panchayats are in the plains, the other half is dispersed in small, scattered clusters of houses on the slopes of mountains and small valleys. As you climb up the Aravali range to a handful of panchayats, the beauty around you is mesmerising — the metalled road winding up the hill is a treat to watch.

Adding to the spectacle is a river that accompanies the road gurgling on its shallow rocky bed throughout.

While researching on the place for this project, I had consulted several friends working in the development sector. Since I had to choose a block in a south Rajasthan district, I called up Amit Sharma whom I had met during an earlier assignment in the state in December 2010. Sharma then worked with Sewa Mandir, a NGO in Udaipur, and was now with Azim Premji Foundation in Sirohi.

While I was keen on travelling to one of the blocks in Udaipur district, Amit suggested Abu Road. “Abu Road is a predominantly tribal block and you will have great learning experience reporting on the implementation of various schemes here,” he told me.

The percentage of families below poverty line in Abu Road block is 51 percent — this figure rises to about 72 percent among the tribal (Garasia and Bhil) people. The Garasias, a scheduled tribe, make 68 percent of Abu Road’s population. More than 65 percent of the area here is forested, of which 6 percent is cultivated.

A railway line divides the block in two halves. The left side of the tracks (if one is coming from New Delhi) is called ‘bhakhar’, which means ‘hilly area’ in the local language, while the right of the tracks is called ‘bhitrot’, or plains.

While bhitrot, owing to the contiguity with the town, has seen considerable progress, bhakhar has lagged behind. “Go around the bhakhar area for your date with development schemes,” Amit told me.

**While bhitrot (plains) has seen considerable progress, bhakhar (hilly parts of Abu Road) has lagged behind.**

“Go around the bhakhar area for your date with development schemes,” Amit, who works with Azim Premji Foundation in Sirohi, told me.

**Waking up in Abu Road**
would never have had access to. Stumbling through different layers of the maze called district administration, I am now better placed to demystify this labyrinth. I know, for instance, the difference between a block and a tehsil; I am aware of the powers of a SDM and a BDO; I can differentiate between a sub-centre, a primary health centre and a community health centre.

My close association with panchayat representatives and various other government officials working at the lowest ladder of the administration has brought them before me in flesh and blood. They were until now just any other sarkari officials — a sarpanch, a ward panch, an ANM (auxiliary nurse midwife), or an ASHA (accredited social health activist) worker.

Meeting Sharmi Bai, the sarpanch of Neechlagarh panchayat, changed that perception – Sharmi, or many like her, is more than just another government official. Given the trying conditions and circumstances under which they work, their work is, in fact, more appreciable than many babus sitting in Delhi.

As I followed her work, I got convinced that an educated, incorruptible and determined leader at the panchayat level can impact the lives of her people in a tremendous way. Sharmi has come a long way from being a ghunghat-wearing, shy daughter-in-law – she now presides over the male-dominated gram sabha with authority and is known to get work done for residents of her panchayat. In fact, her work has made her popular not only in Neechlagarh but also in panchayats nearby. Residents of other panchayats now regularly come to her for advice.

In a healthy, competitive way, her popularity, locals say, has put pressure on other sarpanches to perform.

But then popularity has its own pitfalls, as many non-performing panchayats headed by corrupt sarpanches and secretaries have started conspiring with equally corrupt functionaries in upper echelons of the administrative ladder. There have been several attempts by block officials to unseat her. But the gaunt, forty-something lady trudges along. “Let them do what they want to. I will carry on the way I do,” Sharmi Bai said when I asked her about the hostile opposition she faces from her powerful adversaries.

If Sharmi Bai’s work and her panchayat’s success inspire confidence, then that of the adjacent panchayat and its secretary’s track record illustrate what a corrupt panchayat functionary can get away with if he/she is well connected. The former secretary of the Uplagarh panchayat has been accused of looting MNREGS funds and turning millionaire overnight. Several projects shown as ‘completed’ do not exist on ground.

The secretary was transferred to another panchayat when residents reported the embezzlement.

Be that as it may, my six-month stay at Abu Road has certainly enriched my understanding of the ‘Other India’ and armed me with perspective.

**Impact of my stay**

Before I get into the kind of impact, if any, my stint at Abu Road made, I must point out the role of the local media. Whether by default or design, the local newspapers are largely into reporting daily events, with four of their pages devoted to describing the itinerary of the district officials. More often than not you will find stories like ‘Today the DC took such and such meeting’, or ‘Today the SDM inaugurated such and such function.’

I am told this kind of reporting is the norm in every small town/district in India, and seen from their point of view, they dish out what the target audience wants. While it is understandable that the content of the local papers is demand-driven, it is an insult as well as a disservice to the readers. “The media here does not bother to report systematic loot in a number of government schemes in the block,” Kalicharan Garasia, a retired government school teacher and a member of the zila parishad, told me.

Against such a backdrop, saying that you are a journalist from Delhi immediately raises expectations of people, who otherwise have given up on the newspapers, and instills
some kind of fear in the hearts of officials, who are aware of the ineptness of the local press.

“So who reads your magazine?” That’s the first question I faced from the officials. Local people, on the other hand, would ask something like, “Will district or higher officials (in Jaipur or Delhi) take notice of what you are writing?”

The answer to these determines how seriously one is taken.

Faced with such questions I told them the magazine I worked for is read by the powers that be in Delhi (answer to the officials) and that someone somewhere might take notice of what I was writing and that could result in some kind of action (answer to the people).

Here, I must point out that the attitude of officials at the block, panchayats and those at the district to the member of the press from Delhi varied. While government officials at the PRI level, especially at panchayats, would take you seriously, lest any adverse report on their functioning should affect their jobs, those at the district headquarters, thick-skinned as they are, would go about their work with their usual indifference, assured that nothing would happen to them.

In one of my many interactions with the BDO, I told him how the panchayats were digging the same ditches several times as the mandatory 60:40 ratio of labour to material did not allow pucca work. Though officially he told me that MNREGS rules mandated the 60:40 ratio, and that nothing much could be done about it, off the record he promised he would ensure the panchayats took up some other useful asset-building work instead of digging the same ditch five times.

On another occasion I told the BDO about misappropriation of MNREGS funds to the tune of crores by a certain panchayat secretary. While this fraud is a common knowledge in the block, no action had yet been taken against the person. Asked about this deliberate inaction by the district administration, the BDO told me he was helpless as the secretary was connected/related to someone powerful in Jaipur. “But if you write about it, I am certain the higher-ups will order an audit and he will be exposed,” he told me.

While I have not been able to lay my hand on documents required to nail the secretary, the request from the BDO to write about the misappropriation points to the absence of reportage by the local media on this issue.

“There is absolutely no effort from the press to expose the fraudsters here,” Kalicharan Garasia a former teacher of a government school in the region, said when I asked him why the media had not reported on the scam if it was so big. “But the fact that you have been enquiring about it and the BDO knows it, could mean it would result into something positive. That’s the power Delhi press has on local officials, and I wish the big papers had their representatives here.”

This faith in the “Delhi press”, and the effect this identity could have on the block/panchayat machinery, invigorated me to go about my work seriously and diligently. And soon I found out that Garasia was not speaking in the air.

Every once in a while, the Rajasthan government launches a drive called ‘prashasan gaon ke sangh’ under which it sends its officials to the villages to provide government services – such as issuing caste, residence, birth, death and other certificates and documents like land rights (patta), MNREGS job cards – at villagers’ doorsteps. During this drive, senior officials of 21 government departments are asked to camp at every village panchayat headquarters for a day each.

When I heard about this drive, I thought of visiting as many panchayats as I could to assess what exactly happened during such drives. The senior-most official at such drives is the area’s sub-divisional magistrate (SDM), who supervises the work and gets it done by other government officials. One of the panchayats I visited was called Chandela and the SDM in charge of the camp was a young IAS officer named Jitendra Soni.

My presence at the camp for most part of the day had an electric effect on Soni. The combination of the words ‘Delhi magazine’ and ‘World Bank project’ sent him on an overdrive, directing his otherwise slothful staff to issue as many certificates as they could. “Arre fast kaam, don’t let them do nothing.”
Along with the constant threat of eviction, the Jogi community members also do not come under the ambit of any govt scheme as they do not have ration cards, or for that matter any identity card. Governance Now’s story of their plight, I am told, is about to be part of an NGO’s petition to officials in Jaipur, requesting them to issue patta to these Jogi families.

A scheduled caste community, the 1,000-odd Jogi families in the district do not own land and are settled on the pasture land of different panchayats. Along with the constant threat of eviction from the land they are settled on, another problem is they do not come under the ambit of any government schemes since they do not have ration cards, or for that matter any identity card. This story of their plight, I am told, is about to be part of a petition a local NGO wants to make to officials in Jaipur, requesting them to issue patta to these Jogi families.

“We have been trying to attract the attention of the officials for years but nothing substantial has happened. Hopefully your story would be noticed and some official might be moved enough to push his pen to ameliorate their condition,” said Brij Mohan Sharma of the Society for All-Round Development, the NGO.

Lastly, one story that made a substantial impact was on misuse of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) funds. Titled ‘Bleak board: a scam to build ghost schools’, it reported misuse of SSA money in a hurry to raise schools that were forced to shut down soon after they were opened. District officials got sanction for schools at places where no children could be found for enrolment. Thirty such schools had been shut down in the district and were fast turning into ruins.

But one that had shut shop for lack of students, and which the story had written about, was reopened last month, with a teacher deputed. “Your story was noticed by the district administration and it arranged to reopen this school in Nayakhedha hamlet of Sherwa village. The teacher has been asked to go around the adjacent hamlet to find students and get them enrolled,” Sunita Sharma of SARD said. The news was an emotional high.

Why big media should cover Other India
Frankly, at the end of the six months I do not know how much my stories would impact the lives of people I followed. I do not know if Sharmi Bai’s profile I wrote will help her strengthen her position and ward off her enemies. I do not know if Vaju Jogi and her family will get a patta for the land they have been living on for two decades. I also do not know if the ayurvedic hospitals in the district will finally get doctors and would not have to depend on peons like Adnan Singh to diagnose and prescribe medicines.

For, six months is too short a time to make any solid impact on the ground.

Having said that, what I am certain of, however, is that sustained reporting by the mainstream media locally – at the panchayat or block level – will yield results. If my six-month stay at Abu Road block was noticed by the officials, regular reporting from such a place by big media houses will certainly put pressure on the local/district officials and result in course correction and plugging of innumerable loopholes in the implementation of hundreds of government schemes.

It is at the panchayat and block levels that the impact of the so-called big government schemes on the lives of people can be seen and evaluated, and it is here that their worthiness is tested.

Therefore, it’s all the more important to report that panchayats are resorting to digging the same ditch again and again, year after year, under MNREGS, that peons are running hospitals, that the ICDS has gone to the dogs, that SSA funds are being wasted in building schools that have zero enrolment.

It’s time the big media sent it reporters to the villages.
Bleak board: a ‘scam’ to build ghost schools

SSA money spent in a hurry to build schools that are forced to close soon

It might be used as location for a war-ravaged building in a Bollywood film, so ruined does the primary school in Nayakheda hamlet of Sherwa village, in Reodar block of Sirohi district, look. The five rooms are in total shambles, with plaster peeling off the damp walls, as two steel almirahs lie rusting in one of the rooms. The name of the school, writ in black, is barely visible now, with some alphabets washed away in the rains.

Only some unreadable sentences on the two front blackboards suggest the school was in operation, at least for a while.

Giving the school company are two toilet blocks on either side, each built at a cost of ₹40,000 as part of the Centre’s total sanitation campaign. Though in a shambles, the shining white tiles used in the toilet blocks indicate they were built recently, and in between these blocks is a hand pump.

Built in early 2007, the school was closed within a year, says Varju Devi, a resident of the hamlet next to the school. “There were not enough students,” she says, even before one could ask the reason for its closure. “There were at best 20-25 students, and one teacher, till the time it operated.”

Locals say the Reodar block alone has 30 such schools built under the Centre’s Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) scheme and are lying unused — Governance Now visited five such schools in ruins.

At a conservative estimate, ₹5 lakh was spent on each such school, with an additional ₹1 lakh or thereof on the hand pumps and toilets. Simple arithmetic says we are then looking at a figure of ₹1.8 crore of taxpayer’s money washed down the drain.

This, mind you, is only one of the five blocks in the district.

Why, then, would the government open schools at a place where there are no students and deliberately waste public money?

‘It’s a scam’

“It’s a scam under SSA,” says Brij Bhusan Sharma of SARAD, an NGO working in the block. “Once fund allocated under SSA reaches the district, it has to be spent and the targets met. So district officials
sanction construction of school buildings in bulk without conducting any survey of the area and consulting the panchayats."

The commission involved in constructing a school also plays a role in this flurry of sanctions. According to Radhyshyam Sharma, a primary school teacher, officials of the education department earn at least ₹1 lakh for raising each school building.

A senior government official admits that such schools should not have been sanctioned in the first place under SSA.

Unfolded in 2001, SSA, the Centre’s flagship elementary education programme aimed at providing universal primary education to children between 6 and 14 years, there should be a primary school within a radius of 1 km, or a population of 300 people. But the school in Nayakheda had only 10 families to cater to.

Besides, a better-administered primary school already existed in Sherwa village, about 1.5 km from Nayakheda, at the time.

Not surprisingly, another school in Khadia hamlet, under Mithan village, catering to four families, is also closed for the last two years.

The Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research’s report on SSA for 2008-11 offers some clue on the haste shown by government officials in sanctioning school buildings, offering insight into the last-minute rush to spend funds in a bid to meet annual targets.

According to the report, only 37 percent of SSA’s expenditure was incurred in the first two quarters of 2008-09 fiscal, which means the remaining 68 percent was spent — mostly in a hurry — in the last two quarters. Rajasthan, along with Maharashtra, spent less than 30 percent in the first two quarters, and more than 70 percent between October 2008 and March 2009.

“If more than 70 percent of the fund has to be spent in the last few months of the financial year, such haste in sanctioning schools without proper consultation is not surprising at all,” says a senior government official at district headquarters Sirohi.

Leaving the deserted primary school in Nayakheda, one finds the slogan of SSA painted on one of its walls: ‘Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan — Sab padhe, Sab badhe’, or education for all, progress for all.

While it’s not certain whether the scheme is enabling education for all, it certainly has led to progress at least for some.

Varju Devi
Resident of a nearby village

"There were not enough students. At best 20-25 students, and one teacher, till the time the school operated."

Clockwise from facing page: a closed school in village Khadia; a classroom with dirty floor; school almirahs left to gather dust; unused toilet since the school was closed; a sarva shiksha abhiyan slogan on a wall.

brajesh@governancenow.com
Grassroots Governance

A community caught in catch-22 of babudom

Abandoned by the state, ostracised by society, the Jogis of Sirohi are living examples of the riddles of law and absurdity of bureaucracy. They are listed as SCs but can’t get benefits, neither are other govt schemes valid for them
Sitting in the balmy winter sun outside her decrepit hut with granddaughter Laghu Jogi, Vaju Jogi says she has been running a temperature for the last two days. She shares the hut on the outskirts of Malawa village of Dhan panchayat in Sirohi district’s Reodar block with her youngest son Ishwar Jogi, the latter’s wife and three children.

The huts around Vaju are equally dilapidated, occupied by her five other sons and her only daughter, all of whom live with their families.

The men of the household, all daily wage earners, are out, hoping to get lucky today and return with enough cash to feed their families in the evening. The children, 10 out of 12, and women, are out as well: some begging and others eyeing menial jobs. Kamlesh and Sona, two of the youngest children, too young to ask for either alms or work, are the only ones around Vaju and Laghu.

A thatched roof supported by four bambooos and without the four walls is the family kitchen. Vaju and Laghu are waiting for the others to return with some food so that the first meal of the day could be cooked.

Shivering, Vaju suddenly realises the temperature is pretty high, and Laghu soon carries her inside the hut. But why not take her to the government hospital in Reodar just about 5 kilometres away? “She will be fine in a day or two,” Laghu Jogi says hesitantly.

They would not take her to the hospital, one learns later, since that would cost about Rs 100, an amount the family can ill afford.

No matter what the ailment is, Jogis would not go to a government hospital, 5 km away, as it would cost an amount they cannot afford.

So who are the Jogis?

Vaju and her extended family’s account could be true for all 1,000 Jogi families in Sirohi district. Living on a small piece of land on outskirts of the village, Vaju’s family members are deemed encroachers on panchayat land, despite living at the same place for nearly two decades.

The plot housing their huts is said to be the panchayat’s pasture land. And since neither Vaju Jogi’s extended family nor the other 1,000 households in the district own land, they cannot partake in any government schemes for the poor. In other words, they are invisible for the panchayat, the block, the district, and the state.

They live, but the administration refuses to acknowledge them.

The Jogis are one of the many nomadic tribes of Rajasthan who have moved from one place to another for centuries to ply their trade as snake charmers, singers or dancers.

For the last two decades, however, they have settled on the outskirts of villages all across Sirohi. Considered untouchables, other villagers keep them out of bounds, and settled on pasture land belonging to different panchayats, the Jogis live perpetually in the fear of eviction.

Returning home after failing to get any work for the day, Boja Jogi, who is married to Vaju’s daughter Suja, says the sarpanch of Dhan panchayat threatens to evict their families every other month. “He says we have usurped panchayat land,” Boja says.

The threats are discreet ways of asking for bribe, which they cannot afford any way, he adds.

Taunted, rebuked, threatened

As we talk, Vaju’s daughter Suja returns with some food she managed while begging in a nearby village. Kamlesh and Sona run to her to get their share of the food.

One of Vaju’s grandsons, Mukesh, 10, also returns. He works in the fields of local farmers for a lowly daily wage of Rs 70. While he is wearing a blue shirt, part of the primary school uniform, Mukesh does not attend school. He did go to the nearby primary school, for two or three months but was kicked out by “upper caste students”.

“They called him untouchable and refused to eat with him the midday meal provided by the school. He was unable to face the taunts and dropped out,” the boy’s mother, Suja Jogi, says.

The taunts, rebuke and threats by residents of their village and ones in the vicinity have pushed the Jogis into hiding. Until you belong to the area, or you know a Jogi, it is impossible to locate one.

Typically, five to 10 families live in a small enclosure far from hostile and prying eyes of surrounding villages. They keep dogs to guard themselves.
Officials? Their ‘hands are tied’

Though aware of their plight, senior administration officials express helplessness in doing anything for the community. “The last SDM said they (Jogis) could not be considered for any government scheme if their names are not in 2001 census. His hands were tied,” says Brij Mohan Sharma of the Society for All-Round Development, a local NGO that conducted a survey of Jogi families in Reodar block.

“The SDM later told us that NGOs need to organise some protest programmes in the state capital to get them heard,” Sharma recalls.

While the local population has disowned and declared them outcast, the district administration chooses to ignore the Jogis. When Governance Now visits his office to learn more about the problem, district social welfare officer Mangi Lal Maroo at first cannot recollect who the Jogis are. “Oh, it’s the beggars you are talking about,” he says a little later, a trifle derisively. “But who said they are not taken into account by the state? They are the offshoots of the Kalbelia tribe who are listed as scheduled caste by the Rajasthan government.”

“They (Jogis) are thus beneficiaries of welfare schemes meant for SCs.”

But if they are eligible for government benefits under schemes meant for SCs, why are they not receiving any help?

It’s a bit of bureaucratic maze coupled with a unique catch-22 situation. There’s no simple answer to the riddle.

A government official in the district headquarters (name withheld on request) blames their plight on the nomadic nature of the Jogis. “Since they move from place to place, they could not be included in the 2001 census and thus, unfortunately, they went out of the ambit of any welfare scheme,” he explains.

Therefore, even though the community is listed as SC, they have been disowned simply because they do not own a patta for land, or have not been counted in 2001 census. Further, since people from the community do not vote, they are of little consequence for the political class. The Jogis cannot work under MNREGS as well, as they do not have job cards. Why? Because one needs to be the resident of a village to get a job card. It’s a vicious cycle, and one with no end in sight.
Unveiled: woman who calls shots in a man’s world

From a shy daughter-in-law at 17 who kept up her studies to a hugely popular sarpanch, Sharmi Bai has come a long way “from those ghunghat days”

Besides her efforts in the field of education and pension, Sharmi Bai has worked toward ridding NREGS of corruption and irregularities.
Sharmi Bai doesn’t feel shy any more. Having long given up the ghungahar, or the saree veil, she presides over the male-dominated Neechlagarh gram sabha with an uncharacteristic élan.

Dressed in a bright pink saree, Sharmi Bai, the tribal sarpanch of Neechlagarh, in Abu road block of Rajasthan’s Sirohi district, sits confidently in the Panchayat Bhavan, inspecting documents. The gram sabha has been called to prepare the annual plan for National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), and when she speaks, people listen with rapt attention. Tall and thin, and almost gaunt, Sharmi Bai does not look her 40 years. But years spent working at various positions in the panchayat has brought a certain gravitas in her voice.

“We want a road built to one of our remotest villages. Since it’s the forest land we want your permission,” she tells a forest official in the meeting. “We also want community rights over a patch of land under the Forest Rights Act.”

**The work: present continuous**

Neechlagarh panchayat comes under bhakhar (hilly) area of the block and is infamous for its abysmally low female literacy rate. So ever since becoming a sarpanch in 2010, she has exhorted families under her jurisdiction to send their girl children to school.

Sunita, a class IV student from the area, attests that. Had it not been for Sharmi Bai, the child says, her parents would long have confined her to their house. “I was forced to leave school twice,” Sunita says, “and on both occasions sarpanch-ji convinced my parents to send me back to school.”

Villagers also say tens of girls are now going to school, largely due to the efforts of their sarpanch.

Sharmi Bai, locals say, has also worked to get pension for the aged and infirm in the panchayat. “There is not one single senior citizen in the panchayat who does not receive pension now,” Savita Bai, a ward panch, says.

Besides her efforts in the field of education and pension, Sharmi Bai has also worked towards ridding NREGS of corruption and irregularities. The scheme has so much potential but has been abused at every level, Sharmi Bai says. “Ever since becoming the sarpanch I have cancelled many fake job cards and ensured workers get their payment on time,” she adds.

Her work has made Sharmi Bai hugely popular not only in Neechlagarh but also in panchayats nearby.

Residents of other panchayats now regularly come to her for her advice. In a healthy, competitive way, her popularity, locals say, has put pressure on other sarpanches to perform!

**The entry, the rise in politics**

Besides being chosen as the only panchayat leader to meet US president Barack Obama in Mumbai two years ago (see box) Sharmi Bai’s work is taking her outside Neechlagarh on other occasions, too. She visited Bangladesh recently to attend a workshop on women’s leadership, and is slated to travel to the US soon to talk about her work in the panchayat.

But while she has taken to this new role of glob-trotting sarpanch like the proverbial fish taking to water, she was just another shy, ghunghat-wearing daughter-in-law, like hundreds of other women of Neechlagarh, not long ago.

“**She has made us proud. Thanks to her, anganwadi centres stick to norms and provide nutritious food to pregnant women and children, health sub-centres open on time, and NREGS workers get wages on time.**"

Dharma Ram, local resident

“I was forced to leave school twice, and on both occasions sarpanch-ji (Sharmi Bai) convinced my parents to send me back to school.”

Sunita, class IV student
But as the old proverb goes: if there’s a will, there sure is a way. Though married at the age of 17 after she had barely stepped out of primary education, Sharmi Bai did not however want to give up on education and be a housewife all her life.

She would surreptitiously leave her husband’s house, gather a few women in the neighbourhood, and study together. It didn’t take long for her to travel the next distance: she gathered all illiterate women in her village and began teaching them, becoming, in the course of it, the rallying point for them.

Egged on by those very women, she came out of her shell and joined panchayat politics, contesting for the post of ward member in 2005. She won the election, and thus began her career in public service.

Her popularity as a ward panch rose further when she identified each and every old and infirm person in her ward and forced the sarpanch to get them old-age pension.

She had become quite popular by then, especially among the women. And when the next panchayat election approached, there was clamour among the village women to make Sharmi Bai their next sarpanch.

“As a ward panch, I had been able to make a difference in the lives of some people in the panchayat,” Sharmi Bai now says. “However, a ward panch has her limitations, and I was aware of the powers of a sarpanch. I knew if I became a sarpanch I could make a tangible difference in the lives of many more.

“So there I was, running for the position of sarpanch in 2010.”

For most people in Neechlagarh, the result was a foregone conclusion: she defeated the incumbent sarpanch, who had been in the post for 15 years.

The early years, the next course
Recalling her early years of activism, Sharmi Bai says it wasn’t easy. “Men used to stare at me initially and talk about my audacity. They often asked my husband why he was letting me go out,” she says.

But she ignored the stares and loose talks, and egged on by her husband Bela Ram, a daily wage worker, she ploughed on.

Seven years down the line — the first five as a ward member and the last two as sarpanch — those same stares have turned into admiration. She is now called “Sarpanch sahib” in the village.

Dharma Ram, a local resident, says, “She has made us proud. Thanks to her, anganwadi centres stick to norms and provide nutritious food to pregnant women and children, health sub-centres open on time, and NREGS workers get wages on time.”

Seated on a cot in her modest mud house with brick tiles, Sharmi Bai points to her veil-wearing photograph on the wall, clicked when she was awarded by the area SDM for work on sanitation and girl’s education as a ward panch. Next to it hangs another framed picture, in which she is shaking hands with Barack Obama.

“I have come a long way from those ghunghat-wearing days,” she says, almost reading my mind.

And does she want to rest for now? Is being a sarpanch enough? No way. “I will not fight for sarpanch in the next elections. Anyone who becomes a sarpanch will have to work for people, now that people have seen what a sarpanch can do,” she says.

“But I would contest for the post of panchayat samiti member (at the block level), and then slowly graduate to the zila parishad (district level).”

Does she dream of becoming an MLA? Sharmi Bai smiles and doesn’t answer but the glint in her eyes is a giveaway. She has seen and lived the powers of an elected representative, and the difference one can make in the lives of the ordinary folks.

“There is not a single senior citizen in the panchayat who does not receive pension now.” Savita Bai, ward panch

The ‘date’ with Obama
One of the most popular sarpanches in Sirohi district, Sharmi Bai was the only panchayat leader to have met US president Brarack Obama during his visit to Mumbai in November 2010. She was chosen to showcase to Obama her work as an elected representative of the third and lowest rung of Indian democracy.

Recounting the meeting with the “humble” US president, Sharmi Bai says, “When I told him I belong to a backward region and that I am a tribal, he said he also comes from a similar background and was a kind of tribal himself.”

While Obama commended Sharmi Bai on her work and asked her to carry on doing a good job, she says she promised him that she would. Sharmi bai has kept her promise, having worked tirelessly for her panchayat.

Brajesh has been stationed in Abu Road, Sirohi, for three months. It is part of a project Governance Now is running with Affiliated Network for Social Accountability – South Asia Region (ANSA-SAR). Follow details at governancenow.com/media-accountability. Read other report on page 34.
Sirohi health report:
fit, but also hit

National rural health mission has brought about significant progress in infrastructure, curbed infant and maternal mortality rates but lack of medical specialists remains a concern.
Sawar Ram, a resident of Uplagarh under Abu Road block of Sirohi district, still recalls with chill the day a woman from the neighbouring Mathara fell, or a hamlet, had to be carried on bamboo sticks all the way to the community health centre (CHC) at Abu Road, 25 kilometres away, when she had labour pain in the dead of the night. With no health centre in the region, and no means of transport available, four men carried the woman on two bamboo sticks.

“Such incidents were normal for the entire Bhakhar region (the hilly region of Abu Road block) in those days,” he says. While that woman was lucky and did not deliver on the way, there have been cases where either the woman or the child died due to the lack of medical facilities, he says.

But that was some 10 years ago.

Today, seven years after the national rural health mission (NRHM) was rolled out in the district in 2005, such cases are rare. Every panchayat in the hilly region now has a health sub-centre equipped with the basic minimum facility. And an ambulance service (108) is quickly pressed into action in case of any emergency.

Along with several health sub-centres (a sub-centre caters to a panchayat), the region boasts of a primary health centre (or PHC, catering to a cluster of panchayats) in Deldar and a community health centre (CHC) at the block level in Abu Road.

With 191 health sub-centres at the village level, 22 PHCs and six CHCs at the block and tehsil levels and a district hospital to boot, Sirohi has made considerable progress after NRHM kicked in.

The most visible effect of NRHM in the district has been the exponential increase in institutional deliveries, or deliveries at government hospitals. “Earlier (in 2004-05) we had barely 20 percent deliveries in our institutions. Last year this jumped to 85 percent. For the next year we have set our eyes on 90 percent institutional deliveries,” Dr Sanjeev Tak, chief medical and health officer (CMHO) of the district, says.

The infant mortality rate (IMR) and maternal mortality rate (MMR), two of the most important health indicators, have also shown considerable decline. While the district’s IMR dropped from 68 (sample registration survey, 2006) to 62 (the 2009 survey), MMR declined from 445 in 2006 to 322 (sample registration survey, 2009).

The district fares much better on both indicators compared to others in south Rajasthan such as Udaipur (MMR at 364), Rajasthan (IMR 65 and MMR 364) and Jalore (IMR 79).

“The district has seen considerable progress under NRHM,” confirms Dharmendra Gautam, district facilitator of a convergence programme run jointly by the union government and the UN.

The benefits of NRHM, Gautam says, have accrued at three different levels: it created an institutional framework under which all health programmes operate, it added a big chunk of manpower and facilitated their trainings, and thirdly it made a huge difference to infrastructure.

Institutional framework

“There was no institutional framework for the health sector before NRHM,” Gautam says. “Various state and central health programmes ran independently of each other — there was no planning at any level.”

The NRHM saw formation of the district health mission and integration of multiple societies for health and family welfare programmes at state and district levels. The district health mission, led by the zila parishad chairman, is now responsible for managing all public health intuitions at the district, block and panchayat levels. It also made and implemented integrated district action plan, taking into account requirements at each level.

Medical relief societies formed at each level — district hospital, CHCs and PHCs — were made responsible for making annual plans and overseeing their execution.

At the village level, village health and sanitation committees (VHSCs) with members from panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) were formed to ensure implementation of health plan at the lowest ladder.

Decentralisation of power at panchayat level is the best achievement of NRHM, says Brijmohan Sharma of the Society for All Round Development (SARD), a Sirohi-based NGO working in the health sector.

“The approach was top-down earlier, with the target fixed at Jaipur, the state capital. It was forced on the district, which in turn forced it downed the order. Planning is now done at the panchayat level by the village health and sanitation committees,” says Sharma, whose NGO helps panchayats prepare health plans according to their needs.

The NRHM has also brought large amounts of untied and corpus funds. At the sub-centre level, NRHM provides for an annual sum of ₹10,000 as untied fund (which can be spent on anything, including maintenance of the health facility) and another ₹15,000 as corpus fund (which can be spent under specified heads). These can be spent under supervision of the sarpanch and the ANM. At the block level PHCs get untied fund of ₹25,000 and ₹50,000 as corpus fund and CHCs receive ₹50,000 as untied fund and ₹100,000 as corpus fund.

Neonatal care unit at the community health centre in Reodar block
At both these levels, medical relief societies with members of PRIs and block decide on spending the funds.

“Availability of these funds has made a huge difference to the functioning of health centres at each level,” says Ranjit Kumar Koli, sarpanch of Datani in Reodar block.

The infrastructure
In pre-NRHM days, the sub-centre at Marol panchayat under Reodar block was a deserted, dilapidated building. Although an auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) sat there, the sub-centre existed only on paper. There were no facilities to tackle any medical emergency. Today, the sub-centre sees four or five deliveries every month, besides catering to patients with minor ailments. The building was rebuilt with NRHM funds, says Savita Chaudhary, additional ANM at the centre. “Another untied fund of ₹10,000, received annually, takes care of the sub-centre’s maintenance.”

In adjoining Datani village, the panchayat utilised NRHM funds to build a big labour room to ensure pregnant women from the village do not have to travel the 15 km to the community health centre during emergency.

At the block level in Reodar, the CHC is a state-of-the-art hospital with an operation theatre, a blood storage unit, a deep freezer and a neonatal care unit. “Not long ago, this hospital ran in two small rooms with hardly any equipment, and no patients. But it sees hordes of patients at the out-patient department (OPD) today,” said Dr SS Bhatti, a physician at the hospital.

Manpower
There has been large influx of manpower under NRHM with the creation of a new cadre of ASHA workers, additional ANMs, block health managers and district health managers. “There is a huge gap between the village community and the ANM sitting in sub-centres. (But) this gap has been filled with the appointment of 6,000 trained health workers (ASHAs),” says Dharmendra Gautam.

The appointment of additional ANMs has taken the load off ANMs, who earlier found it difficult to cater to a population of 10,000. Appointment of health managers at the block level to coordinate with different departments and look after health schemes at the block level has also eased the situation to an extent.

NRHM has created an institutional framework under which all health programmes operate: it added a big chunk of manpower and facilitated their trainings, and thirdly it made a huge difference to infrastructure.

The gaps
While NRHM has helped the district meet its health needs, the problem areas remain. From the PHC level upwards, there is a huge staff crunch of specialists. Most CHCs are running with two to four specialists against a prescribed quota of 15.

Accepting that staff crunch at the CHC level affects their operations, district CMHO Dr Tak says, “We have a huge problem in availability of specialists in the district. We need a pediatrician, a gynecologist and an anesthetist but we do not have these specialists at most centres.”

Even offering lucrative salaries have failed to attract doctors, he says. “We offer as much as ₹80,000 to doctors but are unable to hire them. No one wants to take a posting in Sirohi,” Dr Tak says.

With OPD patients increasing every day at CHCs, handling them with the few doctors available is an onerous task.

According to Gautam, another problem is the gap in communication between district officials and PRIs. “Lack of awareness among PRIs about fund entitlements of village health and sanitation committees (VHSCs) is a big problem in effective implementation of the programme,” he says.

Every panchayat has a VHSC, and receives ₹10,000 annually through NRHM to keep them clean and sanitised — the district has received ₹1.5 crore in untied fund for this over the last three years. But, Gautam says, 50 percent of this fund remains unutilised since most panchayats are not aware of the fund. “In fact, several panchayats do not even have such committees,” he says.

Lakma Ram, president of the sarpanch association in Abu Road block, acknowledges that several sarpanches are not aware of VHSCs and the fund it is entitled to. “ANMs keep sarpanches in the dark about several schemes and funds available,” he says.

According to Lakma Ram, the “real problem” is the huge communication gap between district officials and PRIs. “District officials do not bother to come below the block offices. How will panchayats get involved?” he asks.

CMHO Sanjeev Tak agrees on to the communication gap and says efforts are on to address the situation. “Since so much fund is available at every level it is important that PRIs who know the area’s priority are involved,” he says. “Recently we held awareness camps at the block and district levels, where PRI members were invited and told about the different schemes running under the NRHM, and the important role they could play.”
Tribals in Abu Road say ‘cheers’ to PESA

Armed with special Act for tribal self-governance, local leaders look forward to putting a clamp on liquor shops, approve development plans and programmes. For now, all eyes on implementation.
For years, residents of Abu Road block's Neechlagarh panchayat have been trying to oust the government liquor shop located bang next to the village school, but in vain.

This year, however, they might just succeed.

Having made rules of the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) last year, the Rajasthan government is all set to implement the law this year in “fifth scheduled areas” (localities with dominant tribal population) of five districts, including Abu Road block in Sirohi.

Enacted by the centre in 1996, PESA empowers gram sabhas to decide on the existence of liquor shops in their villages, among many other powers including control over moneylenders, community resources, minor forest produce. It also gives gram sabhas the power to maintain peace and resolve local disputes.

“Our first priority would be throwing out liquor shops from our villages,” Narsa Ram, the up-sarpanch (deputy head) of Neechlagarh panchayat said.

Locals and activists operating in the area said alcohol addiction has been a long-running problem in this tribal block. “Many men drink even through the day,” Uplakheda resident Sawa Ram said.

Such is the state of affairs that outsiders are warned against venturing in the tribal-dominated area after 6 pm. “There’s a big chance that you will be stopped by an inebriated man or a group. You could even be mugged,” he added.

“There have been several cases of violence because of alcohol. Our adivasi brothers who get addicted to alcohol spend all their money on alcohol, and when their wives protest they are beaten up,” said Narsa Ram.

The Rajasthan government’s liberal excise policy has led to mushrooming of liquor shops in villages, with at least one such in each village panchayat. “I once counted the number of liquor shops on a stretch of 1-km road in Abu Road town and found there were more liquor shops than hand-pumps,” Narsa Ram said.

**Downing shutters on liquor shops**

With the implementation of PESA, Narsa Ram hopes his panchayat will be able to uproot these shops.

But in order to down shutters of these shops, each village will have to convene a special meeting of the gram sabha, and pass a resolution to this effect with a two-third majority. The resolution will then be forwarded to the district collector, who will subsequently write to the excise department.

On receiving the communication of the gram sabha, the collector will stop renewing the licence of that particular shop in the new financial year, as per rules.

“Though a lengthy and complicated process, PESA Act vests a gram sabha with the power to eject them (liquor shops) from our villages,” said Narsa Ram.

The law gives primacy to the voice of women, stating that their opinion would be considered the opinion of a gram sabha.

There is a provision for procuring liquor for special occasions, though. The law says:

“(A) gram sabha shall be competent to lay down limits for possession of country liquor by resident(s) of the gram sabha on special occasions like birth, naming ceremony, betrothal, marriage, during settlement of disputes, death feasts, Holi and Diwali festivals and such other occasions in view of tradition and customs of the tribal community. (The) gram sabha shall specify the quantity of local liquor to be possessed and date-wise period of possession.”

But in the one-and-half decade since the Act was enacted only Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, out of nine states with fifth-schedule areas (see box on the next page) have framed the rules of the Act.

Besides the prospect of removing liquor shops by using provisions of PESA, Narsa Ram and company of Neechlagarh and other panchayats of Abu Road are equally excited about other provisions of the law.

**Gram sabhas at each village, not panchayat level**

A powerful law, PESA devolves powers to govern a village in the hands of its residents by enabling the formation of gram sabhas at the level of a revenue village instead of the panchayat, as is the case now.

Typically, there are several revenue villages in a gram panchayat, and gram sabhas were conducted at the panchayat level before PESA came into reckoning. In its earlier avatar, it was difficult for a sarpanch to monitor implementation of various schemes in his/her panchayat, especially if the panchayat had four to five villages.

For example, Uplakheda panchayat in the block has six revenue villages, with some as far as 10 to 15 kilometres from the main village where the gram sabhas were held. On many occasions, people from these villages were unable to make it to the panchayat bhavans for the gram sabha meetings.

“As up-sarpanch of Neechlagarh panchayat, I am unable to monitor the anganwadi centre at Neechlabore. Though the anganwadi is in my panchayat it is far from the main village,” explained Narsa Ram.

With the implementation of PESA, however, each village will hold its own gram sabha and take its own decisions. Once PESA is implemented, Narsa Ram would no more be required to go to Neechalbore to monitor the anganwadi centre there — its own gram sabha will do the needful.

“PESA takes governance to the lowest level where each village decides its own destiny — (this is) a true gram swaraj,” Ranchod Devasias, member of Janchetna Santhan, an NGO working with tribals in Abu Road for decades, said.

**Control over money-lending**

The law aims to loosen the hold of moneylenders in the entire block. For years, moneylenders have exploited the tribal people by lending money at exorbitant rates. “In my village, the sahukar/mahajan lends money at an interest of 10 percent per month, instead of an annual
Fifth schedule of constitution

Provisions of the fifth schedule apply to the administration and control of scheduled areas and scheduled tribes in any state other than Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.

In India, most tribes are collectively identified under Article 342 (1&2) as “scheduled tribes” and the right to self-determination is guaranteed by Part X: The Scheduled and Tribal Areas and Article 244: Administration of Scheduled Areas and Tribal Areas.

About PESA

The central government enacted PESA in December 1996 acting on the report of a committee headed by member of parliament Dileep Singh Bhuria to work out details on how structures similar to panchayati raj institutions could take shape in tribal areas and scheduled areas, as also to define their powers.

PESA calls for every legislation on the panchayats in the fifth schedule areas to be in conformity with the customary law, social and religious practices and traditional management practices of the community resources. It directs the state government to give powers and authority to make gram sabhas and panchayats function as institutions of local self-governance, specifically on enforcing prohibition of sale and consumption of intoxicants, ownership of minor forest produce, power to prevent alienation of land and restoration of unlawfully alienated land, management of village markets, control over money lending, etc.

PESA also empowers gram sabhas to approve plans, programmes for social and economic development, identify beneficiaries under poverty alleviation.

States with fifth schedule areas

Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan.

Richa Audichya, director, Janchetna, says PESA will help in tribal self rule in true sense, however many details are yet to be worked out.
the village.

The committee will inquire into incidents that breach the peace of village and report to the gram sabha for a decision. It would counsel those breaking peace, arbitrate and take immediate action where necessary, and subsequently report to the gram sabha.

Any crime that invites punishment under two years’ imprisonment under provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) will be resolved by the gram sabha through these peace committees, the law says.

“The idea is to resolve minor disputes by consensus and arbitration, and check exploitation of tribals by the local police,” said Ranchod Devasia of Janchetna Santhan.

In case of any serious crime (or those with punishment of more than two-year jail term), the police, though empowered to take action, will have to make a report to the gram sabha.

Management of community resources
Abu Road block has several panchayats — Kivarli, Surpagla, Morthala, Akrabhatta and Aamtha, among others — with abundance of marble stones, mined by the state. Till date, these panchayats could not partake of any profit from these mines. Not any longer, though. The state will now have to take permission of the gram sabha under whose boundary the mines are located and the latter has the right to decline the government rights to mine in its areas.

Land alienation
Taking over land owned by tribals by non-tribals has been a major problem here, especially alleged transfer of tribal land to various religious sects. The law prohibits purchase of tribal land by non-tribals. In case forcible acquisition of tribal land by non-tribals, the gram sabha will send a notice to the tehsildar seeking due action.

Control over minor forest produce
While the entire bhakhar region (hilly area) of Abu Road sits on forest land, the tribal population was till date subject to harassment by the forest department in case they collected firewoods or forest products such as honey, wax, tendu leaves or bamboo. “The new law gives them (tribals) legal right over these products, says Lakma Ram, the sarpanch of Chandela.

While the entire bhakhar region (hilly area) of Abu Road sits on forest land, the tribal population was till date subject to harassment by the forest department in case they collected firewoods or forest products such as honey, wax, tendu leaves or bamboo. “The new law gives them (tribals) legal right over these produce,” said Lakma Ram, the sarpanch, Chandela.

According to rules, “Gram sabha shall ensure collection of minor forest produce in accordance with the memorandum of understanding signed by the village forest protection and management committee with the panchayat and the forest department; the gram sabha shall be responsible for the marketing of minor forest produce from its area and optimising its profits; the net revenue obtained shall belong to gram sabha…”

Awareness campaign needed
While the law is being hailed by all those connected with tribal welfare, its actual implementation, though, remains to be seen.

“While panchayats like Neechlagarh and some others, which have educated and pro-active sarpanches, will ensure the law is implemented, there are others who need to be educated about it,” said Lakma Ram, who, the sarpanch of Chandela and also president of the sarpanch association of Abu Road block.

“The government should launch a massive awareness campaign on the lines of MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) and RTE (Right to Education), so that people know about the law that proposes to give tribals the power to self-rule.”

On its part, the government has begun educating its staff, along with elected representatives, about the law. Last month all district officials from departments that would deal directly with PESA — such as revenue, police, excise, forest and mining — underwent a three-day workshop. Elected representatives, or members of zila parishad, panchayat samitis and panchayats were given separate orientation classes.

Meanwhile, Narsa Ram, has begun preparation for convening a gram sabha that would take a resolution to shut the liquor shop in his village. “It has to be convened before the next financial year in April, when fresh tenders for these shops are renewed,” he stressed.
When admin offers a helping hand to villagers

A camp where district machinery comes to the panchayat for service delivery shows the best and worst of governance

How could they all not be there? After all, the ‘sarkar’ was coming to their doorsteps, as they had heard, to provide relief to them instantly.

The venue was a daylong camp at the Chandela panchayat headquarters, in Abu Road block, and most villagers — who had earlier knocked on the doors of the very same officials for months, some for years, in vain — rushed to the panchayat headquarters to get their long-standing grievances redressed.

“Imagine, I can get something done in a day! And that too at my own panchayat headquarters!” exclaimed Shafiq Muhammad, a farmer who had come to get a loan of ₹1 lakh under state government’s ‘Vishwas Yojna’.

The camp, held on January 11, was part of a drive by the Rajasthan government under which it sent its officials to villages to provide government services — issuing certificates like caste, residence, birth, death, and other documents, including land rights (patta), MNREGS job cards, among others at villagers’ doorsteps.

Called ‘Prashasan gaon ke sang’, a brainchild of Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot, the drive started on January 10 and would conclude on February 28. As part of the drive, senior officials of 21 government departments — including revenue, medical and health, education, water resources, public health and engineering department (PHED), cooperatives, ayurveda, labour, forest and environment, among others — have been asked to camp at every village panchayat headquarters for a day each.

The news about the scheduled drive had sent a sliver of excitement across every panchayat in Abu Road block, with people eagerly waiting for their turn. “We want to get our pending work done when the officials have been forced to come to us — to do what they should have done as their duty on any other day,” said Baburam Cheni, 30, a farmer from Neechlakhejda village.

So on January 11, the day the district administration was to camp at Chandela panchayat, they had all come. Hundreds of Chandela residents, including Kaku, Sambha, Shafiq and others, had gathered at the primary school, where the camp was organised, since 9 am.

The game begins

As the camp started at 10 am, there was a huge rush of people with grievances as varied as colours on the huge tent put up for the drive. Inside the tent, at the far end, sat Jitendra Soni, the sub-divisional magistrate of Abu Road, with a big poster proclaiming ‘Prashasan Gaon Ke Sang’ put up behind him.

Soni, by virtue of being the seniormost official in the block, is supervisor of all camps to be held at panchayat headquarters all over Abu Road. Seated at the centre of a table, microphone in his hand, Soni oversaw the work of the 21 other officials seated around him, each table adorned with banners and posters from the respective department, telling the villagers the work that could be done during the ‘abhiyan’.

The women and child development...
department's posters, for instance, listed the services it offered in the camp: identification of malnourished children in the area and getting them registered; identification of under-construction/dilapidated anganwadi centres and getting a proposal passed for their completion; selection of anganwadi workers on the spot; and redress of any complaint against irregularities at anganwadi centres, among others.

The posters put up by the other departments were equally detailed and informative.

**Time for tales, pat crisis management**

However, while all departments displayed their wares, there was no enquiry counter to guide people to the right table. So at the sight of the microphone-wielding SDM, most people rushed to him. An IAS officer of 2010 batch Jitendra Soni, however, did not look fazed — in fact, he appeared excited at the prospect of dispensing instant relief.

Named “Nathu” in his voter's identity card, the SDM was thrilled at the opportunity to make a difference in lives of so many. But as the crowd grew bigger at Uplakhejda, the overall lack of governance and apathy of babus was clear: officials sat behind their desks with insolence and indifference. “Let them find out which counter to go to,” as a panchayat secretary said.

(From top) The crowd at Uplakhejda grew restive after the camp began nearly two hours late — other officials were barely bothered since the SDM turned up late.

Kaku Ram and his brothers inform officials that his name is not ‘Nathu Ram’, as written in the EC voter’s identity card.

SDM Jitendra Soni
Walking hand in hand: What is ‘Prashasan gaon ke sangh’?

- Every few years the Rajasthan government sends its babus (or officials) to the villages to provide government services — such as issuing certificates like caste, residence, birth, death, and other documents like land rights (patta), MNREGS job cards — at residents’ doorsteps
- A brainchild of Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, the drive last took place in December 2010.
- During this drive the entire district machinery camps at the village panchayat headquarters for the entire day, providing service to the locals.
- All government departments — revenue, medical and health, education, water resources, public health and engineering department, cooperative, ayurveda, labour, forest and environment, food and civil supplies, women and child development, social justice and empowerment and panchayati raj and rural development — participate in the drive at the village level.

By 3 pm the crowd had grown bigger. Since the work started at noon, only after the SDM arrived, two crucial hours had been lost. And with chaos reigning in those initial couple of hours, with people not certain which counter to approach for what work, the lack of governance at most offices was clear: officials sat behind their desks with the same insolence and indifference as you see when visiting their offices.

“We are here at their panchayat, at their home; let them find out which counter they should go to,” a panchayat secretary said indifferently.

As the SDM sat down looking for an answer, a hundred others outside the camp became restless: the camp would shut shop at 5 pm. “What if my work is not done today?” Mautali Arja Ram, an elderly woman from Buja village, who had come to get widow pension, asked.

“You could try another camp at another panchayat, or come again next when a similar abhiyan kicks off,” said a gram sewak behind the panchayati raj desk. Behind him was a poster that read: Gaon ki samasyaon ka maunke par samadhan (solving local problems on the spot). Irony.

Soni said, before turning to Kaku Ram: “What do you say, Kaku?”

Ecstatic at having reclaimed his name, Kaku was more than happy to oblige the SDM: “Yes, yes! If not for this camp I would have had to shell out a lot of money in hiring a lawyer for the affidavit. Chasing other government officials would have been another monumental task. But since every government department is present here, my job has been done in a jiffy!”

Like Kaku-turned-Nathu-turned-Kaku again, the camp at Chandela saw several other success stories. Sambha Luhar, for instance, got a ‘patta’ for a small patch of land he owns, while Shafiq got sanction letter for a loan and Achla Ram his pension.

At a camp in Uplakhejda, a panchayat in the bhakhar (hilly) region of the block, the following day, January 12, the rush was much more, signifying the neglect the area had undergone from the administration.

“The more the rush in a camp in a certain panchayat, the more inefficient its administration had been over the years — right from the panchayat up to the block level. It shows the administration had been sleeping all these years,” said Kalicharan Garacia, an activist from Uplakhejda, a 100 percent tribal area.

Success story redrafted

Uplakhejda is one of the largest panchayats with six revenue villages under its jurisdiction, and thus thousands had come, some from even far-flung villages, to get their work done.

SDM Soni, who arrived late at this camp, was his usual excited self — in fact much more excited than he was at the Chandela camp, his excitement directly proportional to the size of the crowd. Looking at the surging numbers, he took the microphone and declared: “Sab ka kaam ho jayega. Kripa sabhi baith jayein aur ek ek kar ke aayien (everyone’s work will be done. Please come one by one).”

The glint in the eyes of the young SDM at the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of so many could not be missed. Only if babus working under him shared the same enthusiasm, things would have been so different, one felt.
When Narsa Ram, the deputy sarpanch of Abu Road block’s Neechlagarh panchayat, told me that nearly every household in his panchayat had a functional toilet, I refused to believe him.

This just cannot be true, I told myself — after all, the panchayat is divided into scattered falis (hamlets) located atop different hilltops, with narrow pathways leading up to them. These falis do not have access to schools, health centres or electricity, I was told. So a toilet in every house seemed impossible to me.

“You must be kidding, Narsa,” I told the deputy sarpanch. “And even if these households do have toilets, they must be lying unused.”

“Climb up the hills and see for yourself,” he replied.

“One of these days I will,” I promised him.

I got an opportunity to “climb up the hills,” as Narsa Ram had casually asked me to do, one pleasant winter morning when Naga Ram, a local resident, offered to take me along to Mahadev Fali, a hamlet of about 10 families ensconced in the Aravallis.

It could be reached by walking about 4 km uphill from Mahakudeshwar Mahadev temple, the point where the concrete road ends. As we approached Mahadev Fali after 45 minutes of negotiating steep, narrow pathways, we could see small brick enclosures adjacent to every house.

These were the toilets Narsa Ram was talking about.

“You will see these enclosures beside every house in the entire panchayat,” Naga Ram told me.

The first house we came across belonged to Hamira Anna, a farmer who lived with his wife and two children. The house had concrete
water and sanitation to ensure sanitation facilities in rural areas with a broader goal to eradicate the practice of open defecation. Under this programme the central government bears the cost of building the toilets and also gives cash incentives (Nirmal Gram Puraskar) to villages that have achieved open defecation free (ODF) status.

Since a year ago, when these toilets were built, the residents of these hamlets have stopped defecating in the open.

For Nona Ima, a 55-year-old farmer from Khetla Fali, another hamlet with about 50 households, the toilet was a godsend. “Earlier I had to walk a long distance into the forest to defecate and I used to get tired. During monsoons, it was pretty difficult looking for places to squat,” he said.

Its need is most felt when one falls sick. Walking around the hilly area when one is sick is very difficult,” he added.

The toilets have made life easier for women and girls who, before they were built, had to go out in the forest, which posed many risks.

“Earlier we (girls and women) could not go out during the day — it is fraught with the risk of someone seeing us — and after dark there was a constant fear of snakes, or that some poisonous insect would bite us,” Champa, a 20-year-old girl from Khetla Fali, said. “But we have not gone out (to defecate) ever since these toilets have been built.”

The fact that open defecation is open invitation to diseases and contributes to pollution has registered well with the community. “Going out to relieve oneself is not good for the village. It leads to pollution and many diseases,” said Fuli, a 30-year-old woman from Mata Fali.

“Nearly 90 per cent of the 400 households in this panchayat have functional toilets,” Narsa Ram said. No mean achievement this, considering toilets are conspicuous by their absence in the surrounding panchayats of this hilly terrain.

Again, Neechlagarh’s achievement is stellar in the backdrop of the country’s poor performance in the direction of making it free of open defecation. According to the government’s own admission, 60 percent of India’s population defecates in the open.

So what clicked in Neechlagarh?

“While the awareness campaign carried out by the government has helped people change their mindset, it’s the effort made by community leaders that has been the real game-changer for this panchayat,” said Kalicharan Garacia, a local resident and zila parishad member.

The panchayat has several educated residents in key positions, including sarpanch Sharmi Bai and Narsa Ram, who have worked hard to take the message of total sanitation to its residents.

“Several gram sabhas were held in which residents were told about the benefits of building toilets. Besides, a huge awareness campaign was carried out with members of the panchayat, along with those from total sanitation campaign, visiting each house and convincing the residents to build toilets,” recalled Naga Ram.

This community-led campaign, coupled with the government dole, has blazed a trail that can be replicated in areas where the total sanitation campaign is doing poorly.

Clearly, the government’s standalone, subsidy-driven model has failed to achieve the desired target as many reports, including the government’s own, have been critical of it.

The World Bank released a report in July 2010 questioning sustainability of the central government’s Nirmal Gram Puraskar (NGP) programme, a cash incentive to encourage villages go open defecation free. The government doles out `50,000 to `50 lakh every year to villages that achieve the ODF status.
“Studies on NGP sustainability showed that only 73 per cent have access to toilets in NGP villages, while usage of household toilets is low at 67 per cent,” the report pointed out.

The report demonstrated that while villages do achieve the ODF status, lured by the cash incentive, they fail to sustain it in the long run. Toilets that the government helps construct lie unused as people return to the age-old practice of defecating in the open, it said.

Enter the community: an alternative help

The failure of this model has given the proponents of an alternative model called community-led total sanitation programme (CLTS), first tested in Bangladesh, to advocate its implementation.

According to Kamal Kar, a developmental consultant who pioneered the concept, a community-triggered behavioural change is required more to achieve this rather than government doles. “The earlier approaches (read subsidy-driven) to sanitation often led to uneven adoption, problems with long-term sustainability and only partial use, besides creating a culture of dependence on subsidies,” he had told me when I met him in June 2011 during a book launch in New Delhi (“Time for community-led sanitation drive”, read the report here: http://www.governancenow.com/views/columns/time-community-led-sanitation-drive).

Explaining the concept, the home page of CLTS website, says: “CLTS is an innovative methodology for mobilising communities to completely eliminate open defecation (OD). Communities are facilitated to conduct their own appraisal and analysis of open defecation (OD) and take their own action to become ODF (open defecation-free).

“At the heart of CLTS lies the recognition that merely providing toilets does not guarantee their use, nor results in improved sanitation and hygiene.”

At Neechlagarh, the community, while it has not heard of the CLTS approach, has surely taken its message to the heart. “We have ensured that people not only build toilets but use it as well,” sarpanch Sharmi Bai said.

While the government is yet to pay heed to this alternative approach, rural development minister Jairam Ramesh, when in charge of sanitation (he was relieved of the portfolio in October last year) did realise the limitations of TSC and had advocated its restructuring.

Talking about a change in approach, Ramesh, in February last year, had said that the gram panchayat would be made to anchor the programme.

“I think this change from a focus on individual toilet construction to making the programme anchored in the gram panchayat, and giving gram panchayat the responsibility for preparing a comprehensive plan for making the gram panchayat open defecation-free and providing sustainable solutions (is) something that we would like to promote as part of the 12th plan strategy,” he had said at a workshop on sanitation in New Delhi.

“This is the time for innovation. We have to think differently.”

Mahadev Fali, Mata Fali, Khetla Fali and other hamlets in Neechlagarh surely thought differently.
Adnan Singh, 56, looks intently at the swollen leg of Kanta Bai. For about 10 minutes he stares at it from different angles. He then asks her to take her tongue out. As Kanta Bai obliges, he looks at her tongue for another five minutes, after which he examines her eyes.

This detailed examination goes on for about 20 minutes, followed by a profound declaration: “Tumhe thhand lagi hai (you are down with cold).” Singh then gives her some white powder folded neatly in a piece of paper.

On the verandah behind Singh lies a man on a cemented slab – on drip. “Isko TB hai..paani chadh raha hai (he is suffering from TB and is on a drip)” says Singh.

On the front, at the entrance, a few other villagers wait for his diagnosis.

Singh has all the pretensions of a doctor – he prescribes medicines, administers injections and even performs minor surgeries. But he is not a doctor. He is not even a doctor’s assistant or a paramedic, popularly called compounder.

He is, hold your breath, a peon at the local government ayurvedic hospital at Girwar village in Abu Road block of Rajasthan’s Sirohi district.

And if you thought the hospital at Girwar with a peon practising as a doctor was an aberration in the district, you could not be further from the truth.

It’s the rule.

Of 67 ayurvedic hospitals in the district, only 32 have qualified doctors in charge – the remaining 35 are at the mercy of peons or compounders, like Adnan Singh.

“There are 18 hospitals in the district that are being run by peons,” confirms Kanti Khatri, an official at the district ayurvedic office in Sirohi. Most hospitals where the peons or compounders have taken charge are the ones where either a doctor has not been appointed after the last one left or those appointed have not taken charge, Khatri says.

Adnan Singh assumed charge at Girwar hospital and graduated to being a ‘doctor’ from a peon in 2009, when the hospital’s lone doctor was transferred. “The government has not appointed another doctor. Despite our pleas to the district administration, the position has been lying vacant since 2009,” says Balkrishna Sharma, a resident of Girwar village.

Sharma, however, acknowledges that the peon has knowledge of ayurveda and his presence at the hospital is better than having no one at all. “He has been with the hospital for so many years that he has learnt the tricks of trade,” Sharma says.

Originally from Jodhpur, Adnan Singh joined the hospital in Girwar village in 1984. Having made the village his home since, he has done well for himself. He built his own house on the outskirts, educated his children, and married them off.

Clearly Singh’s years of practice as a ‘doctor’ have given him confidence about the trade. “Photograph me with my patients,” he says, posing for the camera at
his home.
It’s noon, and Singh, after seeing patients at the hospital, is back home, where he will continue seeing patients all day.

But Singh’s confidence notwithstanding, this trend of peons turning into ‘doctors’ is a dangerous one, says Dr Nidhi Audichya of Aajpura hospital, one of the 32 hospitals that have qualified doctors in charge.

Blaming the government for creating this impasse, she says, “Though they are popular with tribal people in the block, ayurvedic hospitals have been left to die a slow death. There has been absolutely no attempt to recruit new doctors, though there is a dire need to do so.”

The administration, instead of appointing new doctors, is meanwhile giving additional responsibilities to the existing ones. Dr Nidhi Audichya was ordered to take charge of another hospital in the adjoining area which was till now run by a peon. Her husband, Dr Parijaat Audichya, also an ayurvedic doctor posted at a hospital in Kiverli village, has also been asked to take additional charge of a hospital at Ore village.

While the hospital at Girwar and others have compounders, or at least peons like Adnan Singh to take care of, many others, like one at Uplagarh village in the hilly side of the block, have turned into shelter for animals or inebriated people.

A hospital lies in disuse
The Uplagarh hospital was abandoned by its peon in 2008 after the hospital’s doctor died in an accident. The peon, villagers say, practised in his own village, though he drew salary from the hospital.
“We see him once in a while – he lingers on in the village for a few hours and then returns,” says Kalicharan Garasia, a former school headmaster from the village.

Built in early 1990s, the hospital, aimed at catering to about 30 tribal villages, was very popular with residents of the area. Wary of allopathic medicine, they flocked to what they called the ‘jadi-buti ka haspatal’.

But it has been lying abandoned since 2008. Like in Girwar, residents’ plea to appoint another doctor has not been met here as well.

The building, on paper built at a cost of ₹5 lakh, is fast turning into a ruin: its plaster has peeled off and roofs of the four rooms leak during the monsoon. If not for a red ‘plus’ sign on one of the front pillars, it would have been difficult to tell that it used to be a hospital.

“It is a classic case of administrative apathy for the needs of people in a far-off tribal area,” says Kalicharan.

Villagers recall the hospital’s popularity when it opened and wonder why the health department has not appointed another doctor. “People from far-flung villages used to come to this hospital,” recalls Shantilal, who had consulted the doctor on several occasions when the hospital was in operation.

After the doctor’s death (he died while crossing the flooded Battisa river to reach the hospital) residents have appealed the block administration through their panchayat every year to appoint another doctor. But to no avail.

“At one raatri chaupal (night meeting) organised by the district collector near the hospital a few years ago, we had reminded him about our plea to send a doctor here. Although he said he will direct the health department to do the needful, nothing has happened yet,” Noparam, a resident, says.

Not willing to give up, the residents made another attempt to get the hospital run and working when they appealed to the block administration to order appointment of a doctor during the ongoing ‘prashasan gaon ke sang’, a drive by the Rajasthan government to send district officials to villages to address their grievances.

Acknowledging the appeals of the villagers for appointing doctors in hospitals run by peons and compounders, district officials say senior officers in Jaipur have been informed but they are helpless till the government sends more doctors to the district. “The district cannot do anything if the state doesn’t fill vacancies. Last month 187 new doctors joined the department but only one was sent to the district,” Kanti Khatri, the deputy district ayurvedic officer, says.

His senior officer, Shyam Sunder Mishra, was on leave at the time.

Brajesh has been stationed in Abu Road, Sirohi, Rajasthan, for six months, as part of a project Governance Now is running with Affiliated Network for Social Accountability – South Asia Region (ANSA-SAR). Read more at governancenow.com/media-accountability. Read other reports on pages 43, 46, 56
Pankaj Kumar
Reporting from
Noorsarai, Nalanda, Bihar
Strength of women: that’s Nalanda in nutshell

Six months which went like breeze opened my mind to the realities of rural India and helped me evolve as a person. I come back with a fresh perspective and warm memories.

Rural reporting is a different ball game altogether. I realised this during my six-month stay in Noorsarai block of Nalanda district in Bihar. I hit the ground zero in the third week of September. The pinch of summer was all but gone and people awaited that first nip in the air. With Durga Puja and Chhath round the corner, the mood here was festive.

During my early days at the block office, I faced all-round hostility. I was looked at askance and spurned. Getting through this phase was difficult. A closer observation of the activities at the block office gave me an idea to break the ice.

I became a regular at a popular tea shop nearby, where the staff as well as residents discussed politics and other local affairs.

“Be aware of your rights. If you do not get a job under MNREGS, then complain about this to the project officer,” I heard a man telling others one day. His name was Babloo and he was a Janata Dal (United) worker from Chandasi village. When I tried engaging him in a discussion, he sounded gruff.

Rejection is never for real, though. After days of perseverance, thaw set in and Babloo’s malignant looks turned benign. I clung to the opportunity. “You should be at the gram vikas shivir (village development camp). That will open your eyes,” he told me succinctly.

Breaking the ice
Every Wednesday, the entire block administration visits a panchayat (Noorserai has 17) to hear villagers’ complaints and try addressing them on the spot. I visited Chandasi, Baghar, Chirayupur and other development camps on subsequent Wednesdays. Babloo told me how half the staff remained absent during these camps despite having been marked present in the books. I never saw the block development officer (BDO) or the circle officer (CO) in any of these camps. At Baghar village camp, when I asked the head clerk to show me the attendance register, “none of your business” was the cold reply.

By now, the BDO was aware of my presence. A reporter from the national capital can be a cause of concern for the lax local-level bureaucracy, and it can lead to a few positive changes. The block office here began to open at 10 am instead of the earlier 11 am. “You presence has made them work. Sad that you will go back in a few days,” Arun Kumar Dey, a veterinary doctor at the block office, told me toward the end of my stay.

Dey was an upright officer. Be it the hospital, block office or a call from some far-off village, he was always on time. He was already popular with local reporters mainly because of his all-time presence in the office: he became my primary source quickly. By January-end, Dey, who had left a better-paid private sector job in Hyderabad to be near home and serve his own people, looked worried as his contract was unlikely to be renewed. In February, Dey went back to another private sector job. The entire block would miss him for a long time.

During my stay in Noorserai, I noted how contractual workers in block office, agriculture department and aaganwadi kendras were more diligent and sincere than the permanent ones. Take, for example, the record-breaking feat of Nalanda farmers (while a farmer set a record of producing maximum potatoes in an acre in the world, the district as a whole registered a bumper crop): the credit for this must squarely go to various subject matter specialists, technical assistants and kisan salahkars (advisers to farmers).

Being chief minister Nitish Kumar’s home district, Nalanda also enjoys the privilege of a qualitative administration. A good coordination among district magistrate Sanjay Agrawal, district agricultural officer Sudama Mahto and district horticulture officer DN Mahto has also helped the district reap a record harvest and win global accolades. I was surprised to see the energy and efforts of the ground-level agriculture department employees. Such alchemy can be the philosopher’s stone for any enterprise.

**Mushroom talk**

In Saril Chak village, where women have written a success story in mushroom farming, subject matter specialist Kunda Kumar Singh, the ground-level agriculture department worker who advises the folks on the critical aspects of farming, is a household name. In every house of the village, women grew mushrooms. They were confident, self-reliant by all means and truly empowered. Many of them have begun sending their children to English-medium schools. While there are examples of excellence in every
house, I will mention one Nirupa Devi here. When she lost her husband in 2001, she and her four children were hand to mouth. Mushroom farming put her on the right track. Today, her eldest son is studying automobile engineering while her daughter-in-law is pursuing BCA. Two of her daughters are married, while the youngest is an undergraduate student in Rajgir.

Governance Now did a story on the success of the women here and that, I am told, has helped them. “Your story has made our work much easier. We are going to have a better market as Comfed and Jeevika are going to formalise a deal. Our farmers will get a better market, and thus a better price for mushrooms,” district public relation officer and district horticulture officer DN Mahto told me.

However, the most important and noticeable gain of women empowerment here is not monetary; it is in their forward thinking. On one occasion, when I left the village, it was late. A group of women came to the outskirts to see me off even at that hour. Having spent half my life in Bihar, I know how uncommon it was. It showed these women were the true decision-makers.

Entrepreneurs abound

An active administration and a conducive environment together can breed entrepreneurs. No wonder Nalanda has seen a spate of them. It was interesting to meet RK Singh, a management trainee who left his job in Hyderabad to come back and take up organic farming in Nehusua village here. He was engaged in contract farming on 25 acres and had given employment to 25 farm labourers. He sold the produce to different markets at handsome prices. “It feels like coming from India to Bharat. And I can bet it is a better place to live,” Singh said.

Singh was also breeding expensive varieties of fish in his pond to sell them in the international market. He also developed vermi-compost and supplied it to Nalanda and other districts in Bihar.

In Mirzapur village of Parwalpur block, gutsy Rinku Devi showed exceptional entrepreneurial skills with limited resources. On her four acres, she dug two ponds and started breeding fish with the help of the national horticulture mission. Little by little, her business grew and prosperity allowed her to send her three children to an English-medium school. Her husband, Suryadev Prasad, who worked in Maharashtra, soon joined her in her fisheries venture, agriculture as well as honey production.

Despite living in a remote part of the district, she was not bogged down by any impediment. “Rinku Devi is a person to learn from. With her limited resources, she has set an example to follow,” Sudama Mahto said.

The district’s experiment with the SRI (system of rice intensification) method of agriculture has scripted history. Beginning from five hectares in 2008-09, the total paddy crop acreage under this system of agriculture has gone up to 36,000 hectares in 2012-13. “Seed sowing is now cheaper by 50 percent and the yield has doubled,” said Chandrashekhar Singh, a farmer of Bellauwa village. Another farmer from the district, Rakesh Kumar, recently set a world record in potato and onion production.

Government schemes

Two of the government departments working noticeably well in the district are agriculture and the public distribution system. While we have talked about agriculture already, let us move to PDS. Local administration has made good efforts to deliver foodgrains to the beneficiaries on time. Measures have been taken under a scheme called ‘Samarth’ to ensure that PDS dealers do not fall into the trap of moneylenders. This, and the involvement of Jeevika in the PDS, has made it more effective on the ground.

This also shows that better implementation can make even not-so-popular schemes work, provided the administration is willing. Nalanda has shown that in the case of PDS.

My observation of two other schemes, Indira Awaas and MNREGS, was however otherwise. In Maghra village, I came across several extremely poor people who had no houses of their own and were forced to defecate in the open because they were denied benefits of both housing and toilet schemes. One Lalti Devi told me that she and her husband were forced to stay separately because they did not have a house of their own. Ravidas Tola of Maghra village is full of such stories. The village head here belongs to the dalit community and had been allegedly harassing mahadalits of the tola, who he believed voted for his rival. Hardly one or two persons from this locality had been able to avail benefits
of the housing scheme either by paying a bribe or under the impression of being a neutral voter. “After Governance Now reported the matter, the administration has taken a note of it. Appropriate action will be taken soon,” DPRO DN Mahto said.

I also observed many irregularities in MNREGS here. In Chandasi village, job card holders were not getting jobs and did not possess passbooks. In many cases, money was withdrawn from the account of labourers using fake signatures. “Why don’t you complain?” I asked a villager named Deepak Paswan. “We do, but we are either scolded or sent back,” he replied.

I went with Paswan to the block office, where officials promised to look into the matter. A few days later, a team of block officials went to Chandasi panchayat and Paswan got employment for a few days.

Another irregularity in the employment scheme was at the micro-level. Most work at the panchayat level in Chandasi was done by calling labourers from outside, an exercise that benefits both parties. “MNREGS is corrupting labourers, as they now want to get more by working less,” said a district-level officer on condition of anonymity. “Half the job card holders are not even labourers. So you can well imagine where the money goes,” he added.

Farmers in Nalanda were the worst critics of the scheme — they were also the worst hit, facing an acute shortage of farm labourers. “They are now addicted to getting more for much less work, or even without work,” a farmer of Maghra village said. “From June 15 to October 15, when no soil work is done by the government, labourers are available for field work. However, at the peak time of kharif or rabi crops, labourers opt for MNREGS work since they get money for doing almost nothing,” said a senior official in the collectorate.

The integrated child development scheme (ICDS) is another one not working here, I found. The child development project officer in the block, Sabeena Ahmed, said that money allocated by the government to buy various commodities was too little to get even half the items. “Despite doing our best, we are forced to compromise on quality or quantity at some level or the other,” she added.

A changed perspective
The ANSA-SAR project has changed my perspective of rural life in India. All my earlier rural assignments were parachute reporting, basically touch-and-go, where I landed in the village and was back to my office within a matter of hours. But in Noorserai, I had to become a part of their life. Right from the initial hostility to handshakes to invitations to their houses and finally an emotional send-off, the villagers and I evolved together into a steady relationship.

I got to know them better. They are warmer and of course smarter than us. Administratively, the same set of problems afflicts them as well. Facilitators are active at the lowest level of administration to fleece villagers, and complicity of the government staff is far from deniable in this. An equally complex administrative procedure — characterised by rigmarole and lack of will in the staff — causes unspeakable problems to the majority.

However, my best takeaway from Nalanda is the realisation how strength of women can change the countenance of a place. I felt energy in villages where women have formed self-help groups and are making progress. Jeevika has not only empowered women at the lowest level but is also empowering them socially and politically.

In Nalanda, women in groups now run PDS shops, dairy enterprises and various other works — in a much better and honest way.

The presence of Governance Now gave them a hope as we continuously reported about their successes. The local administration also took our reporting more seriously than the local newspapers because they believed we were impartial and that allowed us a fresh perspective far from local biases.
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There is a new heroine for 6,000-odd families from 22 villages of Nalanda district. For people cultivating mushroom as a source of livelihood, not only in Nalanda but across the state, Madhu Patel, and more specifically her laboratory for mushroom seedlings (called spawns), is more than a godsend.

She is an icon, a source of inspiration. Patel, who opened a spawn lab in Rajgir in September 2011, says mushroom cultivators from several parts of Bihar, and even nearby states, come to her to buy seedlings now. There's reason why they do: earlier one had to travel all the way to Delhi or Solan in Himachal Pradesh to get the spawns. And that was only half the battle, for it was no less than a Herculean task to bring the spawns to Nalanda without running them.

Patel remembers her own fight over buying spawns and then getting them to Nalanda, when she started a business on a small scale in Hilsa town in 2000 and had to travel to other states to buy the seedlings.

Working her way up in small ways since, Patel, like most entrepreneurs, had her moment of 'enlightenment' in 2009, when she got in touch with the Agriculture Technology Management Agency, or ATMA. Soon, the Botany graduate from Hilsa College in Nalanda was sent to Pantnagar, Uttarakhand, to get training in mushroom cultivation.

Already aware that mushroom is easy to cultivate, provided the spawns are available locally, she next underwent training in spawn-producing at Solan in 2010. Buying a small autoclave, she started producing spawns with the help of ultraviolet tubes at home, at a minuscule level initially.
The first small steps
Patel acknowledges the inspiration lent by Nalanda’s district agriculture officer Sudama Mahto, who was ATMA’s programme director of as well in 2010: “I wanted to set up a spawn lab in Nalanda. But I could not have done it without Mahto’s motivation and insight, and district magistrate Sanjay Kumar Agrawal’s help.”

While opening the lab at Rajgir cost her ₹15 lakh, Patel says she was helped to a large extent by the National Horticulture Mission Programme, which helped her arrange half the investment. The rest, she says, came from banks and her family.

The local administration and the agriculture ministry also encouraged her mission, Patel says.

A year since its inauguration, the lab is now frequented by hundreds of mushroom cultivators from not only Nalanda but Dhanbad, Gaya, Ranchi, Patna and Hazipur as well. Patel says she sells 50 kg to 60 kg spawns every day at ₹80 per kg. She says 10 to 15 kg mushroom can be cultivated from each 1-kg packet of spawns.

“We produce mainly milky white, button and oyster type mushrooms. It takes nearly two months to produce spawns ready to be sold in the market,” she says.

According to Patel, she zeroed in on Rajgir because it is a tourist place and, besides, electricity supply is not erratic there. Her husband Dharam Dutt Singh, who runs an NGO, has stood by Patel in each of her decisions.

The next big step
Running her lab at present with four employees out of a rented house, Patel is “very excited” at the thought of opening a spawn lab in her own building soon.

And thanks largely to her efforts, aganwadi kendras of Nalanda now include mushroom on their menu once a week due to its high nutritional value. “The local administration has now tied up with Sudha (Bihar’s milk cooperative) to sell mushroom at Sudha counters,” district magistrate Sanjay Agrawal says. “So there is no dearth of a market in Nalanda.”

But besides being an entrepreneur, Patel is also a firm believer in women’s empowerment and trains several groups of women to make them self-reliant. “As a child, I always acted as any male child because I had lost my father at a very young age. There was no discrimination in our family.”

She now wants to pass that on to fellow women, for “women’s empowerment can never be a reality unless women themselves come forward to become self-reliant”.

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Nalanda: loads on anganwadi menu, no money to buy foodstuff

Govt-issued rate lists 5-10 years old, anganwadi staff say they are forced to shortchange on quality, quantity

“Anganwadi centres are functioning on ground but faulty proposal breeds corruption at the very initial level. We can’t give what we are asked for, simply because our budget doesn’t allow it.”

Of the 40 children who come for preschool training at the anganwadi centre of Sonchari, 28 suffer from “normal malnutrition” and the remaining 12 of “extreme malnutrition”, though the distinction remains restricted to official paperwork, as multiple visits confirmed. In reality, fewer students visit the centre, and even when the optimum numbers are present they are shortchanged on quantity of “nutrition” offered.

Quality compromised for pregnant women, new mothers

For another facility, take-home ration (THR) for pregnant women and mother of newborns, quality becomes the victim as rules require quantity has to be mentioned. For THR, the amount prescribed for rice is 166 kg at the rate of Rs 15 per kg, while the government circular stipulates 83 kg pulses are to be bought at Rs 40 a kg — both grossly insufficient, according to anganwadi workers.

Similarly, the government has prescribed to buy 12.84 kg jaggery at Rs 32 per kg and 4.575 kg edible oil at Rs 80 per kg. The
centres are also bound by rules to 4.48 kg grams at Rs 27 a kg. For spices, Rs 85 is allocated to buy ration of 17 days, while Rs 500 is meant to buy 25 days’ quota of fuel, amounting to Rs 20 per day — both hardly a third of the amount required, according to the anganwadi staff.

“All these amounts allocated are laughably low in comparison to the market rates. So we have no option but to compromise on quality,” a worker from Noorsarai block said.

Calling the rates prescribed “a joke by themselves”, an assistant from the same block said, “Grams are available for Rs 35 per kg, jaggery for Rs 40 per kg, while groundnut comes for Rs 72 a kg. How are we supposed to buy them for Rs 27, Rs 32 and Rs 50 (respectively)?”

Sabina Ahmed, the child development project officer of Parwalpur block, said each centre is allotted Rs 10,975 per month, admitting that the amount is “much less than what is required”.

District programme officer (DPO) Shobha Kesri avoided a reply when Governance Now asked her the same question. While a new technology-enabled methodology called ‘Drishti’ has certainly gone a fair distance in making operations of anganwadi centres more effective in Nalanda, with better inspection and coordination on ground, officials on conditions averred that quantity and quality of food offered is always a challenge. So while the aim of the integrated child development scheme is to improve nutritional and health status of children below six years, and to lay the foundation for their proper psychological, physical and social development, flawed provisions are seen as not only putting up a hurdle but also encouraging corruption.

‘Too much work, too little pay’
According to the staff, another problem is the abject salaries they receive. An anganwadi sahaika (or assistant), who cooks food at the centre, is paid a monthly remuneration of Rs 1,500, while a sevika (worker) gets Rs 3,000 for bringing children to the centre, imparting them preschool training and taking care of their health.

The worker also has additional responsibilities such as being part of any survey. “We are burdened with work but our salary is too little. We are expected to be dutiful and honest but no one cares for our salary,” rued Nikku Devi, a sevika in Sonchari village.

Not willing to be named, several anganwadi workers and assistants said this low pay-grade also breeds corruption in the otherwise plausible and laudable scheme.

(All rates in Rs per kg)
For some, LPG cylinder price hike is a debate from Mars

A few villages in Nalanda are on the verge of achieving self-reliance on cooking fuel and manure front. Thanks to the biogas and vermi-compost manufacturing revolution, it is set to be a really happy new year for the local farmers.
For people in at least three villages of Bihar’s Nalanda district, the centre’s decision to put a cap on the number of subsidised LPG cylinders per household could well be a debate gathering much heat over nothing. In Saril Chak, Raitar, Kalyan Bigha villages, many people have of late stopped buying LPG cylinders, which come from outside.

It’s the eco-friendly biogas — or green “gobar gas”, as the villagers call it — that is fuelling a new dream for people in these villages, selected as model villages for the biogas project.

Besides producing cooking gas, the biogas plant is also helpful for their farms, as the gas-less cow dung is a key element in producing vermi-compost with the help of earthworm, which is used as organic manure.

“We are a family of 10 and had to buy on an average two LPG cylinders per month. But now we don’t need any, thanks to the biogas plant,” said Surendra Prasad, a farmer from Saril Chak village and the first person in his village, as well as the whole of Nalanda, to use and own a biogas tank.

According to Raj Kumar Prasad of the same village, there were eight biogas plants in Saril Chak till recently. But the number has gone up to 30 now, catering to approximately 2,000 people. What’s more, 20 more units are in pipeline. “Most villagers are dependent on biogas for fuel now and we will be totally self-dependent in terms of fuel very soon,” Raj Kumar said.

Explaining that their trips to the city to buy LPG cylinders are already history, a group of delighted farmers told Governance Now that since one biogas unit produces fuel equivalent to three cylinders, the news about the cap on LPG cylinder subsidy is hardly worrying them.

“In all, 100 biogas units are functional in Nalanda, and 600 others will be functional within a month,” said Sudama Mahto, a district agriculture officer of Nalanda. Raitar village has 16 functional units of biogas and 40 other units will be functional soon, while 18 are up and running in Dharahra and 40 units are almost ready to function in the village, Mahto said.

Kalyan Bigha, a small village, also has 12 units functioning.

**Biogas tank for all**

“The success of the biogas plants (in these ‘model’ villages) has prompted the administration to arrive at a decision to give a biogas tank to all farmers who apply,” said Kundan Kumar Singh, a subject matter specialist in Nalanda who helps out the farmers at the grassroots level.

He said the local administration gives 50 percent subsidy on biogas tank under Rashtriya Kisan Vikas Yojna (RKVY), the national farmers’ development mission. With one biogas tank coming for ₹30,000, the farmers are thus given ₹15,000 under RKVY.

“Subsidy is given to those who own cattle and are willing to take up the job (of producing biogas) seriously,” Kundan said. “We have the records, as we have formed groups earlier, and know the track record of farmers (willing to work on new projects).”

Explaining the process of making biogas, Kundan said cow dung is churned with an equal amount of water in the tank. “Normally 10 kg cow dung and 10 litres of water are poured into the tank for churning and the gas produced from it is used as fuel,” he said.

The residue, known as slurry, is used to make organic manure called vermi-compost with the help of earthworms. One vermi-compost unit is prepared at a cost of ₹60,000 and farmers get 50 percent subsidy for this unit as well under RKVY.

“Biogas has changed our farming style. We don’t need to run after chemical fertilisers any more. The vegetables we grow are much healthier, and are less expensive,” Saril Chak farmer Rajkumar Prasad said.

“Biogas has come as a lifeline for us, as we are hardly dependent on any agencies for fertilisers and LPG cylinders now,” said Madan prasad of Dharahra village.

With most farmers having access to biogas units with vermi-compost units, they use cow dung judiciously for energy and fertiliser. Besides the subject matter specialist, who works at the panchayat level, farmers’ advisors (or ‘kisan salahkar’, as they are called) at the village level work in tandem with farmers to teach them various new techniques.

**Struggle to get bank loans for biogas units**

While the success of biogas is for all to see, there is a twist in the tale. With more and more farmers willing to buy cattle, they are approaching banks and the animal husbandry department for loans — and that isn’t the easiest puzzle to solve, as many have realised over the months.

Surendra Prasad, a farmer from Saril Chak, explained the rigours saying, “There is a provision of loan for dairy but it is (ruled) through the bank. So it becomes very complicated to get a loan. I applied for a loan in February 2012 and deposited ₹20,000 for that. But the year is almost on its way out, and I am yet to receive any money.”

Surendra and several other farmers said the animal husbandry department should become more “farmers-friendly”, like the agriculture department in Nalanda.

“Unlike the agriculture department, the animal husbandry department does not have facility (to process) loan or subsidy,” said Satyendra Prasad, a farmer from Dharahra. “Farmers, thus, have to depend more on the middleman.”

And that, needless to say, isn’t the most cheerful task going around.

The district dairy development officer parried Governance Now’s question on the issue of easing the loan process.

District agriculture officer Sudama Mahto said, “We will raise this issue before the district magistrate soon since it is a matter of the animal husbandry department. I am sure he (DM) will take the same measures he took earlier in giving loans to farmers to buy power tillers and other modern agricultural equipment.”

Annoyed with the complexities of banks and their procedures, some officers said the district magistrate had earlier simplified the procedure and distributed money directly among farmers in cash or through cheques to buy power tillers.
THE POWER OF ONE

Subject matter specialist Kundan Kumar (left), beneficiary Surendra Prasad

With not many farmers willing to buy the biogas idea, Kundan Kumar, a subject matter specialist in Nalanda, thought of a simple strategy to popularise it earlier this year. He picked up a Saril Chak farmer, Surendra Prasad, who showed some interest in biogas and vermi-compost unit, and used his experience to convince his fellow villagers.

Since biogas and the vermi-compost unit are interlinked, Surendra easily got a 50-percent subsidy on both. He had his units up and running in June.

“We showed the utility and then others started following me,” Surendra says.

“Seeing is believing. So we chose one person each in several villages and showed the result. Then people slowly started believing us,” says Purushottam Singh, a technical assistant in the agriculture department.

GAS STORY REVEALED

Piped gas from tank to chulha

WHAT: Normally 10 kg cow dung and 10 litres of water are poured into the tank for churning and the gas produced from it is used as fuel
The residue, known as slurry, is used to make organic manure called vermi-compost with the help of earthworms
HOW: Local administration gives 50% subsidy on biogas tank under Rashtriya Kisan Vikas Yojna. With each biogas tank costing ₹30,000, farmers thus get ₹15,000
One vermicompost unit is prepared at a cost of ₹60,000 and farmers get 50% subsidy for this unit as well under the scheme
WHERE: Saril Chak, Raitar, Kalyan Bigha and Dharahra villagers, which primarily cultivate potato, groundnut, sugarcane and cereal crops, are on the verge of self-reliance in fuel and manure
THE SLIGHT SNAG: “There is a provision of loan for dairy but it is (routed) through the bank. So it becomes very complicated to get a loan. I applied for a loan in February 2012 and deposited ₹20,000 for that. But the year is almost on its way out, and I am yet to receive any money,” says Surendra Prasad

The happy ending

While the biogas story looks set to end on a happy note, at least in some Nalanda villages, Kundan Kumar said it wasn’t easy to begin with. “Initially no farmer was ready to believe us. No one was ready to accept that a biogas unit will make them self-reliant in terms of fuel and fertiliser,” he said.

But starting slowly (see box) he, along with the others working on the project, was able to convince more and more farmers. “We had earlier experienced high productivity of food grain with vermi-compost in Sri method (of farming). But we had to get vermi-compost from outside. Now we can produce it on our own,” said Bhagwatya Devi of Kalyan Bigha village with a hint of pride.

For now, Saril Chak, Kalyan Bigha, Dharahra and Raitar villagers are on the verge of self-reliance in fuel and manure. These areas primarily cultivate potato, groundnut, sugarcane and cereal crops, and one can see the farmers, especially women, beaming with confidence. Biogas has added to their income by giving fuel and organic manure at much cheaper rates, and also helped raise productivity by several notches.

With several other villages in line to follow the example set by Saril Chak and others, the local administration is hopeful that the day is not very far when any hike in LPG price will leave the people of Nalanda completely unaffected.

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‘Guaranteed’ work but uncertain labour, wages

Outsiders brought on contract to work under MNREGS in Noorserai’s Chandasi panchayat, allege locals; mukhiya pooh-poohs claim; official says people prefer contract work for better pay

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act aims at enhancing livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

That’s quoted off the website of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MNREG) Act. In Chandasi panchayat of Nalanda district’s Noorserai block, though, the
MNREG scheme website and its mission statement could well be from another planet. Here, people working under MNREGS are not residents of Chandasi panchayat but outsiders brought on contract.

And why is that? Locals allege that the mukhiya, purportedly hand in glove with some officials, brings workers from outside, engages them in work under the central government scheme and then withdraws money from the post-office using passbooks of the genuine job card holders to pay the outsiders.

It’s a scam, they allege. It’s rubbish of an allegation, the mukhiya, Biranchi Yadav, shoots back. And somewhere in between those two contrasting claims hangs in balance the real story.

For the record, Noorserai block has 17 panchayats, Chandasi being one of them comprising five villages.

Most people here have their job cards but do not possess the passbooks meant to withdraw money against MNREGS work.

“Our passbook is with the village mukhiya (Biranchi Yadav). He withdraws money in the name of labourers in collusion with post-office staff to distribute among workers from outside”

Deepak Paswan, Chandasi resident who has taken his complaint to project officer for MNREGS at Noorserai block added. “There are several others whose passbook lies with the mukhiya.”

But dismissing the allegations, mukhiya Biranchi Yadav told Governance Now over telephone: “My opponents are leveling false allegations against me. I don’t have the passbook of any labourer.”

Work exists, but ‘not for us’

Several other labourers in Chandasi said though they have job cards but do not possess their passbook — and have not got any work under MNREGS for even a single day in the last several months.

“I haven’t even seen the passbook and, needless to say, haven’t got any work either. But I know all money is withdrawn by the mukhiya from my account,” alleged Deepak Paswan, who has cleared Intermediate and seemed aware of the employment guarantee scheme.

According to Deepak, he has written an application along with Ramlagan, Manoj and a few others and sent it to the block-level project officer. According to the application — Governance Now possesses a copy of it — most work shown as ‘done’ in Chandasi panchayat is “false”, and whatever work is actually done is not given out to labourers living in areas under the panchayat’s jurisdiction.

“Workers are called from outside and money is withdrawn in the name of local labourers,” alleged Mahendra Rajak of Chandasi panchayat.

According to locals, people from five villages under Chandasi panchayat have, between them, nearly 300 with job cards but most of them have not been handed over their passbooks. “We do not get work under MNREGS. We have often gone to mukhiya Biranchi Yadav to seek work but in vain,” said Krishna Ravidas of Jolahpura village.

Another Jolahpura resident, Karu Ravidas, alleged that when he approached the mukhiya for their passbook “he ticked us off and threatened to delete my name from the BPL (below poverty line) list”.

“Our passbook is with mukhiya (Biranchi Yadav). He withdraws money in the name of labourers in collusion with post-office staff to distribute among workers from outside”

Deepak Paswan, Chandasi resident who has taken his complaint to project officer for MNREGS at Noorserai block

“My opponents are leveling false allegations against me. I don’t have the passbook of any labourer.”

Ramlagan Paswan, who works as “van poshak” in Chandasi village and ought to get ₹144 per day as per norms

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Several other villagers from Jolahpura — Pramod Ravidas, Savitri Devi, Chandrashekhar Ravidas and Jitendra Raj, among others — also said they possess yellow cards (meant for people above poverty line, or APL) but do not get work under MNREGS.

Left with no choice, most of them venture outside their villages to seek work, Dharam Sheela Devi of Jolahpura said. “We know all government schemes exist to help only the powerful, and those with the right connections. “So we avoid making formal complaints,” she said, adding that though she is “totally landless” she has not been given a house under Indira Awaas Yojana either.

“In fact, the dalit community was further divided to create a mahadalit society to help them. We are the mahadalits and are the most neglected community in these villages,” said Umesh Ravidas, a physically challenged person.

So who is at fault?
While Governance Now came across more than 50 people in Chandasi and Jolahpura village in the panchayat who do not possess their own passbooks, mukhiya Biranchi Yadav’s son Aman Kumar, who took over the phone when the mukhiya was audibly alarmed, blamed the political opponents of his father for starting this “rumour campaign”.

“Some people are doing this deliberately to put up hurdles in way of my father’s good works. But they will not succeed,” Aman Kumar reiterated.

Asked how officials deal with complaints of villagers, Noorserai block MNREGS project officer Sudhanshu Shekher Pande said: “We take each complaint seriously but on most occasions we find complainants approach us with a malicious intent to settle scores with the mukhiya. Most labourers do not want to work (under MNREGS) because they get only ₹144 per day. Instead, they prefer to work in another panchayat on contract, where they get more in daily wage.”

So, even if the accusations and counter-allegations are kept aside, what the project officer is inadvertently admitting is that work is done under MNREGS in Noorserai villages are given to outsiders on contract, in many cases if not all, and the legitimate labourers listed with the panchayat are ignored.
A n unannounced drizzle is normal for this time of the year anywhere else. For Chandasi village of Noorserai block in Nalanda district of Bihar, this would mean a sudden change of appearance. The dusty plains meekly give way to an expanse of swamps. Ankle deep mud never fails to surprise villagers with its unending store of dangers lurking in its pores: thorns, flesh-hungry bolsters, scorpions, reptiles, to name a few.

A cobbled road paved with bricks which begins at the rear of the village and goes right up to the primary health centre, later connecting the village to the main road, retains its identity in that expanse of swamps should that be any consolation to the villagers. For, when it comes to taking it, they prefer risks in the mud to the dangers of the cobbled road. It is so poorly made that it should not have been there, some of them say.

To exacerbate their plight, open drains running right next to houses in the village lost their purpose of carrying filth soon after they were constructed recently. Stagnant for months, the drains now breed mosquitoes and give out stench.

The stretch on the left of the fields is supposed to be a road. People in Chandasi are used to the joke by now.

This is a classic example of absentee administration coupled with an indifferent headman. The villagers had lost hope long ago; they are now losing patience.

Why are the villagers angry here?
Villagers no wonder are hopeless, angry with the callously indifferent headman and cranky about the utter lack of civic amenities here.

An indifferent headman
“An epidemic like malaria or dengue can break out anytime. But who cares about our lives?” says Wakeel Prasad, a resident. “Nothing is happening on the ground here. But nobody in the block administration pays attention to our problems. The headman is looting all the money sanctioned by the government and the officers work hand in glove with him,” says Yadunandan Yadav. “What can we do if our representative has no intention of solving our problems? Most of the developmental work takes place on papers while very little is done at the ground level to help the public,” he adds.

Several proactive villagers made complaints to the headman in the past. But these fell on deaf ears. “We made several complaints to the headman about the poor condition of the road. He did nothing. The money allotted for NREGS was spent by the headman a year and half ago. And the pathetic road stands where it always was,” says Chitranjan Prasad, a farmer in Chandasi village.

“Most people in our village are devoid of proper drainage, roads, toilets, etc. The close-by Muzaffarpur village has all of these,” Arvind Yadav, a villager, says. That’s not all. There are other administrative loopholes as well. “We don’t get our share of foodgrains through public distribution system (PDS). But we remain silent; we are tired of complaining,” Viresh Prasad adds, another villager, says.

Public no-distribution system
PDS is of little use to villagers. They have various complaints against contractors Arvind Paswan and Shakuntala Devi, who have been given licence to distribute rations among the BPL card-holders. “We get our due share of grains after three-four months and if we go to complain, we are threatened,” 80-year-old Bedamia Devi says.

The BPL card-holders are given 35 kg of foodgrains each month plus three litres of kerosene. But the ground situation here speaks volumes about corruption in the PDS. “I have a BPL card, but I could get foodgrains and kerosene only once in the last 12 months,” Buttu Gope, a villager, says.

People seem to have little faith in the system so they prefer to remain silent to raising voice. Pintoo Yadav, a villager, tells us how when a villager once complained about the irregularities in the PDS to the marketing officer (MO) at the block level, ration supplies to all the villagers was stopped. “We went to demand our due share ration the next month. But we were told by the distributor that someone from the village had complained against him to the MO, so he would need to bribe the officer now. Hence, we were denied the supplies for the month,” Yadav says. “You may go and complain against the distributor, but mind it, it will be at your peril,” he warns.

Surprisingly, the BPL card-holders have to submit their cards and coupons every month, but they don’t get grains and kerosene of their share on one pretext or another. The authorities at the block level, however, are in a denial mode. “In October and November, the BPL card holders could not get their due share because of unavailability in our stock. But before that, every month foodgrains have been supplied. If any one comes to us with a complaint, we will take action as per law,” says block development officer Tarun Kumar.

Absentee administration
Similarly, no toilets have been constructed yet in Chandasi under the government scheme, despite people both under above poverty line (APL) and BPL categories have filled up the requisite forms long ago. The villagers are more concerned since people in the neighbouring panchayats have begun availing the facility of toilets and have said no open defecation.

Agriculture, too, is in a poor shape in Chandasi. Farmers here are still glued to age-old techniques, ignorant of developments in the sector. There are yet no signs of organic farming here and no biogas unit has ever been thought of, let alone setting up one. “We hardly get any subsidy on agriculture as no one comes to inform us about the schemes. We talk to the headman but he cares woefully little for us,” says Sidheshwar Prasad, a farmer.

People have reams of complaints regarding NREGS too. They complain that the works being done under the scheme are just an eyewash. “It is the best tool for a headman to make money. He can spend ₹5 lakh in a week but you see the whole village and decide even if ₹5,000 has been spent on the development,” says Babloo Kumar, a farmer and social activist, in the village.

The headman, Biranchi Yadav, already speaks in the lingo of a seasoned politician as if always responding to critics in a televised debate. When this correspondent confronts him with the villagers’ complaints, he says matter-of-factly, “Those critics are supporters of my opponents. I have won because of my good work and my good work will continue without caring for anything which obstructs development.”

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Having stayed here for over four months now, Nalanda, I have found, is like any other district: the good coming as close neighbour, almost part of the package, of the bad. While there are obviously disconcerting evidence of bad governance, there are signs of good work being done in various departments.

The agriculture, just to single out one department, is doing exceptionally well in Nalanda, propagating organic mode of production on a massive scale. Similarly, departments like animal husbandry and social welfare also have officers working well and hard.

With many of these hardworking young officials in various departments employed on contract, extended every year in January or February, one can discern signs of nervous tension in them these days: will they, or will they not, get an extension of their job?

In fact, this job insecurity, coupled with low salary and perks, are leading many to look elsewhere. Alamgir Anwar, an erstwhile subject matter specialist (SMS) who quit his job with the agriculture department in Nalanda, put it in perspective when he told Governance Now: “I enjoyed working for the villagers and making agriculture a prosperous profession in Nalanda. But I was forced to leave under the circumstances (revolving around the job) — there was simply too much insecurity that I couldn't take any more, besides the low salary.”

Alamgir now works as a technical assistant at Pusa agriculture institute — besides other facilities, he said his salary went up from ₹15,000 to ₹25,000.

Nalanda has set several records in foodgrain production, and subject matter specialists and farmers’ advisors (kisan salahkar, as they are called locally) have played a major role in that.

“If success is attributed to Nalanda in agriculture, then 80 percent of the credit goes to subject matter specialists, kisan salahkars and technical assistants recruited under the national food security mission. The farmers and the administration would get rest of the credit,” said Sudama Mahto, district agriculture officer in the district.

**Good work, little recognition**

While Mahto recognised the contribution of these people at grassroots level, these local-level expert hands and advisors say they do not get adequate opportunity to air their views about their pitiable work condition.

While the state has 4,065 posts sanctioned for SMSes, only about 2,200 are recruited in all 33 districts of Bihar. They are all appointed on contract, which can be dismissed any time, unlike school teachers appointed on similar contract.

The condition of technical assistants, appointed under the provision of national food security mission, is no different: while their role is very important, their work condition is worse than a peon in the agriculture department.

Subject matter specialists (SMS) at panchayat level and farmer advisers at village level are trained by consultants and technical assistants. The latter were recruited through a three-pronged set of examinations: a written test, followed by interview and computer aptitude test. Their monthly emolument was set at ₹8,000 at the time but they were not given dearness allowance, house rent, insurance and medical leaves — facilities offered to all government employees.

While the salary has now gone up to ₹15,000, their services are still at the mercy of immediate bosses. Like one
consultant (name withheld on request) said, “Even a peon laughs at us because his job is permanent; ours is not.”

Nalanda’s district magistrate Sanjay Kumar Agrawal, though had a slightly different, if a bit cryptic argument on the job security issue: “Insecurity is a big motivation for doing hard work, that’s why most employees on contract are performing so well in Nalanda. They are aware of the consequences of non-performance.”

Nalanda has five technical assistants and two consultants. Trained workers, their job is to monitor the work of block agriculture officers. Each technical assistant has been tasked with covering two to four blocks in Nalanda, and then report directly to the district agriculture officer.

According to officials, these technical assistants and consultants were appointed in a bid to increase the yield of wheat, rice and pulses. The production records over the last few years are evidence enough that they have been successful in their job, which is why the national food security mission is on and will continue for at least another four or five years, as reported in various section of the media, one consultant said on conditions of anonymity.

“Anyone can see the record production of foodgrain in Nalanda over the last five years but our work condition has deteriorated from bad to worse in these years,” the consultant added.

In 2009, a new System of Rice Intensification, known as SRI method, was introduced in Bihar under the food security mission. An agro-ecological methodology, it increases productivity of irrigated rice by changing the management of plants, soil, water and nutrients, according to the SRI website of Cornell University, USA, where the method was developed.

Nalanda received a huge upshot in paddy irrigation since its introduction, which was made possible largely by the technical assistants, who demonstrated and convinced the local farmers of its use. Following Nalanda’s success, the SRI methodology was introduced across the state, and 2011-12 was observed as “SRI year” in Bihar. The credit for it, officials admit, goes to the consultants and subject matter specialists.

But if you thought their worth would increase in the eyes of the administration, you were wrong, the consultant, who hesitates being named for fear of re-percussion, said. “Besides being treated like class-II workers, our salary is only between ₹15,000 and ₹20,000; there are no facilities such as dearness or travel allowances, provident fund, house rent allowance etc,” he said. “There is little job security, so no wonder most of us are forever edgy and demoralised.”

Whatever emoluments consultants and technical assistants get come from the Centre; national food security mission employees don’t get anything from the state government, as subject matter specialists and farmers advisors’ receive, though they are all on the same boat on the job-security front.

**Rough and tumble of contract work**

Recently, Puja Kumari, called by peers as a hard-working subject matter specialist with an impeccable record in Raitar panchayat of Nalanda, received major burn injuries but she did not receive any government assistance. Reason: there is no such provision in her contractual job.

According to locals, she played a vital role in making mushroom cultivation popular among masses, especially women, thus giving them a new ray of hope at becoming self-reliant.

But struggling with life now, Puja’s job cannot give her assistance of any kind.

In Khagaria, a woman SMS had earlier died of the heat wave but her family, too, got no government assistance.

“Women get maternity leave in all departments and they are paid for that. But in our job if a woman gets maternity leave, she isn’t paid — the no-work-no-pay plan is totally applicable to us,” a Nalanda-based SMS said.

According to the SMS (name, again, withheld on request), there is a clear discrimination among the employees, as subject matter specialist on permanent roles get a monthly ₹45,000 without having to bother about meeting targets and responsibilities, whereas contractual employees get a measly ₹15,000 a month besides forever facing the heat of insecurity.

Farmers’ advisors, too, share similar woes. They play a major role in subsidy distribution and getting farmers familiar with new techniques but are paid only ₹5,000 per month.

Agreeing that these advisors do play a “vital role at the grassroots level”, district agriculture officer Sudama Mahto, however, said, “We can’t do anything to reward them, barring some encouraging words.”

According to farmers’ advisors, their job is considered inferior to other government employees, such as school teachers, and the situation is made worse by the fact that they lack an association to fight for their rights, unlike teachers, who are also appointed on contract in lakhs but get job extensions each year.

A similar condition is seen among block animal husbandry officers, who play a vital role by taking care of cattle at the block level. Their service is available at one’s doorstep, as well as at health centres, but suffer equally from job insecurity. “Job security and salary are equally important but we have to compromise on both. That’s why I am looking for a job at a private firm,” said Arun Kumar Dey, a block-level agriculture husbandry officer of Noorserai block.

Dey, who came to Noorserai after quitting his job with a private firm, said he is “fed up” with the tension and insecurity of beginning each new year fretting over whether his contract would be extended.

Bihar’s animal and husbandry minister Giriraj Singh, however, has some good news for the employees on contract — they will “not lose their job”. “From now on, no employment will take place on contractual basis,” he stressed.

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On February 17, Rakesh Kumar, a farmer from Sohdih village in Biharsharif block of Nalanda district, was on seventh heaven. Scientists from Krishi Vigyan Kendra at Harnaut and Horticulture College of Noorsarai, who supervised the harvest of potato on his field, assessed the yield at 1,088 quintals per hectare — a new world record.

In fact, Rakesh broke the record of a fellow Nalanda resident, Nitish Kumar of Darveshpura village, who held the previous highest per-hectare potato yield of 729 quintals last year. Not only that, Rakesh also reportedly holds the world record of onion output — the yield on his fields last year was 660 quintals per hectare.

Thrilling news no doubt for Nalanda but record productions are no more breaking news for the district, which, in 2011-12, broke the national record in wheat harvest, by producing 126 quintals in one hectare.

So what’s the reason behind Nalanda’s happy story that is getting it prominence for reasons other than the ancient seat of learning? All these plots, where several national and world records have been created, are demonstration plots with 100 percent organic farming to gain the maximum yield.

Introduced in 2010, the popularity of organic farming has skyrocketed in villages of Nalanda, where farmers are depending on it to sustain the health of soil, ecosystem and people. Eighteen villages in the district have adopted complete organic farming, while others are in line to follow suit. As a result, use of vermin-compost (a mixture of gasless cow dung and earthworm to compost organic residues) and bio-fertilisers is on the rise, while those of chemical-based urea and DAP are decreasing.

According to district officials, use of chemicals like DAP, urea, insecticides and pesticides like diethane, monochrotophos and fumigants have decreased markedly. They said use of insecticide is down 50 per cent, while use of eco-friendly variants like dhaincha (a green manure crop that is a rich source of nitrogen) has increased significantly.

In simple words, organic farming is a method of agriculture that avoids use of chemical fertiliser, pesticide, fungicide and weedicide, among others, and, instead, stresses on use of organic fertilisers like organic manure, bio-fertiliser, green manure and bio-pesticide, depending on crop rotation. Organic farming has proven to have improved soil fertility, increase productivity without harmful effects on human and animal health, environment and biodiversity.

Since fungicide and pesticide directly affect the human body, their use is minimal, if not zero, in organic farming.

Going green on farm: The beginning

While the agriculture department started a major initiative to introduce organic farming in Nalanda district in 2010-11, the farmers initially were hesitant, as often happens with introduction of newer technology and a move away from age-old practices. Agriculture officials said initially only 20 farmers came forward with 10 hectares of land. However, as input costs declined and bumper yields went up, many more farmers adopted the new technique.

As of now, approximately 2,500 hectares of land is under organic farming, all growing different vegetables.
If Rakesh Kumar is over the moon — he has every reason to be, having just set the world record in per-hectare potato harvest — he does not show it. An unassuming man, the 35-year-old Nalanda resident smiles when you mention his record but for both Kumar and his family it’s not a new phenomenon. After all, he had set the world record only last year — that time for onion, having produced 660 quintals of it per hectare.

**WHAT he did?**

On February 17, scientists from the Harnaut-based Krishi Vigyan Kendra and Horticulture College in Noorsarai oversaw the potato harvest at Kumar’s field in Sodih village. It came to 108.8 tonnes, or 1,088 quintals per hectare.

Having joined the family profession immediately after clearing Intermediate (or class XII), Rakesh Kumar did have his doubts in the initial years. But it all changed three years ago, when he took to organic farming. “Now I am getting better results each successive year,” he told Governance Now. “Organic farming has improved fertility of my land.”

**HOW he did it**

Having invested in new techniques to gain maximum yield, Kumar said he could achieve this new milestone with the help of eco-friendly vermin-compost, poultry manure, organic manure and biozymes. Bio-pesticides like trichoderemas and pseudomonas were used to treat potato seeds to save it from harmful fungus, as also because “this technique makes seed healthier and more productive”.

While swearing by organic farming, Kumar also used chemical fertilisers like NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium). “The idea is to provide nutrients to soil. We advise farmers who have adopted organic method to use a little amount of chemical fertilisers like NPK for soil management. Using 1 kg NPK per katha (approximately 1,300 square feet), however, does not mean farming is not organic,” said Dr Vijay Agrawal, scientist and horticulturist from Krishi Vikas Kendra at Harnaut, Nalanda.

Kumar said he used Azadiractin, a product of neem, which acts as insect repellent. “Azadiractin, trichoderemas and pseudomonas (the latter used as foliar spray) are used as bio-pesticides, and Rakesh used them judiciously,” plant breeding scientist Dr Anand Kumar said.

**WHERE he succeeded**

“In the 1990s we used to produce 400 quintal per hectare with chemical fertilisers, and yield, too, was decreasing every year,” Kumar said. “It was a disturbing trend — we all started using chemical fertilisers and harmful chemical insecticides and pesticides in abundance with the hope to increase yield.”

Three years ago, he said, some farmers in Nalanda, including him, took up organic farming with scepticism — “we had no faith in the district agriculture department’s advice — but were surprised by the yield. As the harvest increased, with lesser investment in organic manure, so did our confidence and belief in the department’s advice for organic farming,” he said.

DN Mahto, the district horticulture officer, said it was not easy to convince villagers about the benefits of organic farming. “We did our confidence and belief in the department’s advice for organic farming,” he said.

**WHY he did it**

Kumar said organic farming increases shelf-life of vegetable crops like potatoes and onions. “Earlier, we had to eliminate rotten potatoes every month to save the rest of the crop. But organic potatoes can be kept in godowns for five to six months without any extra care on storage. Thus, we save storage fare of ₹5 per kg since we do not have to rush to cold storages.

Kumar was also astute, having applied the high-density methodology in his farm, Purushottam Kumar, a technical assistant with the agriculture department, said. Now a ideal among small marginal farmers as he has.

“Normally, seedlings of potatoes are sown in a line, with a few inches left between two rows for better irrigation. But Rakesh used this vacant space as well; no wonder he had a record yield,” Purushottam Kumar said.

But for Rakesh Kumar, the journey has just begun. He now plans to spread the lessons he learnt the hard way to others in the district by teaching them the benefits and nuances of organic farming.
After successful experimentation on growing cauliflowers, farmers have now employed organic farming to grow onions, potatoes and many other vegetables. Sohdih, Asha Nagar, Preman Bigha, Nagarnausa, Ganga Bigha and Andhana are some of the villages where all crops are considered to be grown completely organic.

Officials said three villages are in the last stage of certification by reputed international French organisation Ecocert. While Sohdih village in Biharsharif block is in the last stage of certification, having already crossed the C2 stage by standard norms, Asha Nagar, Preman Bigha and Ganga Bigha have crossed C1, the first stage of certification.

A reputed French organisation, Ecocert does soil-testing to certify whether it is organic by finding out the level of chemicals. The third stage, or C3, can be attained only when there is complete organic farming and use of chemicals has been totally done away with.

Listing the advantages of organic farming, district agriculture officer Sudama Mahto said, “Organic fields are disease-free and production increases by one-and-a-half times over fields using pesticides and insecticides. Since Nalanda has traditionally been a big production hub for vegetables, use of insecticides and pesticides was at its peak barely three years ago. But with our efforts and under the guidance of the district magistrate, their use has decreased nearly 50 percent in Nalanda as organic farming is gaining popularity.”

Purushottam Singh, a technical assistant with the agriculture department, concurred: “Use of and dependence on toxic chemical fertilisers has decreased by up to 50 percent and use of vermin-compost has increased. That’s why wheat, pulses and paddy crops are available in abundance, with little input of chemical fertilisers.”

“The investment required earlier was ₹800 per katha (piece of land measuring 1,000 to 1,300 square feet, varying from region to region) with the help of chemical fertilisers. But after we adopted organic farming, it has come down to ₹300 per katha,” he added.

And the happy ending

Two years after having adopted the eco-friendly version of farming, villages like Sohdih, Andhana and Saril Chak of Nalanda are bustling with activity with merchants from other cities going there directly to buy farm-fresh products. Now the farm products, which were earlier sold in the local wholesale market, or mandis, now have ready markets in other parts of eastern India.

Thus, while potato is sent to Kolkata, Bokaro and Jamshedpur, among other places, after marketing links were developed, the local cauliflower goes to Ranchi, Jamshedpur, Jharia, Bokaro and Patna (see table).

Locals said people from south India, and even abroad, visit these villages to buy organic products, fetching a good return for farmers. “We sell groundnuts to visitors coming to Rajgir. They come to Saril Chak village specifically to buy such organic products,” said Manjula Devi, a villager who has benefitted from organic farming. Both officials and locals agreed that organic farming has “truly changed the lives of farmers” in Nalanda and reduced toxicity to a huge extent. It has encouraged farmers to buy more cattle so that cow dung is available in abundance.

The move has also prompted the local administration to give subsidies to farmers to buy biogas tank to produce cooking fuel in the villages themselves, while the slurry (gasless cow dung) is used to manufacture vermin-compost.

“With organic farming, we are becoming more self-dependent. Our income has also increased several notches,” said Biranchi Yadav, the mukhiya (head) of Chandasi village in Noorsarai block. ■

Pankaj has been stationed in Noorserai, Nalanda. It is part of a project Governance Now is running with Affiliated Network for Social Accountability – South Asia Region (ANSA-SAR). Follow details at governancenow.com/media-accountability. Read other reports on pages 06, 86, 89
On January 16, 2013, president Pranab Mukherjee presented the Krishi Karman award to Bihar for a significant increase in production of paddy in 2011-12. The 7.2 million tons produced was 50 percent more than its previous highest yield of 4.6 million tons. Agriculture minister Narendra Singh accepted the award, which consisted of a trophy, a citation and `10 crore, on behalf of Bihar at Rashtrapati Bhavan. The president also presented an individual award to Sumant Kumar, a farmer from Darveshpura village in Nalanda district, for setting a new world record with production of 22.4 tons per hectare of paddy using SRI methods.

SRI methods, used on more than 3 lakh hectares in the past season (about 12 percent of the paddy area), probably contributed about one-third of state’s increased production as the state agriculture department calculated an average SRI yield of 8.08 t/ha.

Three days before this, on January 13, Nobel laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz, inspired by the progressive farmers of Nalanda who catapulted the district on to the global agriculture map, had visited the farms in Nalanda that have been acknowledged worldwide for getting the highest yield of paddy, onion and potato in recent times using the scientific SRI method along with traditional bio-fertilisers.

The noted author and economist visited organic farms at Sohdih and said that it was amazing that the farmers of the district are prospering using traditional methods in farming that are healthy as well as more productive. He added that the achievements of farmers of the state and the district will definitely inspire farmers of other countries.

While the Bihar government observed 2011-12 as the ‘SRI year’ to promote the methodology in the entire state, the Nalanda district had taken the lead three years ago when the farmers here began experimenting with the farming technique on 10 hectares of land. The results were encouraging and the subsequent year, the total land under SRI methodology in the district had risen to 1,000 hectares. In 2010-11, this figure rose to 4,000 hectares and in 2011-12, to a record-breaking 25,600 hectares.

Encouraged by the experiment, chief minister Nitish Kumar launched the ‘SRI Vidhi’ agricultural campaign on April 14, 2012 in Patna to improve agricultural productivity across Bihar.

**What’s SRI?**

System of Rice Intensification (SRI) was developed as a methodology aimed at increasing the yield of rice produced in irrigated farming without relying on purchased inputs. Its main elements were assembled in 1983 by the French Jesuit father Henri de Laulanie in Madagascar after 20 years of observation and experimentation. But systematic evaluation and then dissemination of the system did not occur until some 10-20 years later.

Principles included applying a minimum quantity of water, instead of continuous flooding, and the individual transplanting of very young seedlings in a square pattern to give plants more room for root and tiller growth.

The spread of SRI from Madagascar to other parts of the globe has been credited to Norman Uphoff, director of International Institute for Food, Agriculture and Development at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York from 1990 to 2005. After seeing the success of SRI for three years, when Malagasy farmers previously averaging 2 tons/hectare averaged 8 tons/ hectare with SRI, Uphoff was convinced of the merits of the system, and in 1997 started to promote SRI in Asia. Today, the spread of SRI is supported by SRI-Rice at Cornell University, an organisation devoted to advancing and promoting SRI knowledge globally.

Other than rice, SRI technique has also been extended to wheat, maize and pulses in Nalanda. A catchy slogan, now popular among the farmers here, summarises the essence of the methodology.

Striking green gold in Nalanda

A wonder farm technique which has put the district on the global agricultural map is filling granaries in Bihar
light and aeration. Another important rows of plants allows them both sun- maintaining proper space between neat teaches farmers in simple language how ‘

District magistrate, Nalanda
Sanjay Kumar Agrawal, 2012-13 to increase the yield,” this human resource base in
crops. We are going to increase trained hands to sow paddy
SRI Vidhi, because we need trained
plantation as instructed under

Pankti mein shakti’ (power lies in rows)
teaches farmers in simple language how maintaining proper space between neat rows of plants allows them both sun- light and aeration. Another important

The Nalanda experiment
“Earlier, the farmers here used 50-60 kilogram of harmful chemical fertilizers, like di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), in their wheat and paddy crops. But after switching over to SRI method, it has been reduced to half,” says Kundan Kumar, a subject matter specialist here.

SRI methodology also promotes organic farming as farmers are encouraged to use vermicompost – manure made by using earthworms on cow dung – to decrease use of chemical fertilisers.

A nursery is of immense importance in SRI methodology. Seeds are planted here 8-10 days before sowing the crop. After they sprout, very young seedlings, mostly with two leaves only, are taken out of the nursery and sowed in the paddy field with great care. In case of paddy, a gap of 25 centimetres between the plants is maintained; in a wheat field, this distance can be reduced to 20 centimetres.

In case of wheat too, statistics show increase in the popularity of SRI methodology here. Beginning with mere five hectares in 2008-09 here, this figure had reached up to 5,000 hectares in 2011-12 in Nalanda.

Going by data provided by different government agencies like food corporation of India, state food corporation, and primary agriculture credit society regarding the paddy crop procurement in Nalanda, the procurement rose miraculously to 1.42 lakh metric tons in 2011-12 from the mere 59,953 metric tons in 2010-11. Similar trends were observed in the procurements statistics of wheat, maize and pulses.

“Use of SRI methodology has brought down the cost of cultivation here. Sowing of seeds is 50 percent cheaper and the yield is 40-50 percent higher. That’s why the methodology is so popular here,” says district agriculture minister Sudama Mahto.

While the increased production has filled granaries of farmers here, the methodology is also providing employment avenues to farm labourers. “We have trained around 10,000 farm labourers in seed plantation as instructed under SRI Vidhi, because we need trained hands to sow paddy crops. We are going to increase this human resource base in 2012-13 to increase the yield,” says district magistrate Sanjay Kumar Agrawal.

The road ahead
The use of this innovative farming technique has changed the face of agriculture in Nalanda and has brought the district from the dungeons of backwardness to the forefront of global accolade. Part of the credit must also be given to an NGO called ‘Pradan’, which initiated the work on the methodology here as early as 2007. Buoyed by this success, the Nalanda district agriculture officers with permission from the district magistrate brought the experiment to the paddy fields in 2008.

There has been no looking back since. “During the drought years (2009-10 and 2010-11), the entire state was worst hit and Nalanda was no exception but farmers using the SRI methodology went on to record bumper paddy crops despite odds,” says Mahto. For the Rabi crop this year, the state has set the target of bringing 3 lakh hectares of wheat fields and 4 lakh hectares for maize under the SRI methodology. The government now wants to bring 50,000 hectares under SRI technique to sow grams and 25,000 hectares for lentils.

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Read other reports on pages 06, 43, 56
‘Bharat’

darshan

in a

slice of

Odisha

Excreta on state highway 36, which links NH 257 with Sheragada, has halved the road; (inset) a signboard put up by local police warns against open defecation. Evidently, few bother.

Considering the scope of impacting development in the greater part of the country that forms rural India, there is an urgent need to reorient our attention towards the villages.
I was told late August last year that our magazine would tie up with the ANSA SAR for a six-month project on accountability through sustained reporting on implementation of various government schemes. I had no idea what I had signed up for when I first said yes to a five-month stint, reporting on governance in Sheragada block in Ganjam, Odisha.

In fact, I first heard of the place only in September last year, in a discussion with my senior Prasanna Mohanty. We had been trying to zero in on a block in Odisha. We finalised Sheragada as the spot for our joint assignment – he was to kick it off from October, staying for a month, and I was to follow it through from November – because it was the chief minister's constituency. What better place could there be to track rural governance in the state than Naveen Patnaik's home turf, we thought.

I remember being quietly confident then that it would be an easy ride because I know Odia and considered myself well-versed in the stereotyped sensibilities of an Odia person. All such convictions were challenged and demolished over the five months I spent here, from November 2012 to March this year.

**Choke, sputter and start**

I reached Bhubaneswar, and then Berhampur (a sub-division of Ganjam and the best-known city of southern Odisha) in early November. Armed with all I could glean off the reports filed by my senior earlier, I was quite keen on starting; the project didn’t seem too daunting.

That was until I had to figure out how to get to Sheragada from there.

Forty-four kilometres from Berhampur, Sheragada can be reached by two routes: one, along a potholed, dusty road through Digapahandi (another block) if one were to depend on the four ‘direct’ buses that run daily, and the other along the Berhampur-Aska road via Hinjilicut (the other block that is part of Patnaik’s constituency), turning at Syamalai Chowk. The ‘direct’ buses, I figured out after the first ride, took nearly two and a half hours to reach Sheragada. Then on, I stuck to the second route, boarding buses to Hinjilicut in the first few weeks and then paying obscene amounts to auto-rickshaw drivers to take me to Sheragada.

This was hardly better because the buses to Hinjilicut would take almost two hours to cover 33 km with their frequent stops to pick up passengers. Moreover, once in Sheragada, I had to depend on local contacts to take me around on their motorbikes. The first month down, I switched to cabs in efforts to avoid these hassles.

Commutation, throughout the five months I was here, proved to be the biggest challenge.

**First impressions**

The axial road from Syamalai Chowk on the Berhampur-Aska road to the block headquarters is a newly tarred state highway that could put all other roads in the district to shame. Beside the road are large fields where seasonal vegetables, sugarcane and paddy are grown. The only breaks in this verdant rural landscape are villages that are unlike any I had seen before. The houses, mostly pucca, are built on thin strips of land. As a result, neighbours share walls and the residents live in rooms arranged like Lego blocks in a line.

‘Train coaches’ is the clichéd metaphor used by outsiders who sneer at the design.

In many ways, Sheragada is an island within the district of Ganjam. If one were to compare it with the other blocks one would find it leaps ahead in terms of infrastructure like roads, banks, irrigation projects etc. However, the most defining contrast of the place is the sense of inviolability of its people.

This sense is best summed up in what a local contact offered (always sardonically) on many occasions – in the CM’s constituency, everybody is the CM. At first, I was unable to fully grasp what the cryptic leitmotif was. But with every succeeding field visit, much to my frustration, I realised what it encapsulated. Most here are strongly aligned with the ruling Biju Janata Dal (Patnaik’s fiefdom of sorts).

Even the panchayat elections, supposed to be free from party politics, are basically about one political outfit flexing its muscles at the grassroots. Initially, with neighbours, clansmen, and sometimes even themselves, having vested interests to guard, most people I spoke to were cautious with their words. The words “Delhi media” seemed to have little...
impact on them.

But two local activists – Siddharth Sahu from Takarada (one of the 22 panchayats in Sheragada) and Arun Tripathy from Pitala, who had helped my senior during his reportage – helped me out whenever they could in the professed hope that media attention on governance could help change some of the things that needed changing. Needless to say, this was a much-needed encouragement.

Walk-in interviews
If the villagers were guarded, I had expected even less from the block officials. The first time I met the person at the helm, Manoj Swain, the young block development officer (BDO), I was pleasantly surprised to see how accessible he was. And it had very little to do with my profession.

It was a Tuesday and there was a long queue of people outside Swain’s office, waiting for him to return from a field visit. Asking around, I found out that Swain had marked Tuesdays for weekly meetings with villagers to discuss grievances. So I waited till he had heard the last villager out before I walked in.

By the end of the conversation, I had been assured that I could just call and “walk in” if he was in office. Most other block officials – whether the child development programme officer (CDPO) or the block resource coordinator with the sarva shiksha abhiyan (SSA) or the block programme manager for the national rural health mission (NRHM) – seemed to take the presence of the “journalist from Delhi” seriously, though the CDPO, Chandrakala Swain, asked to see some identification before she spoke to me the first time I met her!

Learning to unlearn
I have never been a reporter’s reporter, or even a reporter, except for an earlier assignment in Saranda, Jharkhand. The Saranda experiment (the ‘experiment’ is my addition) was very similar to this project at Sheragada, and yet, the two experiences could not have varied more. Like in the Sheragada project, I was sent to Saranda for five months to report on the implementation of the rural development schemes in place, which had been dovetailed into the Saranda Development Plan by the rural development ministry.

But that is where the similarity ends. All that I picked up as ‘given’ about people, governments, administration and policies, and the way these four interacted while at Saranda was undone in Sheragada. I got a ringside view of federalism at work. The union government schemes are often implemented in a way that best suits the states’ coffers, guidelines remaining mere guidelines. For example, in Jharkhand, for a day’s work under the rural employment guarantee scheme beneficiaries are paid the daily minimum wage, irrespective of the nature of work. In Sheragada the scheme finds very few takers because of the way wage is structured.

You dig hard and rocky soil, you are paid slightly more than the full minimum wage for a day’s work while if you are made to dig soft and loose soil, you are paid considerably less. No matter how many hours you put in, you are at the mercy of the work order.

A low minimum wage (Rs 124 a day in Odisha) and in some cases even lower MNREGS wages have ensured that there are very few takers for the scheme. Taking advantage of the desperation of the administration to meet targets, local touts and strongmen, including some village-level functionaries, have turned contractors, bilking the government and enlisted beneficiaries of welfare schemes’ money.

Work orders are executed with machines and hired labour. While some of the actual beneficiaries are paid a cut to keep shut, many remain ignorant of the graft taking place in their name.

Surprised that implementation of one scheme could vary so much in two states, I downloaded a copy of the MNREGS guidelines from the rural development ministry’s website and read the finer points. Turns out I knew very little about the scheme.

Shit sociology
One of the first governance failures in Sheragada, and broadly Ganjam, that I
had been alerted to was the utter lack of sanitation facilities, which in turn had reinforced a callous disregard for hygiene and sanitation among people. Open defecation is still in full force here. And it has no pretences of privacy that many of us needing the closed space of a toilet would like it to be. Hordes of women and men, young and old, from the villages squat every evening and morning by the newly tarred roads, unheedng of being exposed in the headlights of passing vehicles as they relieve themselves.

In such close quarters, there is no escaping the smell of each other's excreta. It is a sight no one from anywhere else can ever be ready for. I had frequent conversations with the villagers, drivers, officials, activists, health workers about it and everybody seemed to have the same resigned air – “it has been like this only”.

Only the officials, the activists and the health workers seemed committed to ensuring that it didn’t stay so. Not the people.

Kanaka Swain, a sixty-something grandmother of four from Tahara (a village of the eponymous panchayat) had insisted that she was used to going in the fields when pointed out that her family could benefit from the Total Sanitation Campaign under which toilet construction is subsidised for households below the poverty line (BPL). “I can’t go in a cramped enclosure,” she had laughed, covering her face with her pallu.

Most perform their ablutions in community ponds and tanks which are used for bathing, washing clothes and utensils alike. Villagers often sheepishly admitted that open defecation was a force of habit for most of them. But it was habit they were curiously lethargic to break.

No matter how well-designed a policy is, sometimes people are unable to grasp its import. “It is here that the government should step in. Look at Gram Vikas (a local NGO of considerable repute). In every village where they undertake sanitation projects, they post a field agent who stays on for two years after all toilets have been constructed to make sure the villagers lose the ‘habit’. Why can’t the government try something similar?” Arun Tripathy, a Sheragada-based social activist, had once asked rhetorically while we were discussing the issue.

Meanwhile, due to public indifference, shoddy implementation of sanitation schemes have virtually gone unnoticed. So while I had assumed that beneficiaries were seldom the reason behind failure of government schemes, here were entire villages facilitating the government’s near-abdication of its responsibilities. It would be easy to blame this indifference on lack of awareness but there have been many awareness campaigns regarding sanitation and many health concerns surrounding the practice of open defecation.

Stuck to contradictory stands
Another instance of being forced to reconsider hitherto-held beliefs came from relaying grievances of foot soldiers to the higher-ups.

When Ranjita Rath, an anganwadi worker of Santoshpur ward number 2 of Pitala panchayat, complained about the government grant being inadequate to meet the nutrition chart specifications and said she had to mark children who didn’t turn up on a particular day as being present, so that she could split their grant among the tots who had come, I asked CDPO Swain about it. Seemingly unfazed, the CDPO explained why the “adjusting” of attendance was gaining ground among anganwadi workers. “Except for the days when they have to feed eggs to the children, they shouldn’t be complaining about the grants. It is enough to feed the children according to the nutrition chart,” Swain said.

While the anganwadi workers get a monthly honorarium, the accredited social health activists (ASHAs) have to depend on commissions from specific medical cases from pregnancies to HIV tests. Rita Kumari Mishra, an ASHA attached to the primary health centre at Pitala, had called the commissions pittance diminished by delays in payments. But the block programme manager for NRHM, Sohan Patnaik, pulled out a sheet which had details of commissions one of the ASHA had earned in September last year.

This lady, whose name was not disclosed, had made a princely (compare to what Rita said she made) sum of little over 8,000! Some arrears were added to the amount but even if they were deducted, the remainder far

What they say

“If there is constant media attention on the implementation of government schemes in Sheragada then the people will come to know about leakages and poor implementation. They can then demand changes. At the moment people living with HIV/AIDS are stigmatised by the people working in the health sector itself. Paramedics at the community health centre or primary health centre often refuse to even give patients an injection once they come to know of their HIV-positive status. Maybe, through the story you are working on, they might realise the kind of stigma they are inflicting on them and change their attitude.”

Santosh Kumar Sahu, PPTCT counsellor at Sheragada CHC

“There are many irregularities in the implementation of MNREGS in our panchayat. I have alerted the BDO about it many times and have tried drawing the local media’s attention. But the journalists don’t come here because it is the chief minister’s constituency and they are afraid to report on the bungling. I hope Governance Now’s stories on MNREGS create some kind of pressure on the local administration to act.”

Pitabasa Pradhan, former sarpanch, Dhabalpur panchayat
exceeded what other ASHAs managed to scrape. “If the ASHAs were to perform their duties with earnest, there is more than enough for them to make from the NRHM grants,” Patnaik had noted.

All of this has to be seen in the backdrop of the recent protests of anganwadi workers and ASHAs (on separate occasions) in front of the state assembly in Bhubaneswar. The former have raised demands of regularisation as government employees with salary increase and grants for children under the scheme, while ASHAs have demanded a monthly stipend.

Meanwhile, as evident in Sheragada, foot soldiers and their overseers stick to contradictory stands. While I had, on earlier occasions, stood with the foot soldiers, I have since been forced to reconsider. I haven’t been able to figure out whether Rath and Mishra are right or Swain and Patnaik are. I suspect the truth could lie somewhere in between.

Apart from opportunities to reform my perspective on governance, I got many that added to my knowledge. Following NRHM, I found out about the implementation of AYUSH (Ayurvedic-Unani-Siddha-Homeopathy), the union health ministry's scheme to encourage alternative medicine. I had heard of it earlier but wasn’t familiar with its particulars. A long conversation with a young homeopathic doctor at the Pitala PHC, Dr Epili Jagannath, helped me understand how policy flaws were actually driving out alternative medicine professionals rather than encouraging them.

While working on a story on financial inclusion, I found out about the way the informal financial systems work. Speaking with handloom weavers in Pitala, I found out about a dying craft that had put Odisha on the national centrestage during the days of Indira Gandhi, who was known to be particularly fond of Odisha handloom.

But the waning popularity of handloom is now forcing a community to give up a craft passed down generations over centuries.

Impact of the project
This, arguably, has to be one of the hardest questions I have faced: what impact did the reporting leave? Did it move files or was any action taken on the basis of the reports that my senior and I filed from Sheragada?

I am not in a position to answer because I am not privy to that information. But there were other indicators that suggest that Governance Now’s presence here did alter things for the better, however short-lived this effect might have been.

First, it has provided hope to those who believe that things can be better and are working towards it. Pitaabasa Pradhan, a former sarpanch, has been trying to get hold of data that can expose the many scams in MNREGS. He has, so far, been frustrated by the state information commission with which he has filed many applications asking for the details of many projects in his panchayat, Dhabalpur.

When he heard that Governance Now was keen on tracking MNREGS in the block, he sought us out at the block office and offered to take us to the various work sites and share some of the documents he has collected as evidence of graft. The curious bit in the tale is that the man who is the de facto contractor for a project, the construction of a bund for a small channel at the foot of a hill far from the village limits in Solasola (this project is one of the gushing founts of graft in MNREGS, alleges Pradhan), used to be the gram saathi, (a village-level functionary associated with the scheme).

Prashant Sahu, the first time I met him, had talked of leakages in MNREGS (ironically) back in December at a public hearing of grievances held at the block office. When I had made pointed queries, he had skilfully avoided answering. So, on the March morning I visited the site where he was (according to his own admission later) “overseeing” the work, even before I had made my way back to the village he caught up with Pradhan and I, and parked his bike in front of our vehicle. He abused Pradhan and then made a veiled threat to the both of us saying, “You’ll see what comes off this.”

I was concerned for Pradhan because he was a local. “He made the threat only because he knows that now the media’s attention is turned on the graft. You must help expose it,” Pradhan replied.

Governance Now’s presence also made the local administration and functionaries keenly aware that their work was being scrutinised and that they could be held accountable. In one of our conversations, Siddharth Sahu, the local activist who had on many occasions shown me around the block, pointing out potential stories, revealed that he had got a call from a senior official at the tehsil who had asked him to point me towards positive stories as well. During one of my meetings with the BDO, I informed him of the Solasola project and Pradhan’s campaign. Though he shrugged off Pradhan’s allegations, he said he would soon undertake a closer monitoring of MNREGS projects in the area.

But more than what has been, I wish to see actual impact of my reports in two cases. In one instance, I have found a school functioning without a building for the last six years. The project primary school at Khasapa has 30 students. But without a building, they have to sometimes sit under a banyan tree on the plot allotted for the school, or in a shed that can barely sit 15.

I hope my report (yet to be filed) expedites the construction of the school.

While reporting for a story on financial inclusion, I had met Jagili Dakua, a BPL daily-wage labourer who is one of the great unbanked. In my interaction with the BDO, I had pointed out Dakua’s case as an instance of those who could be left behind when direct benefits transfer system is fully adopted. The BDO had assured me that the block would soon undertake financial inclusion drives in which the likes of Dakua would be included in formal banking systems and will be trained for financial literacy.

I wish to see Dakua holding his passbook soon.

Well begun but only half done
As I wind up my reporting assignment at Sheragada, I realise in hindsight that I should have better pre-empted what it was to go to be like working on a social accountability project in a politically charged area like the Odisha chief minister’s constituency.

But the most significant takeaway has to be the experiencing of how media can help shape governance so that it serves the interests of people even at the grassroots. In fact, considering the scope of impacting development in the greater part of the country that forms rural India, there is an urgent need to reorient our attention towards the villages.
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What stinks so bad in Odisha CM’s constituency?

Wonder what open defecation in its most bizarre form can do to a place? Come, visit Sheragada block of Ganjam district.

Highway toilet: Muck in left part of the road, that connects NH 217 with Sheragada, is actually human faeces.
I

t will be prudent of Odisha’s tourism department to carry a warning along with its catchy invitation to the tourists that describes the state as ‘The Soul of Incredible India!’ – keep away from chief minister Naveen Patnaik’s home district Ganjam, especially his home constituency Hinjlicut in the district.

If, by sheer misfortune, you step into Sheragada, one of the two blocks that constitute the Hinjlicut assembly segment, you will be overwhelmed by a strong stink that can make you pass out instantly. Escaping hospitalisation can only be a stroke of luck. Impossible to visualise unless you have seen it and a truly bizarre sight to behold, the entire block is actually an open public toilet. Recall VS Naipaul describing India of the 1960s in An Area of Darkness: “Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover…” He never visited Sheragada. Had he been, his description would have been more savaging.

Sheragada is at the centre of Ganjam, a coastal district in south bordering Andhra Pradesh, with a pronounced influence of Telugu culture and lifestyle. To reach it (which we wouldn’t advise) you will have to take NH 217, connecting Gopalpur (known for its quaint beach) in Ganjam with Raipur in Chhattisgarh. Forty kilometres down the highway, at Syamaiali Chowk, a two-lane metalled road going left (State Highway No 36) connects the highway with the Sheragada block headquarters. A signboard says the distance is 14 km. The road is fine, flanked on either side by green paddy fields. By the time you have taken a full glance at the rural setting, the stink hits you. If you survive the first blast, you will notice the source of the stink – human faeces covering much of the road. Not the road sides, mind you, which are covered with grass. Not even the fields that are spread out on either side and green with standing crops of paddy and sugarcane. Only the metalled road is a public toilet. Don’t ever take the smaller roads that connect or lead to villages. Those are completely covered with faeces. (The taxiwalla will not agree in any case.) The gain from MNREGS can be debated, what can’t is the usefulness of roads and check dams, especially its cemented parts, that have been built under it. They provide excellent perch for defecation.

Good on paper
Officially, almost every house has a toilet. A survey by the district water and sanitation mission (DWSM), which is in the process of being compiled, shows that of 10,015 BPL households in the block, 9,988 have got toilets built by the government. Of 8,967 APL households, 5,286 have their own toilets. The block has 140 schools, of which 137 have toilets. The record is not so good for anganwadi centres (AWC) with just 19 of 192 having toilets and 40 more in the process of being added.

The data is difficult to disapprove of. Random checks in several villages show that toilets have indeed been provided to most of the BPL families. Villagers and social activists don’t dispute it either. The problem is hardly anybody uses those toilets. The tradition of defecating in the open, and in groups, is so strong that almost all the toilets the government has provided under total sanitation campaign (TSC) since early 2000 are simply lying unused and wasted. In Sarangi Palli village in Bandaguda panchayat for example, Duryodhan Nayak got a toilet built a few yards away from his house along the village road about a year-and-half ago. A look at it suggests that it was never used. His wife, Pramila Nayak, explains why: “It is getting dirty and is located close to the house.” Ask her how the road she is using as toilet any better and she will just lower her gaze and keep quiet.

Sarpanch of Takarahata panchayat Jyotish Nayak says people don’t want to defecate at a place close to their homes. That is why the roads used for defecation are always far away from houses. More honest villagers will tell you that it is sheer “habit” and “tradition” of the community, used to as they are to defecate in the open for centuries. Those familiar with the village life will vouch that defecation, especially in the evening hours, is as much a social function. Men and women, boys and girls move out in groups, catching up with day’s gossip and sharing their daily grind even as they walk away from the village to relieve themselves. They defecate and move to the nearby water source to clean themselves. Flushing is not part of the ritual, which is what is stopping them now from using low-cost toilets provided to them. Only in late night hours some may be found carrying buckets to clean themselves, but not flush. And none bothers to look for cover or cover himself/herself when vehicles pass by with their head-lights on.

But a wind of change is blowing. There is a growing realisation that defecating on the roads is not something to be proud of. Police have put up signboards warning that defecating on the road is “illegal and banned”. These signboards came up after the chief minister visited the area.

Two local social activists, Arun Tripathy and Siddharth Sahu, tell Governance Now that one day in October 2011, Naveen Patnaik was being driven down to Sheragada. (Sheragada block was added to Hinjlicut assembly segment during the delimitation of 2009). This was unusual as Patnaik normally uses choppers for travel. After returning to Bhubaneswar, he called the district collector and asked him how 30-ft-wide roads have got reduced to 10-feet ones. The collector got into the act and started a campaign to keep the roads

Sheragada block at a glancel

| Area: 180.5 sq km |
| SCs: 21 percent |
| STs: 2 percent |
| Rest: OBCs and general |
| Literacy: 62 percent |
| Male: 70 percent |
| Female: 54 percent |

| No. of panchayats: 22 |
| No. of villages: 114 (19 are uninhabited as population has shifted elsewhere) |
| Maoist-affected panchayats: 8 |
| PHC: 4 |
| CHC: 1 |
had built community toilets elsewhere outside Sheragada block but they too failed because nobody bothered to keep them clean. There was no water supply to these toilets either. Therefore, this time, there will be a tank with every community toilet and someone to keep it clean, Swain says.

To this rural development department has added a third strategy. In order to increase public participation, it has directed that construction of toilets under the individual household latrine (IHHL) scheme – under which now individual beneficiaries will be given Rs 9,100, of which MNREGS will contribute Rs 4,500 and the beneficiary will add Rs 900, taking the total cost to Rs 10,000 – will be the beneficiaries’ responsibility. Twenty beneficiaries will form a group and select a leader to do the running around. The state has been engaging NGOs and contractors to built toilets since early 2000 with little gain.

SN Tripathy, secretary, rural development, who looks after rural water and sanitation drive, says the focus will now shift to two activities – (a) launch a campaign to mobilise people to cover up faeces with earth after defecation, as per the central government’s directive and (b) launch education/awareness campaign to change the toilet habits of people through various means.

Half-hearted approach
Even a casual look at the toilets that have been built will show why they are wasting. Most of the toilets are without covers. Just a bare structure to sit and defecate. These are in front of the houses along the common village road and present an ugly sight. Villagers explain how some people descended one fine day, set up the structures and went away. In some cases, a separate structure has been erected on the “side”, roofless and open in the front. These are connected to pits but require flushing, something the villagers are not used to. Cleaning the faeces is not in their ritual. How can they let faeces collect in front or side of their houses to stink?

Half-hearted approach

Even a casual look at the toilets that have been built will show why they are wasting. Most of the toilets are without covers. Just a bare structure to sit and defecate.

Even a casual look at the toilets that have been built will show why they are wasting. Most of the toilets are without covers. Just a bare structure to sit and defecate.
In open defecation area, one village says hello to own loo

Ganjam NGO makes toilets, bathroom for Subaliapalli village in Dhanantara panchayat. Now eyeing second village

Every evening, between 6 and 7, the entire population of Sheragada block in Ganjam district is out on the streets — young and old, men and women. No, it isn't because earthquake strikes the block every evening at that hour. It's just that they are all out to defecate on the streets — a daily ritual.

Long ago, nobody really knows exactly when, all of them fell in love with metalled roads, especially the 14-km State Highway 36 that connects the block headquarters with NH 217. They simply squat on either side of the road, relieving themselves in small groups as you drive by. It helps that there are no streetlights on this state highway.

Except for people of Subaliapalli village in Dhanantara panchayat.

These villagers don't need to go out to the streets because all 108 households in the village have their own toilets in their backyards. Thanks to a programme of total sanitation carried out by Ganjam-based NGO Gram Vikas, they are a happy lot, having washed away the stigma and leading a clean and healthy life. Pradeep Badatiya, a small farmer, says his family is much relieved since water supply to the toilets started in 2008. “The toilets are convenient. We don’t have to go to dirty places to dirty them further, and are saved from the shame of having to defecate in the open,” he says.

There is no fear of wild animals either, especially for women who get up and go for morning ablutions at 4 am.

Same is the case with P Raju Patra and the other villagers. The ‘revolution’ began in 2005 when Gram Vikas approached villagers and persuaded them to build their own toilets — a set of two pucca rooms with roof, one for relieving and the other for bathing. Once each villager had such structures ready in their backyards in a couple of years, a water tank was built and three borewells dug just outside the village.

Each household was then given three 24x7 piped water connections — one each in the toilet, bathroom and kitchen. On average, the cost of building each such toilet came to Rs 16,000, of which Rs 3,500 was given by Gram Vikas. The cost would have been higher had villagers themselves not offered free labour.

The water tank and borewells were funded by Gram Vikas and cost about Rs 10 lakh. There were additional expenses on laying out the pipelines. While these villagers are not any more prosperous than their neighbours — most are small and marginal farmers — it was their collective decision-making, unity and a sense of shame that goaded them to change their lifestyle. Sojan K Thomas, who heads Gram Vikas’s rural health and environment programme under which the Subaliapalli experiment was carried out, says they took care of three aspects while working on the project: providing “usable and decent” toilets, water connection to these toilets, and ensuring 100 percent participation of villagers. “We made it a precondition that we wouldn’t start work until there is 100 percent participation and contribution from villagers,” he says.

To ensure this, each household was asked to pay Rs 1,000, which went into building a corpus.

Once the system was put in place, each household was asked to pays a monthly Rs 30 for maintenance and a person was hired for a monthly pay of Rs 1,000 to ensure that the system works without glitches. The going, thus far, has been smooth.

Gram Vikas has moved on but not out.

It still keeps a close eye. It has set up a village committee headed by a president, P Ravindra Kumar Patra, which meets regularly to ensure that the locals do not return to their old habits. Thomas says next on their agenda is Nuabali village: with its 70 households under Khirida panchayat, it will soon join Subaliapalli. The toilets, water tank and connections are ready and electricity supply snags will be sorted out soon.

Sheragada block will then have two villages where people don’t defecate in the open.
Something historic has happened in Odisha — a first for not only the state but the entire country. While the panchayati raj institutions were revived through the 73rd constitutional amendment passed in 1993, never have village meetings (or palli sabhas, as they are called here) and gram sabhas (comprising adult members of all villages of a gram panchayat) been truly meaningful or participatory. People have never demanded and decided the kind of development work they want in their area. Take it to each village across the state, and the dimension of Odisha's own ‘October revolution’ comes close to being called mind-boggling.

For 10 days from October 2, village after Odisha village held palli sabhas. They discussed local problems, deliberated on government welfare schemes, listed works they want, and staked claims to various benefits under these schemes. These lists were then forwarded to respective gram sabhas, which met on October 17-18, deliberated and finalised five-year perspective plans and annual action plan for 2013-14. The details were subsequently uploaded on their respective websites and forwarded to senior officials for necessary approval and funds.

All the meetings were photographed and videographed for evidence. There sure were glitches, as there were expected to be. Of 44,544 palli sabhas, for instance, meetings couldn’t be held in 300 due to Maoist threats (mainly in Malkangiri and Koraput districts), there were protests over land acquisition (in Sundargarh, Anugul and Jagatsinghpur districts), and there were local fights. Out of 6,236 gram sabhas, meetings couldn’t be held in 161 for those very reasons.

But they were minor irritants at best in the face of the massive crowd participation and “unprecedented success”, as Aparajita...
Sarangi, commissioner and secretary, panchayati raj department, who made it all possible, puts it. “I am extremely satisfied. I never expected such a response,” she remarked at the end of it all.

Is it a fest? No, a palli sabha meet
One had to see the massive election-like, almost festive, atmosphere during this period to believe it. With the entire state machinery, social activists, local politicians and, most importantly, the villagers, participating, banners were put up in villages even as vehicles made the rounds, exhorting people to participate in palli and gram sabha meetings.

Each sarpanch issued a ‘chit’, inviting people to the meetings, while groups of drum-beaters took the message of welfare schemes to the villagers and asked them to decide their fate.

And the villagers responded just as enthusiastically.

At meetings, they fought with government officials, panchayat members and health (Asha) and anganwadi workers, demanding their share of benefits and compelling against non-existing services.

At Sagarpalli village in Sheragada block of Ganjam district, villagers heckled the BDO during the palli sabha and sought to know why the Indira Aawas Yojna list of beneficiaries existed when no one got assistance. The health worker was also questioned on missing services.

At Gopa Pali in Bandhaguda panchayat of Ganjam, the panchayat executive officer had to face villagers’ wrath for not clearing pension and other claims. At Dhavalapur gram sabha, the anganwadi worker was grilled by residents for not giving ‘chhatua’ (the local name for ‘sattu’, made a national delicacy by Lalu Prasad) to children for a month, ostensibly because the contractor faced some problem.

Besides, nearly all of 1,000 households demanded toilets. To demonstrate that they are keen to stop defecating in the open, as is typical in Ganjam and parts of adjoining Gajapati district, one village elder explained how, on their own, they washed state highway-36, which skirts their village, a day before chief minister Naveen Patnaik was to drive by.

Similarly, at Krushna Sahi gram sabha, 200 people demanded toilets under the individual household latrine (IHHL) scheme.

How the revolution was shaped
Such a thing had never happened, admitted the villagers, the panchayat members and government officials. All sarpanchs and other panchayat functionaries of the areas named earlier confessed development plans and listing of beneficiaries were made in panchayat offices and involved a handful of people.

There never was a true gram sabha, or a palli sabha, they said — a fact evident from the proceedings, as villagers had little knowledge of the eligibility criteria or what their rights and privileges were.

The credit for the success of palli and gram sabha goes completely to the careful planning by Sarangi, who took over the panchayati raj department on August 1.

After seeking feedback from her officials and the villagers, she decided to formulate a structured plan, named Grama Sabha Sashaktikaran Karjyakrama (GSSK). Nothing was left to imagination.

GSSK set out a four-hour plan of action for each palli sabha and two gram sabha meetings — one to spread awareness about all welfare schemes and the other to finalise the action plan and claims.

This document makes a fascinating reading. After listing priorities and schemes of the panchayati raj department, it goes beyond and records schemes run by all other departments — SC and ST, women and child development, rural development, agriculture, health and family welfare, school and mass education, and tourism and culture. The focus on each head is as much on dissemination of information and sensitisation as on actually planning for the future and making a list of works and beneficiaries.

“For holistic development of a village it is essential for people to (a) know and understand all government schemes and their benefits and (b) know their entitlements, how to access them and who to approach,” said Sarangi (read her interview on the next page).

She also made it mandatory for panchayati raj proceedings to be both photographed and videographed. Work at the state, district, block and panchayat levels were distributed, with clear instructions about the role of various government officials, including the collector, who does not even report to her.

Sarangi said she sought and received full cooperation of all government departments.

Going by the response and participation of the villagers, at least in Sheragada block of Ganjam, there is little to doubt that a welcome change has begun. Once the necessary clearances come, which Sarangi says will be done in due time, the panchayati raj department would be able to get work orders for the next financial year issued on the very first day, April 1.

Going by the development so far, that does seem likely.

prasanna@governancenow.com

Other reports on pages 08, 20, 56
On the condition of confidentiality, a sarpanch of Sheragada block in Odisha’s Ganjam district shared some secrets about the MNREGS works.

He said over a period of two months ending in June 2012 he got a pond renovated under the employment guarantee scheme which provided work to about 140 to 160 people. Most of those engaged for the job were from a neighbouring panchayat. But on paper, all the names were from his own panchayat. In all, ₹2.40 lakh were paid to the workers on the spot, not by the government but by him. He drew money from the village fund (called ‘gaan kotha’) for the purpose. Not all the listed beneficiaries have received their official payment. As and when they do, the village fund is replenished.

The sarpanch was trying to impress how difficult it is to get MNREGS work done in his area because most people are just not interested in a low-paid job. When challenged, he pointed to a villager listening to the conversation and said, “Ask him”. The villager (who too will remain unnamed for confidentiality) said: “Payment comes after three months. How will I, a daily wager, and my family survive for so long? Besides, I get ₹150 a day doing other work. Why will I take MNREGS work for ₹100?” (Though minimum wage under MNREGS is ₹126 in Odisha, it is linked to the actual output and so could be less.)

The grama rozgar sevak (GRS), who supervises all MNREGS work in a panchayat, said he was forced to give ₹150, instead of the minimum wage of ₹126, because people were reluctant. “How do I adjust the difference except by making fake entries?” When asked how he could get away with it, he said those who received ₹150 suggested the names of the job card holders for fake listing.

He had another issue. If a less number of people showed up for a work, and they could all be given work only for 100 days each, what would happen if the work wasn’t completed in those many days? He would have to make them work for more days and make fake entries in the muster rolls.

Quite clearly, there is a conspiracy of silence at work that keeps the wrap on such wrong doings.

A special social audit conducted in this panchayat in June this year by Omega – a joint initiative between the state government and the UK-based funding agency, DFID – confirmed that “people feel that MNREGS works are low paid and un-remunerative”. It, however, failed to detect the fake entries in the muster rolls.

The GRS said the root cause of corruption was fixing of a target for MNREGS works. He said the previous block development officer or BDO (the current one took charge in May 2012) had told him to carry out works worth ₹16 lakh if he wanted the salaries of all five panchayat functionaries, which come to about ₹35,000 a month, released in time. The salaries are paid out of six percent administrative cost earmarked for the purpose. (Senior officials contacted later said the target could have been given to ensure adequate works were taken up.) The new BDO, Manoj Swain, had not given any such target, he said.

Inquiries in this panchayat had earlier revealed that a 72-year-old villager had received 77 days of work in 2011-12. But the old man said he had not gone for work in the last one and a half year. When confronted by Governance Now with official documents, he said he didn’t know how his
There was another entry against a person whose family couldn’t be found in the village at the time but the villagers said he was a 10-year-old boy. He was shown to have got 100 days of work in the same year.

In fact, it was these findings and the official document that forced the self-indicting disclosures from the sarpanch and GRS.

A few more examples are in order, which show how the scheme is working at the ground level.

In Gopa Palli village of Bandhaguda panchayat, villagers assembled for the October 2 palli sabha said that there had been no MNREGS works for the second year in running. This was in response to a question. There was no fresh demand, only indifference. The panchayat officials said a pond was to be renovated (dug dipper and cleared of muck) this year but since it didn’t dry up, it wasn’t taken up. Then the mandatory period of stoppage of work (because of rains) set in – from June 15 to October 15.

Similarly, in Subaliaiappalli village in Dhanantara panchayat, no work was taken up after 2010-11 because there was simply no proposal. One proposal was made in February 2012 but it was rejected by the officials because it was too late in the day and the panchayat elections were due (held in February-March). In the previous two years, two projects had been taken up. A 12ft wide and 400m long road was laid over two years at a cost of ₹5 lakh. It has now reduced to a 2-3 ft wide ‘pagdandi’. A pond was also renovated and now holds sufficient water.

In Dhavalapur panchayat, there are 559 job card holders and yet there is no proposal for work even after the gram sabha meeting of October 17-18. A panchayat official said a lot of work needed to be done in the area, but there was little demand.

Low demand is reflected in the fact that of 4.4 lakh job card holders in the district, only 1.03 lakh have demanded and got the job this year, as on October 5.

It is also reflected in the panchayati raj (that runs MNREGS in the state) department’s letter of September 17 to all district project directors expressing concern that the “demand for employment and expenditure are not up to the (proposed) work”.

Low demand is primarily because of a tradition of migration for work. Most of the able-bodied individuals work in Surat, Mumbai, Bhubaneswar and elsewhere, where they get better wages – ₹150 to 250 a day. They find regular work in textile, embroidery and diamond cutting units. Or at construction site.

Historically speaking, the origin of the phenomenon (in this southern and western part of Odisha) is traced to the devastating famine of 1866 – known to Odias as the ‘na anka durvikhya’ that wiped out a million lives, almost one-third of the state’s population at the time, and sparked a massive migration that has endured. Besides, farming is largely rain-fed. Land holdings are low, most of the people being small and marginal farmers or landless. All these factors add to the pressure to look for job elsewhere.

There are no official statistics but the collector, Dr Krishan Kumar, says anywhere between 2 lakh and 3 lakh people (of 37 lakh in the district) move out in search of work. He concedes that MNREGS has not made substantial impact on migration, though the agriculture wage has tripled in a matter of a few years – from about ₹50-60 in 2009 to ₹150 now.
The collector says the last financial year was particularly bad for the district because of a CBI inquiry. The apex court had ordered it following a petition by an NGO which alleged massive embezzlement of funds in the infamous KBK region (Kalahandi, Koraput and Balangir districts that now have been divided into eight). Though Ganjam didn’t figure, “there was a general decline in the MNREGS works in the state and Ganjam mirrored that”.

Besides, the panchayat elections were due in February 2012 and in this politically sensitive district (home to the chief minister, revenue minister and several MPs) both the sarpanchs and BDOS backed out. They were reluctant to take up new projects. Thus, as against a total expenditure of around ₹90 crore in 2007-8 (at its peak), only ₹55 crore were spent in 2011-12. He says things are looking up with ₹50.09 crore already spent until October 2012.

Costly land and insufficient government land are the other issues he listed to account for less work.

Infusing new life

The panchayati raj department is trying to stem the rot through a slew of new initiatives. The first is to energise the panchayats and get the villagers to do their planning. For this, for the first time anywhere in the country, a state-wide campaign was launched to hold panchayat and gram sabha to prepare a five-year perspective plan and an annual action plan between October 2 and 18. The officials expect to complete the rest of the formalities (gram sabha’s proposal will be cleared by panchayat samiti and then the zila parishad) and issue the entire year’s work orders on April 1.

New panchayati raj secretary Aparajita Sarangi has taken several other measures too. She has made it almost impossible to take up road connectivity projects that cause much of the wasteful expenditure. She told Governance Now: “We received a lot of complaints that machines are being used for road constructions. There is possibility of siphoning off funds in this. Besides, durable roads can be made under other schemes. Somewhere down the line, mud roads are a waste of money.” Durable roads with a higher material component can be built under the cement-concrete road and gram panchayat road schemes of the state, MPLAD, MLALAD, BRGF (backward region grant fund), PMGSY, Integrated Action Plan for Maoist-hit districts etc.

A mud road can still be built but only with a district collector’s special permission.

Digging up and renovation of ponds, the other major cause of wasteful expenditure, haven’t been stopped though. She explained that the state was focusing more on “mo pokhari” (‘my pond’) – a state government scheme started in 2009 that promotes integrated development by providing additional fund and resources for pisciculture in those ponds and plantation of fruit trees on the banks. Under this scheme, a grant of up to ₹2 lakh is provided to an individual. All small and marginal farmers are eligible for the grant.

Incidentally, renovation of ponds accounts for a maximum of ₹22.6 crore of ₹50 crore spent on MNREGS this year in the district. Water conservation/harvesting and rural connectivity come second and third with ₹11.75 crore and ₹9.5 crore of expenditure respectively.

Another significant initiative is to identify “potential pockets” where MNREGS works could be taken up on a massive scale. The criteria for identifying such panchayats are: poverty, SC/ST population, non-availability of works, less payment of wages, non-industrial area, non-irrigated area and away from urban area. These have been spelt out in her directive to the districts. So far, 3,500 gram panchayats, out of a total 6,236 in the state, have been identified for the purpose.

As for Sheragada block, the BDO, Manoj Swain, has identified 14 of 22 panchayats as potential ones in which he says, maximum importance will be given to soil and water conservation, water harvesting and individual projects. Besides, at least two community projects would be taken up every year in every village.

Sheragada seems to have taken to building check dams in a big way. There is one to be found anywhere there is a stream or water flow. Such is the administration’s zeal that in Krushna Sahi panchayat, for example, the gram sabha had proposed four mud roads and renovation of four ponds for this financial year but five check dams were built instead (roads are out in any case). Pond renovation is quite common too. Emphasis on water harvesting is quite keeping with the need of this rain-fed area.

Interestingly, Sheragada is the first block to take up e-muster rolls and e-payment (through electronic fund management system), which started last year to prevent leakages and ensure timely payment. The BDO says the block is the first one in the country to do so. But the problem remains. The BDO says that is because there were some glitches with the SBI’s business correspondent model, called Zero Mass, which held up payments. Now the state has banned Zero Mass and the SBI has been directed to transfer the money directly to the beneficiaries’ accounts. When MNREGS work resumes, after the annual break for rains, he assures, payment will be quick. He also says that following the example of Sheragada, the entire state will be following e-muster and e-payment from now onwards. That surely will be good news for those who would like to stay put and work in their villages but don’t because of delayed payment and other issues. “MNREGS can provide work only for 100 days. Thereafter what will we do?” That question remains unanswered for now.

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There is no flat, dreary government school building in Puruna Pitala village in Sheragada block of Odisha's Ganjam district. Actually, there is. Only it is locked and hidden from view off the road by the new, two-storey building of sober beige with maroon highlights. Old colours, but new trimmings.

The old building stands locked, perfectly fine from the outside if not for its dowdy structure. But then, someone from the village education committee, the monitoring body for functioning of the school, says the building is condemned. Let us, then, change that opening line to ‘There will be no flat, dreary school building…. It is so decreed’.

But by what logic?

If one puts two and two together, one is bound to smell fish. Ashwini Kumar Mishra, the district project coordinator for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), says education funds barely go unspent. But at the local level, the village education committees (the citizens’ body overseeing education in government schools at the village level) allege that bills for construction work are pending for many schools — and some dating back from 2006.

One member, not willing to be named, says some engineers in charge of clearing these bills demand a cut. Denied, they delay clearances that lead to the pendency.

Shaking off the scepticism, I enter the new Puruna Pitala primary school. At the entrance, painted on the wall, is a number: 1800 3456 722. “School Student Helpline”, the sign says.

The state government has installed a helpline for students but one wonders if it serves as anything more than a gimmick. I ask one of the oldest students playing nearby, a girl of about 10 years, if she knows what it is for. She looks lost and stares at her feet.

Basantilata Sahoo, the headmistress (in-charge) and one of the two teachers for the school’s 58 students from classes I to V, replies on her behalf, saying that students...
can call on the number if they find any deficiencies in their learning experience. Asked about the old building, she says it is being used as a mess hall for midday meals for students.

Manoranjan Panda, a member of the village education committee, who accompanied me to the school, says though the new building has been equipped with a fan and a tube light in each of the two classrooms, ironically the building has no connection to the grid. “The light and fan are just fixtures,” he says.

Education left rudderless, a victim of ‘norms’

The conversation then steers to the problems the teaching staff face. “According to SSA, the teacher to student ratio is 1:40. The Right to Education (RTE) Act has revised it to 1:30,” Sahoo says. “In a school like ours, the norms just increase the workload for the teachers. If I were teaching just one class, teaching 30 or 40 students would not have been a problem. But we fit in the fifth and fourth standards in one room and the first, second and third in the other.

“I have to alternate between two classes all the time — while I teach one, students in the other are given some tasks to complete.”

On days one of the teachers has to take a leave, the other has to manage all five classes, she adds.

“We could have more children in the classes we run to bring up the strength to a number where more teachers would need to be appointed. But we are losing out to private schools and the Saraswati Shishu Mandirs that are coming up everywhere,” Panda adds as an afterthought.

It is not just in Puruna Pitala that education has been left so rudderless. Almost all of Sheragada faces the same challenge. Of the 137 primary and upper primary schools and the four high schools with classes VI to X, only 12 have a permanent appointee at the head teaching and administrative posts. The rest make do with ‘in-charges’.

Norms seem to be the spanner in the works here, too. The post of headmaster/headmistress is open to only teachers who hold a graduation degree in education, a B.Ed. But most are like the one in Purana Pitala — Sahoo is not even a graduate; she holds an intermediate degree. So the norms rule out the appointment of these teachers as the school head while they are forced to serve as in-charges for long periods.

Sahoo has been an in-charge, a post supposed to be temporary, for the last two years.

A visit to the block resource centre (the block-level monitoring office for SSA) fails to clear much of the confusion regarding expenditure patterns, especially expenditure on school infrastructure. Officials say new buildings are being commissioned in instances where safety inspections found the old buildings “dilapidated”.

The concern isn’t frivolous — five children, all below six years, died when a wall collapsed on them at an anganwadi centre in Suansia village of Nayagarh district in July. The state government could be serious in its efforts to pre-empt a repeat. But in the process is it not, as is evident from the Puruna Pitala case, throwing out the baby along with the bathwater? ■

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“I have to alternate between two classes all the time — while I teach one, students in the other are given some tasks to complete.”

Basantilata Sahoo
Headmistress of Puruna Pitala primary school
On October 18, the scheduled gram sabha meeting at Dhavalapur panchyat in Sheragada block of Ganjam district began about three hours late because most villagers were busy getting their Aadhaar cards made at a local school. The sarpanch, Sunita Swain, was home, waiting for her husband, the ‘sarpanch pati’ Ramesh Swain (found loitering around everywhere except the gram sabha venue).

But Swain wouldn’t leave home without her husband leading her. “That is the custom”, the villagers explained, and her ‘ghunghat’ made an affirmative nod.

The late start offered us an opportunity to talk to the panchayat functionaries and examine their record on the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY).

Prepared last in 2005, the IAY waiting list was meant for five years — that is, with a 2010 update deadline, which wasn’t done. The list had two segments: one for the general category below poverty line (BPL) families and the other for scheduled caste/scheduled tribe (SCs/STs) among BPL families.

The list had 358 names in the general category, of whom 33 were found ineligible because they had pucca houses. This came to light during a recent survey in the block, though the findings are yet to be compiled. No one, though, seemingly knew whether these houses existed at the time of preparing the list or were built later. Twenty-nine of these families had already received money, while the remaining 296 still await their turn.

This means the last man in the list would have to wait for 60 years to get the fund. Here is how: Dhavalapur panchayat has about 800 households, and its annual share of IAY beneficiaries is eight: five for general category and three for SCs/STs. (Odisha’s share of annual IAY beneficiaries is 1.5 lakh, which gets divided by districts, blocks and panchayats. Thus, this panchayat’s share came to eight. The beneficiaries are entitled to get ₹48,500 in eight gram panchayats of this district, including Dhavalapur, because these are declared Maoist-hit. Normal areas get ₹45,000).

At this rate, Dhavalapur’s list will get exhausted in 60 years (296/5). The other category, for SCs/STs, had its own tale to tell. The list had 192 names,
A house in six decades?

- Of nearly 800 households in Dhavalapur panchayat, Indira Awaas Yojana beneficiaries' waiting list has 358 names in general category, of whom 33 were found ineligible because they had "pucca houses".
- Twenty-nine of these families have received money, while the remaining 296 still await their turn.
- Now, Dhavalapur's annual share of Indira Awaas Yojana beneficiaries is eight: five for general category and three for SCs/STs. (Odisha's share of annual IAY beneficiaries is 1.5 lakh, which gets divided by districts, blocks and panchayats. Thus, this panchayat's share came to 8.)
- At this rate, the last Dhavalapur man in the list would have to wait 60 years to lay his hands on the fund (296/5).

and exactly 100 of them had been found to own pucca houses (again, no idea when they were built) and hence marked ineligible. The remaining 92 had received their money.

This meant that all eligible SC/ST families had received IAY assistance. But this also meant that Dhavalapur's SCs/STs quota of three had been reverted to the block, as these can't be passed on to the general category claimants.

The BDO, Manoj Swain, said that of 255 allotted to SCs/STs in the block he had reverted 171 to the district.

Decades before money reaches?

It turned out that 50 more villagers had made fresh claims for IAY at the previous day's gram sabha (the event was spread over two days this time), and would be added to the list soon. All 50 were unverified claims.

 Asked why so, the official concerned, gram panchayat extension officer (GPEO) Bhagwan Behera, said: “Who will verify (the claimants)? We have orders only to hold palli sabha and gram sabha (meetings).” The seeds of the mistakes committed in the 2005 list have, thus, been planted.

In neighbouring Krushna Sahi panchayat, all SC/ST beneficiaries have received money but the general category list still had 80 claimants awaiting their turn. Since this panchayat's annual quota for the general category is two (both for SCs/STs, which were returned), the last person will have to wait for 40 years.

At the October 18 gram sabha, 200 more people staked and listed their claims. Assuming that their claims are genuine, the waiting period will spread to 140 years if all of them belong to the general category.

It was this long waiting period that caused anxious moments at Sagar Palli village's palli sabha in Takarada panchayat on October 2. The BDO was heckled and forced to explain how priorities of selecting the beneficiaries had been fixed: top priority was being given (in existing list) to those with 'zero' score in the 2002 BPL survey by the state, based on a 13-point criteria, to exclude those with a house, agriculture land, motorised vehicle, TV etc. (Incidentally, this list was rejected by the centre for showing an unreasonably high number of BPL families and, hence, the state's BPL list continues to be that of 1997 — a vintage list, indeed.)

Next in order or priority were those who figured in the 1997 BPL list, followed by people who scored 'one' in the 2002 survey.

Those who had completed 100 days of MNREGS work were the last in priority. (Fresh claimants will be listed thereafter. Incidentally, since no gram sabha was held all these years, no names had been added to the list earlier. A regular gram sabha was held and fresh claims were listed for the first time this year, pending final approval from the higher-ups though.)

At the block level, the BDO said, a quota of 438 was fixed for IAY beneficiaries for 2012-13. Of these, 267 eligible families (including general and SCs/STs) had already been issued work orders, enabling them to start construction of houses with the funds, linked to stages of construction, to be released in phases. The remaining 171 among SC/ST beneficiaries had been reverted to the district.

Since the findings of a house-to-house survey the BDO had ordered on his own have not been compiled, the total number of people in the waiting list, or those ineligible as per the list, are not known. No such record exists at the district level either.

Additionally, this block is providing IAY house to the Forest Rights Act (FRA) beneficiaries, too, for the first time this year. Statistically, there are 189 FRA beneficiaries, of which 151 have already got IAY money. Ten of them have pucca houses and are ineligible, while eight have been given work orders and four have two claims each at two different places. The remaining 16 claims would be settled through the gram sabha.

The unique setting of houses

Interestingly, the block sets aside 5 percent quota for fire victims. The BDO explained that fire causes extensive damages in this part of the state due to a unique arrangement and design of houses. The houses share common walls (of rooms, not boundary walls that don't exist) and are arranged in a row without a break until the last one in the row. So once fire catches one house it spreads quickly to the others.

That is why a fire station is being built in the block, which is unique and unheard of for a rural setting.

This district and the neighbouring Gajapati, which also borders Andhra Pradesh, have very distinctly designed houses. Most of them are between 5-6 feet or 12-14 feet in width, and 30-40 feet or more in length. This means rooms are built one after the other in a straight line.

When siblings divide property, they divide the house in the middle by raising a wall. This reduces the width of the rooms. No house is further divided once the width is reduced to 5-6 feet.

The houses in a row may number 10, 20 or 30.

The rationale of this arrangement was explained by A Tripati Balaji Patra, an entrepreneur and civil society activist from neighbouring Hinjlicut, as he took me around his house. First, he said, neighbours build houses around common walls (of rooms in a straight line) to prevent thieves from digging holes from a side wall, called 'sindhi' in Odisha, which was earlier a common threat to all mud houses. Mud houses may have
disappeared but the practice continues. People in this part of the state are known for their excessive fondness for and hoarding gold, and hence the threat. A common wall reduces the threat, unless the house is the last one in the row, and makes it easier for neighbours to detect any disturbance, should an attempt be made to dig a hole.

Second, Patra explained, it is economical since a common wall for all rooms reduces the cost, and third, when siblings separate they raise a wall across the house (all rooms), thereby reducing the width.

The distinctive nature of houses isn’t the only thing. Notice Patra’s name – A Tripati Balaji Patra – a unique mix of Telugu and Odia tradition of naming.

**Benefits reaching, problems abound still**

As for the benefits of IAY reaching people, visits to villages show that people are actually getting benefit in large numbers. Any village in the block will show up more than one such houses.

In Subaliapalli village under Khirida panchayat, for example, there were at least five houses built under the scheme on either side of the main road. There are several others on the northern end of the village — all built over the years.

In Takarada village, Bhika Das got work orders for ₹45,000 in 2010 and spent about ₹10,000 more from his pocket to build a small house. Though Takarada is supposed to have exhausted the list, villagers said three or four persons staked their claims at the recent pali saha.

Problems, though are aplenty still, besides the long waiting list. It is also about bogus entries andineligiblescornering the benefits. As lists of Dhavalapur and other panchayats showed, a very large number of people with pucca houses got in, which were detected during a house-to-house survey. An obvious flaw in the survey is that no one knows quite how many of them had pucca houses when they got IAY funding.

According to panchayati raj secretary Aparajita Sarangi, “gut feeling” tells her that 2 to 5 percent in the list could be bogus. Going by experience, bogus entries could be much higher. Since the recent gram saha listed names without verification, the threat continues.

Sarangi, whose department manages the IAY scheme, was however alive to the possibility and had asked officials to put the list in public domain and invite objections to “weed out” those ineligible.

Collector Dr Krishan Kumar, meanwhile, had a different take on the issue. He said the solution lies in fixing a clear responsibility, which is not possible in the present arrangement. Who would you hold accountable for an ineligible person getting IAY benefit when a collector, a BDO, the panchayat and its functionaries at various levels, separately or together, can decide who gets the IAY benefit, he asked. They become a party to the dispute and will more likely to cover up the lapses, he said.

Fixing responsibility, Kumar said, will require empowering the panchayats first by giving them functions, functionaries and funds, as envisaged in the 73rd amendment, so that a sarpanch gets complete control over administration of all schemes in his/her areas and the funds. A gram panchayat can then demand accountability from the sarpanch, and the higher-ups can act as both supervisors and arbitrators, he said.

But this handing over of the panchayat’s powers that the law envisages can’t be done by the bureaucrats. It has to be done by the political establishment, the collector said, rightly.

And thereby hangs the tale.
Changing the nature of MNREGS

Converging natural resource management with the rural employment guarantee scheme is reaping rich dividends in remote Kandhamal.

Sarthak Ray
Kandhamal, Odisha

For innovation in the Mahatma Gandhi national rural employment guarantee scheme (MNREGS) that has paid off big, one needs to look at Kandhamal.

The hill-locked district in western Odisha may seem the unlikeliest place for such success, though. For a start, it is one of the most backward regions in India’s poorest state. Throw in the terrain — most of the district is spread on the undulating Eastern Ghats — and the communally divided population of tribal folk and scheduled caste Christians, and cohesive development work becomes an administrative nightmare.

Worse still, it happens to be a part of the ‘Red Corridor’, where the writ of Maoists often supersedes that of the state.

But it is here that one sees the best intent of the community-assets clause of MNREGS guidelines materialise in real terms; so much so that it has become the new paradigm for rural development here.

In 2009, the district administration, partnering with five NGOs, started an integration of natural resource management with MNREGS. The project envisioned bolstering agriculture as livelihood in villages by harnessing natural resources of the region like rainfall, soil and natural springs. This harnessing was to be done by the villagers under MNREGS work orders.

The work has created community assets like earthen dams, ponds, stream linkages, farms and wells — all resources that have helped agriculture diversify and thrive ever since.

Governance Now found resounding evidence of the success by the road to Nadapatanga, a small village in Baliguda block. The winter here is tinged with the yellow — a dull one of ripening paddy and a bright one in patches where mustard is in bloom. It is hard to believe that these fields were once pastoral, low-productivity land earmarked for grazing livestock for most of the year (except for the kharif season).

Chaman Dandiya, a 50-year-old fledgling farmer, says, “Barsare paani bali dhoi aanu thila pahadaru. Sabu khetare bali chari jauthila. Miccha kahibini aagyan, abika dhana fasala bhala hauchi (The rains would bring washed-away sand from the hills and deposit it on our fields. Now, I swear, the harvest is much better.)”

It is intriguing. Chaman had, a few minutes before that, seemed all set to tear into MNREGS implementation with complaints of payment hassles but was now placated by his own afterthought.

Trenches the fodder, how green is the valley!

The fields carpet most of the slope at the base of the hill on which Nadapatanga nestles, even patches along the cobbled exit from the tarred road that leads to the village. Most of these were created under MNREGS again as land-leveling projects. Villagers cleared the patches of forest and took to tilling the land. A few hundred metres ride from the village up the road, there is an abrupt break in views as the fields and the forest seem to merge in a flux.

I am on a motorbike with Sanjay Swain, who works with Pradan, one of the NGOs involved in the project. We stop by a clearing. From here, we have to walk down a trail to see the fount of Nadapatanga’s new-found prosperity, I am told.

Trenches dug by the field are tell-tale signs of the project. Around 100 metres from the road, Nadapatanga villagers have dug an earthen dam on the hill to make a reservoir that harvests all rainwater flowing down two rain-fed streams. The trenches one saw before are the drainage that leads to the fields down the slope. A little money and labour, brought together by MNREGS, has helped set up an indigenous irrigation system!

Though the dam is dry in the winter, it isn’t hard to imagine how the controlled release of water must have helped the crops grow.

We are headed back to Nadapatanga when Sanjay offers to show some fields irrigated by water harvested from a perennial stream, using the same natural resource management technology. We stop by a field where a woman is bent over the last of her harvest — the family’s first paddy crop this year but she is planning to sow daal or a vegetable for the rabi season, she adds.

This, in fact, is a place where despite abundant rainfall every monsoon, the land used to be parched rest of the year. Not because there were no other sources
of water but because the people had little wherewithal to tap it. The resident communities thus thought little of agriculture as livelihood and, instead, depended on forest produce.

**How the fortunes changed**

Abi Dandiya, father of gram rozgar sahayak Bansidhar Dandiya, says his fortunes have changed. Abi, who is growing chilli this season, enthusiastically shows the patch where the plants are heavy with the crop, a scarlet ripening. The field is broken up into small patches where one may grow one or many crops simultaneously. Each patch, curiously, has a small pit in one of its corners. “We use rainwater that collects in these ditches to irrigate our crop,” Abi explains.

That’s fine for the monsoons but what happens afterward? “The rest of the year we use ditches as a compost pit (for farm waste). There’s a stream on that side; we use its water,” he replies, pointing towards the other end of his field.

The ditches were dug, and his field levelled, under an MNREGS work order. Enthused by the first successes with agriculture, Abi has taken to it with a certain level of fervour. He now sees it as something that could become his family’s mainstay. In fact, he has taken it a few steps further: with a grant received under Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, Abi has put up a vermin-compost shed.

Whatever he can use, he will; he plans to sell the rest to neighbours, who have also taken up agriculture.

With funding from the state horticulture department, Abi has also put up a nursery for vegetable saplings. “I will use the saplings for my own field and will consider selling later,” he replies when asked whether it is another venture with business in mind.

Abi says he made a handsome profit selling brinjals and peas recently. So his decision to see whether he can replicate it with other crops seems understandable. It is clear that Abi is channelling the entrepreneur in him these days. Realising that dry red chillies sell at a better price than green chillies due to the vast difference in their shelf-lives, he has
added value to his crop this time — he is drying them!
And he credits MNREGS for his fast-evolving role.

**MNREGS: offering a gateway to holistic development**

But it is not that the benefits of new MNREGS implementation in the district are contained to Abi and others who, like him, were in the path of direct gain. It is spilling over to the likes of Sugena Mallik, who has been working as a farmhand on Abi’s field for the last few cropping seasons. With very little land of his own, he needs the employment. His friend requested his services when he found he couldn’t manage the farm by himself.

Now, with year-round cropping on the farm, Sugena knows there wouldn’t be many lean days. “Bhai pakahare chasa kaama acchi ta mate paisa miliba (as long as my brother [friend] has work at his farm I’m assured of an income),” he says.

A few furlongs from the mouth of the cobbled path to the village lies a huge mango plantation on fields owned by different families. The land was levelled, the pits dug, sapling planted and bamboo guards were set up around each sapling. This, too, was part of MNREGS work order for Nadapatanga. It is an overwhelming realisation that all this is pretty new to the people here, and yet they see the full promise of it.

The new, innovative MNREGS implementation props the promise offered to Kandhamal. It offers a gateway to holistic development. Rules were tweaked, yes, to arrive at the present avatar — the district administration did away with work orders for individual projects, replacing it with work orders for entire panchayats — but the risks paid off. The effect has been encouraging — Nadapatanga has received ₹34 lakh under MNREGS for a period of four years, which will see extensive convergence with natural resource management in the region.

However, it is not that this has come off unstuck. Annapurna Patra may be 62 years old but she’s still got the spunk of a younger person. “The projects are helping us. We used to just make roads (under MNREGS) but the payments are not cleared on time. How long can we work without pay?” she asks.

Bansidhar, who has been listening, says the villagers had complained to assistant engineer (in-charge of planning projects and deducting outlay) and were told that the pending amounts will be cleared once the next work cycle starts. But for the villagers it means further delay, as the harvest season is on and it is a period of intense work from reaping to threshing paddy.

There are leadership issues as well. The project is run aground every time a dedicated official is transferred, be it at the block or at the district level. In fact, the engineer who had assured Nadapatanga was transferred and it interfered with payment schedule, Bansidhar says.

“MNREGS here sails in fits and bursts but whenever it does, it goes a long distance in benefitting people,” says a keen watcher of the project unwilling to be named.

Whatever the din about MNREGS elsewhere may be, Nadapatanga and other villages in Kandhamal can’t help but acknowledge the extent to which it has changed their lives for the better. Some, like Chaman, may offer it grudgingly, thanks to the many issues that need working out, but they will never diss it.

*Sarthak has been stationed in Kandhamal, Odisha for six months under a project Governance Now is running with Affiliated Network for Social Accountability – South Asia Region (ANSA-SAR). Follow details at governancenow.com/media-accountability. Read other reports on pages 06, 10, 89*
A bitter pill to swallow

An irregular attendance of doctors, delayed supply of alternative medicines, and grossly inadequate pay for work at ground-level are some of the ills that afflict Sheragada

On a balmy winter morning, the primary health centre at Dengapadar village in Sheragada block of Ganjam district in Odisha was missing its doctors – the medical officer (an allopathic doctor), and the other (a homeopathic doctor) stationed as part of the ayurvedic, yoga, unani, siddha and homeopathy (AYUSH) programme under the national rural health mission (NRHM).

The only person in attendance claimed to be the compounder and told Governance Now that the pharmacist, who was also absent, had gone “somewhere nearby on some work”.

In a nutshell, then, here was a primary health centre (PHC) – one of the four in the block and the penultimate point for delivery of healthcare by the government in rural areas – left unmanned.

Though the ‘compounder’ at Dengapadar insisted that the doctors are fairly regular (visiting “three or four days a week”) at the PHC, locals said they would consider themselves fortunate if the case was so. A villager, insisting on anonymity, said, “They are always in Berhampur (a city nearly 40 kilometres away) – either on official work or for personal reasons. It’s not that they don’t come at all, but the sick can’t wait for the doctor to arrive at his convenience, can they?”

If this seems tragic, the case of the Solasola homeopathic dispensary seems a rung worse. When Governance Now visited the dispensary, a frail, old man at the doctor’s desk was giving a young patient some medicines and instructions on the dosage. The man turned out to be the caretaker at the dispensary and was handing out medicines in the doctor’s absence. Asked why he was giving the medicines, Sukhadeva (the elderly caretaker) said it was a normal practice there.

In the doctor’s absence, he was supposed to give medicines to those who sought out the dispensary. He wouldn’t, however, say who had authorised him to do it.

If this is anything to go by, Sheragada’s health is far from being in the pink. Irregular attendance of doctors (in cases of Dengapadar and Solasola) and other issues are crippling rural healthcare in this block of 22 panchayats.

The dilemma over human resource

At the PHC in Pitala village, the doctors (an allopathic medical officer and a homeopathic AYUSH doctor) see as many as 40 patients a day. They are fairly regular in attendance.

Arun Tripathy, a Pitala resident, said, “The lady who serves as the medical officer used to stay here before and was on call more or less 24 hours a day. But she has had to shift out a couple of months ago due to personal reasons. Nevertheless, she is at the PHC by 10 every morning and sees patients well into the evening.

“When she is not around, the AYUSH doctor fills in.”

However, Dr Epili Jagannath, the young...
homeopath at the PHC, feels grounded at
times by a lack of clarity in the guide-
lines. “The rules aren’t very clear on
AYUSH doctors handling emergencies. At
the moment, I do take emergency calls at
the PHC-level if the medical officer is not
available but I have to often refer these
to allopathic doctors elsewhere. I am not
qualified to prescribe allopathic medi-
cines but have to handle the first line of
treatment.”

Expected to supervise the routine field
activities of a primary health centre –
including immunisation programmes,
supervision of the activities of auxiliary
nurse midwives (ANMs), accredited
social health activists (ASHAs) – under
NRHM and the anganwadi workers
(AWWs) and the planning and execution
of NRHM programmes such as school
health camps, village health and nutri-
tion days, the likes of Jagannath said
they are overworked and underpaid.
With the monthly salary at the base
level at ₹12,000 (there is a provision for
additional performance incentives but it
is never paid regularly, most AYUSH do-
tors say), it is only natural that the best
talent the programme gets is often lost to
opportunities elsewhere.

“We are all contractual employees.
There is no move by the government to
make us permanent so far. So, with low
growth prospects it is only natural that
most of us look outside for jobs, some
even in non-medical fields,” Jagannath
admitted.

There also seems to be no considered
approach to rural healthcare in Sher-
agada. A blind following of the directives
without contextualising them to field
realities makes NRHM implementation
here seems more like a compulsion than
realisation of government policy. An
illustration: AYUSH doctors and ANMs
were given a 21-day skilled attendance
at birth (SAB) training at Hinjlicut a few
months ago. Ever since, they have been
waiting for medical kits required to assist
in such procedures. “It’s not just the kit.

Auxiliary nurse midwife Sarita Panda of Pitala PHC giving an expectant mother a tetanus shot. Panda says tracking expecting mothers and mothers of newborns for vaccination is a difficult task.

66 Ours is a demanding job. Each one of us is put in charge of a 1,000-strong population. Now, the health needs of all vary widely. We have no fixed salary though there are target-based incentives and fixed allowances.

At the end of the month, having spent considerable time and energy, going door-to-door on foot, canvassing for everything from JSSY to educating people about malaria and tuberculosis symptoms and their prevention, to conducting health camps for school children, we get a sum that is paltry considering all the efforts we put in. Sometimes, even this sum is also delayed.”

Rita Kumari Mishra, ASHA for Chasapitala village, with population of 810

We can’t go ahead and help with a procedure unless we have permission letter or a guideline allowing us to do so. So, the government may have spent money on the training but we can’t use it,” said an AYUSH professional on condition of anonymity.

Good plans gone off course
In fact, some of the best-laid plans of the
government in rural healthcare seem to
have gone off course here, if not entirely
awry.

Take the Janani Shishu Suraksha Yojana (JSSY) for example, which consolidates
healthcare of pregnant and lactating women and newborns. From vaccination (infants) to diet advice (for pregnant and nursing mothers), and from weight and blood pressure monitoring (antenatal, or before birth) to free provision of essential vitamins and iron (for expecting mothers to check anaemia), JSSY seems to have envisioned care at each step.

There is provision even for women below poverty line (BPL) and those above poverty line (APL) to receive a small grant from the government for institutional delivery. But on field things run far from smooth. The auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) at Pitala PHC, Sarita Panda said, “It is difficult to keep track of pregnant women from one PHC or anganwadi centre as the custom here is that women leave for their parents’ home late in the second trimester or third trimester of the pregnancy. We have a mother-tracking register with almost each detail of the beneficiary which is also stored online. Using a unique ID, a text message is sent to the expecting woman on a mobile number, informing her of the next dates of immunisation or regular check up.

“However, it is all undermined at the last mile because the SMS is in English.”

Dr Epili Jagannath, the young homeopath at the PHC, feels grounded at times by a lack of clarity in the guidelines: “The rules aren’t very clear on AYUSH doctors handling emergencies. At the moment, I do take emergency calls at the PHC-level if the medical officer is not available but I have to often refer these to allopathic doctors elsewhere. I am not qualified to prescribe allopathic medicines but have to handle the first line of treatment.”

But unable to read the text, over 50 percent women drop out of the free healthcare scheme, Panda said. “In most cases, they come back after a dosage or scheduled check-up has lapsed.”

Panda admitted that physically tracking each beneficiary is almost impossible. “ASHAs have to be informed of the woman’s movement. Sometimes, it is difficult to arrange for such coordination if she leaves for a long time, or goes to a distant village. Even otherwise, the woman has to let us know when and where she will be leaving for in the first place. Most don’t despite the awareness drives,” she rued.

**Missing medicines**

One of the most damning lapses, however, had little to do with doctors, paramedics or health workers. Sohan Pattnaik, the block programme manager for NRHM, said AYUSH doctors (ayurvedic ones in two PHCs and at the block-level community health centre and homeopaths in the two remaining PHCs) have had worst of the lot with medicine supply being beyond irregular. “The last the homeopaths received their lots of medicines was way back in December 2009. They have made many requests but the medicines haven’t come. The ayurvedic ones received a lot each only recently, may be a few months back.”

With the AYUSH programme itself nearly four years old, it is likely that some of the doctors hired under the programme have received medicines only once! “Don’t ask us how we manage,” is the cryptic answer of one of the doctors.

A health supervisor of one of the panchayats later revealed that in most of the cases, the doctors are forced to prescribe over-the-counter allopathic drugs. “It is arm-twisting, of sorts. When there are no medicines of one’s own discipline to give, what can he or she do other than choosing the alternative? After all, they can’t turn patients away or prescribe no medicines after a check-up,” he said.

Sarthak has been stationed in Sheragada, Ganjam for six months under a project Governance Now is running with Affiliated Network for Social Accountability – South Asia Region (ANSA-SAR). Follow details at governancenow.com/media-accountability.

Read other reports on pages 06, 43, 46
Puja Bhattacharjee
Reporting from
Salboni, West Medinipur,
West Bengal
A strange sensation swept over me as I got off the train at Medinipur station. Even a few years ago, I would have rebelled if my family had suggested that we go somewhere rural for a vacation — I couldn't bear to be away from the comfort of city life. I would have had nothing to do with the fabled ‘gram Bangla’ (rural Bengal).

Nothing, it seemed initially, works in West Medinipur. Dug deeper, some things do, and the others need to be discussed, talked about for them to move.

Those thoughts ricocheted inside my head, like thought bubbles crashing into one another, as I collected my luggage at Medinipur station — a district nearly 200 km from the nearest city Kolkata — and got set to work among and report from the grassroots.

That was six months ago, when I was given a posting in Salboni, a block in Bengal’s West Medinipur district. Truth be told, I was delighted and apprehensive in equal measures; I had no clue how to go about things. I was not certain how the local people would react to my presence — whether they will see me as a threat, or as hope, or a curious creature from an urban, and urbane, world, or simply ignore...
my presence.

Friends and family were particularly worried since Salboni had a history of Maoist insurgency.

**Smelling Ground Zero**

But all my apprehensions were unnecessary, I was to find out over the course of late autumn, winter and early spring. The people, as I find out after interacting with them day in and day out, were easy-going and simple — though they did initially doubt the nature of my work, they left it at that once I explained it to them.

It took me some time to gain confidence as villagers were rumoured to be the eyes and ears of Maoists, even as I worried myself sick thinking I was under watch! Officials, too, cautioned me, as some journalists had apparently been kidnapped in the past.

My first official visit in the region was to the office of the block development officer (BDO) of Salboni. The BDO was gracious throughout, providing me with information and asking officials in the block to cooperate with me. The district administration was difficult to penetrate and it wasn’t until three months before I could secure an audience with a district official who agreed to do an interview.

As I slowly started interacting with the people and the local administration, I was acutely aware that this is where everything boils down to: these are the people who, at the core of India’s governance, form the base constituency, and political negotiations go upward from here. These villagers make up 80 percent of the electorate that decides which political party, or coalition, will administer from the Writers’ Building in Kolkata.

As I started field visits, I searched for a positive story to begin my reporting from Salboni. But the more I searched, the more I was crestfallen: nothing seemed to be working there; none of the schemes were functioning properly; there was a major shortage of funds in all areas. I felt I was amid a sea of despair. I was frantically searching for answers since it was shocking to me how nothing can work at a place.

Finally I arrived at the ‘answer’.

Though the Trinamool Congress (TMC)-ushered ‘green revolution’ in the summer of 2011, the gram panchayats in Salboni are under huge pressure because they are run by the CPM. The popular perception is that the Mamata Banerjee government does not want panchayats administered by the Left to perform, and thus funds are a perennial concern.

But given the complexity of the place, the credibility of that ‘answer’ is suspect.

**‘Feeling’ Ground Zero**

MNREGS, the UPA government’s much-touted employment guarantee scheme for the rural poor, was the first scheme I began researching on. There was no MNREGS work being done in the block for five months, apparently due to the shortage of funds, and some work started right before I left.

I followed Nantu Nandi, the gram rozgar sevak of panchayat number 4, to Kotalkuli where a road was being made. The work had started from the last week of February, and 85 people have been engaged with an estimated budget of ₹2.83 lakh. Gandhi Mahato, who was working as a labourer at the site, told me he had last worked under MNREGS over a year ago. He has been a job card holder for three years now and had applied for work under four months ago.

Nandi said this was the third week of the work and payment for the first two weeks is still due. “We have sent a request for funds to the BDO in the first week of March,” he said.

“Do you really want to report what is happening here?” I was frequently asked by officials. It was saddening to see so little faith in the fourth estate but I cannot blame them. Officials were unanimous in their opinion that reporters collect facts and then manipulate them according to their convenience.

So, given this all-round opinion, it was particularly interesting when the district TMC chief conveyed his pleasure on being quoted verbatim for a story.

During the field work, I found the people mostly cooperative; everyone wanted to share their grievances with a journalist from Delhi in the hope that something will change. A lot of people began to depend on me to bring about change in their lives. And when so many people have their hopes pinned on you, it is your job to not turn a nervous wreck and try and deliver, which is what I tried to do over these months.

I found the Indira Awaas Yojna (IAY) more or less functional but funds doled out to the beneficiaries under this
scheme were insufficient. In most cases, the beneficiaries would opt for mud houses instead of brick ones, as specified in the guidelines, to meet the cost. In Nandaria, two beneficiaries who tried to do it by the rulebook ended up exhausting their funds, and with only semi-constructed brick houses.

I had forwarded their names to the district planning officer (DPLO), who had promised to help them.

Impact or not, some welcome changes

Chhobi Mahato is an accredited social health activist (ASHA) with Dakhinsol sub-centre with whom I interacted regularly. On the first day itself Mahato told me that being an ASHA brings no financial liberation. The payments, she explained, were always delayed and she was financially on the brink.

Thus, it came as little surprise to learn about the frequent protests and demonstrations by ASHAs in West Medinipur whose dues were not cleared for months on end. I had written a report on how ASHAs work at the ground level and even spoken to the district health officials about the possibility of paying them a fixed monthly remuneration. When I had met them at the time, district officials had put the onus on the state and central governments.

Early this year, it was announced that ASHAs would be given a monthly salary of ₹1,300 from April. I do not know for certain whether the change was brought about due to my reportage, and it matters little: it was heartening to learn that things had changed for the better for this set of foot soldiers at the lowest tier of governance.

“I am happy that we will get a set salary every month but I just wish they had fixed it at ₹2,000 instead of ₹1,300,” Chhobi Mahato said. “I am worried that our monthly salary will be irregular.”

When I was tracking and reporting on a mobile health camp run in the Jangalmahal areas, staff of the prime minister’s rural development fellows (PMRDF) scheme were working on the same camp would corroborate their findings with mine. As PMRDF was covering the whole district, the district planning officer felt my observation of only Salboni would help them track the NGO handling the mobile camp in the block better.

Some hindrances, some irritants..

The aim of the Governance Now-ANSA-SAR project was to make some difference, to bring about some change in the way things work. But on some occasions, the mindset of the people was a major hindrance. In Nandaria village, for instance, there was a family whose women regularly bemoaned the lack of a tubewell near their house. The mother-in-law of the household told me several times that it is tedious for her to drag vessels full of water from a well quite far.

Intending to help them, I spoke to the panchayat officials, who in turn asked me to tell the family to give the panchayat a written petition. When I relayed this to the women, I was told flat on my face that they cannot leave household work to run around. Well, they expected me to do something about the issue without them having to move an inch!

In Godapiasal, there was a young boy who suffered from congenital heart defect and his parents were knee deep in debt paying for his treatment. I spoke to friends and relatives who agreed to financially help this family. But no sooner had I promised to help that the local political leader rang me up and demanded to know who I was and why I was offering them help.

While the family had initially seemed relieved when I assured them that I will do what I can to help get the boy treated, they seemed disinterested soon as the political leader interfered. I was to learn much later that the family was made to wonder why I was keen to help them, where the money will come from, and why others (read outsiders) are willing to help them.

Later I learnt from block officials that
In our village people have a lot of problems. We do not have regular water supply and use the canal for bathing and washing. The well-to-do families in our village dump their waste in the canal where we bathe. As a result, we get infected with diseases. We do not have the option of complaining to our elected representatives as they are the ones dirtying it. I feel if the media reports our problems, then officials can take some action to address the situation. When we relay our problems to the media we hope something will change, that our voices will be heard.”

Rozina Khatun, Student and resident Sayedpur

In India, and particularly in West Bengal, most people live in rural areas. So reporting should be more from villages than big cities like Kolkata or Delhi. Media can bring about swift changes, particularly pertaining to development, and bring about awareness. While working in the rural sector you must have observed the education system; I am sure you were able to comprehend the differences in the rural and urban educational setup. Through the media, the reports will reach not only the state government but also the union government. It will help the authorities better understand the schooling atmosphere, the mentality of guardians and students. If the reports directly reach the governments then it will lead to quick action and improvement of the education system.”

Sheikh Khoiru, Headmaster, Sayedpur primary school

Media presence in villages is imperative. People are becoming more conscious. The service I give in the villages is being highlighted. Media provides clarity about the services we give and also the services provided to us, villagers, like water, roads and electricity. In villages media can be used as a tool for grievance redressal.”

Chobi Mahato, ASHA

Villagers turn to local politicians for counselling, and the latter, more often than not, mislead them.

...and some bright sparks
Rozina Khatun of Sayedpur and Sapan Singh of Gowardhi were two persons who decided to go against the flow. Rozina, 17, was not sure whether she will continue with education when I first met her. But with time, and some encouragement, she decided to finish school and I am happy to report that she has enrolled for a nurse's training course from Salboni hospital on weekends, which will enable her to get a job in the health sector.

Sapan Singh has a handicapped sister and a father who is an alcoholic. He and his brother Indrajit are thus the sole bread winners of the family. One brother has to be home at all times to control their father, who gets into brawls whenever he gets inebriated. So when Sapan got a job in the police, it was some relief for the family, who eked out a hand-to-mouth existence.

Delhi beckons
I had expected to be intimidated by the local people, who I thought would consider my presence detrimental to their interest. But everything went smoothly in the six-month period. The only time I felt uneasy was when I was researching on the public distribution system (PDS) and the dealers and officers from the food distribution office felt threatened since I was trying to delve deeper into their business. A dealer who I had caught red-handed cheating people from their ration contacted the person who took me around the block and asked him to mediate. Needless to add, it wasn’t a happy experience.

Six months seemed like a long time when I first set foot in Medinipur. But as I left, it felt too short a while. I was leaving with the faces permanently ingrained in my heart, and it saddened me a little to think that I don’t know whether I will see them again.

Being a city slicker, I was unaware of rural India. Every time some amendment to an existing law was passed, I used to think how it will affect me. The much-used, and therefore abused, the word ‘common man’ always implied me, or someone like me. I never thought beyond many immediate periphery. But post-Salboni, I now know there are people beyond the cities who need development, who need change more than I or my peers do. These are the people who wait endlessly for development even when no development is in sight. These are the people with endless patience, who lose hope only to regain it, who believe that one day they will finally get their due and things will never be the same again.

These, in sum, are the people whose issues need to be talked about — not just in stray fly-by-night essays but with a continued focus.
Salboni is one of the 29 blocks of West Midnapore district in West Bengal. It has 409 villages and 10 gram panchayats.

Salboni derives its name from the sal forests which covers much of this area. The topography is typical of the northern plains with red alluvial soil. Salboni is infamous for Maoist insurgency. There was an attempt to assassinate the then chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee in 2008. It is also the location of a plant of the Jindal South West (JSW), the single biggest investment in West Bengal till date. Since 2011, Maoist violence has subsided considerably. Tribals, Hindus and Muslims make up most of the population in the villages.

Twenty-three villages which are on the fringes of the JSW plant come under the company’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity which includes health camps, de-worming, immunisation, etc.

The Salboni block has three primary health centres (PHC) and one rural hospital. No block primary health centre, however, exists. It has 31,823 households with a population of nearly 2 lakh.

The villagers are mainly dependent on collecting sal leaves, wood and agriculture for livelihood. Ever since the steel plant construction has begun, there are a lot of expectations from the Jindal group — that the company will do something for the villages. Most villages don’t have proper toilets and the villagers defecate in the open.

This correspondent has chosen three villages for reportage. They are:

**Khoirasol village**
Located on a fringe of the JSW compound, Khoirasol is a village of only 11 households, most of which have been classified as living below the poverty line (BPL). Sanatan Tudu, from Khoirasol, says that the condition of the roads in his village is pretty bad which are at their...
worst during the monsoons. JSW has installed a tubewell which has made access to drinking water easy for the families. Previously, they had to depend on wells which dried up quickly. “Once they ran dry, we had to walk long stretches to fetch water,” Tudu says.

Employment opportunities are limited both in scope and number. Sometimes, some villagers find work as labourers in the nearby areas. Premchand Hembram, another Khoirasol resident, says that the agricultural yield (paddy is the major crop in the village) is only for subsistence, too low to even attempt selling. Both Tudu and Hembram have BPL cards enabling them to buy subsidised food grains through the public distribution system. They said that they are satisfied with the ration disbursal and have no complaints. Institutional delivery, however, is conspicuous by its near absence. The villagers have little information of government programmes like the accredited social health activist (ASHA) scheme or the janani suraksha yojana. Some of the villagers have solar panels they got a decade ago from the government, all of which are in a state of disrepair. With the roads in a pitiable condition, the only mode of transport is bicycles. There is neither a dispensary nor a health sub-centre in the village.

Left: Khoirasol village has only 11 households, most of which have been classified as living below the poverty line.

Above: Residents of Sayedpur bathe in the canal that leads to their village. Waste from the sewers of some houses also flows into the canal.

Nandaria village

Nandaria village is comparatively better off. It comprises 130 households and is under the Bakibandh panchayat. Around 70 percent of the population is literate. Agriculture and labour work are the main occupations of the people. Barrack a few, most houses have access to electricity. The relatively well off have access to toilets and drinking water. The village has a primary and higher secondary school. The midday meal scheme is functional in the primary school.

The Mahatma Gandhi national rural employment guarantee scheme (MNREGS) has been functional but not for more than a few days. None of the beneficiaries have got the guaranteed 100 days of work.

Sumitra Mahato, 65, says “My previous house was destroyed by torrential rainfall three years ago. I was promised a new house under IAY. But nothing has come of it yet.” Her son, Uttam Mahato, works as a labourer and tills the family’s land. “The yield is too less to be sold,” he says. His wife works in the primary school as a cook for the midday meal scheme and earns ₹250 per month. Both Mahato and his wife have received basic education. Mahato says on days work is available he gets ₹100 a day.

Sumitra receives a widow pension of ₹400 per month from the government. “The pension collection is not always smooth. At times, I have to make several rounds,” she says.

The Mahatos are dissatisfied with the PDS as well. “We are a family of five. We are entitled to 8.5 kg of rice. Instead, we get only 4 kg,” says Uttam. The ration does not suffice. During the agricultural season from November to April, they make do with the cultivated paddy. “It is a struggle with inadequate rations for the rest of the year,” says Sumitra.

Drinking water is a problem as well. The village well has water only during the monsoons. Every other season, the villagers who don’t have their own wells or tube wells, walk half a kilometre to get water from a tap. As Nandaria is located near the highway, commuting is not a problem and the roads are in decent shape. The monthly income of the Mahatos is around ₹1,000.

Chobi Mahato (unrelated to Sumitra’s family) is an ASHA for the villages of Nandaria, Rajbandh and Brindapur. She attends to 170 households in all. Almost all deliveries in Nandaria are institutional. Despite the service she renders, Chobi says her dues (from the institutional deliveries) have not been cleared for the past six months.

Her husband Lakhipada Mahato says that once the panchayat had told all the farmers that they will be given seeds at a subsidised rate but later backtracked saying that the seeds had rotted. According to him, the panchayat administration
is still with CPM but all the work is overseen by Trinamool workers. “It is all about favouritism. We were CPM supporters for a long time. Right now, the Trinamool supporters are reaping the benefits,” he says. “I am waiting for the panchayat elections to change camp. We have to be with the majority in order to benefit.”

Sayedpur village

The village is located on the national highway 60 and is divided into two colonies. The Muslims inhabit the larger colony which comprises 16 houses. The rest is occupied by Mudi (a scheduled tribe) households. Entering the Muslim colony, one sees a narrow canal by the path that leads to the village. Children can be seen sitting on the stone steps of the canal with fishing lines in hand. This canal is used by the villagers for bathing and washing. "We don't have a well. So we use this canal for bathing and washing. Recently, waste from the sewers of some of the affluent houses around us has started flowing into the canal," says Asma Bibi, a resident of the village.

A tap is the only source of drinking water that is available for two hours daily, in the morning and evening. This, residents say, is not adequate. In winter, when the canal dries up, the tap is the only source of water. “There are daily squabbles for water then,” says Rozina Khatun. The residents have to pay ₹30 per family for water from the tap.

Each family had paid ₹300 to the panchayat which promised to build a toilet for every house within three months. “It has been six months now. Neither have they built the toilet nor returned our money,” rues Asma Bibi. Asma is the village midwife. Her husband is a daily labourer but has stopped working recently after a tumour surfaced on his neck. She had taken her husband, Sheikh Amiruddin, to the Midnapore hospital from where he was referred to Spandan, a private clinic. “We can't afford private treatment,” says Amiruddin.

All houses have electricity but there are problems that take the sheen off the power connections. “They (the electricity distribution firm) don't send our bills for months and then suddenly one day they would ask us to make payments for six months. How can we afford that kind of money?” asks Khatun.

The people are not happy with the ration they get. “We get only rice and wheat and sometimes sugar. The rest we have to but from the market,” informs Bibi.

The village has a primary school with midday meal. The children of conservative families are sent to madrasa (Islamic schools for religious teaching). For health check-ups, immunisation and other medical facilities the people go to Hatimari sub-centre or the JSW medical centre.

Crossing the Muslim locality and entering the Mudi part of the village, the first thing one notices is a well and a tap. The part of the village is comparatively cleaner. Tuberculosis is a common disease in the village, among both the communities.

Employment is scarce, even MNREGS work is hard to come by. The villagers say that there has been no MNREGS work allotted in the past one year. The villagers show their ‘job cards’ pointing out that there has been no entry in the corresponding time period.

Most families in Sayedpur don’t have land of their own and work as daily-wage agricultural labourers. Most deliveries in Sayedpur are institutional although the village doesn’t have an ASHA. Most of the population is illiterate.

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Home truths of raising a house on govt fund

In Salboni, insufficient funds and yawning time gap between allotment of instalments hinder Indira Awas Yojana
Puja Bhattacharjee

A House for Mr Doloi but for a small anomaly. Almost everyone in Salboni block of West Medinipur district awaiting houses under the government’s Indira Awas Yojana is a Mr Doloi, and almost everyone gets a house. Or, well, almost.

But over to Mr Doloi — or Gopal Doloi of Radhakantapur village — for now. “I got Rs 35,000 in two instalments to build a house under IAY. I started construction after receiving the first instalment, but the second instalment was delayed by a year and half. So I borrowed money and finished the construction.

“I paid off the debt after receiving the second instalment later,” he says.

It took Doloi three months to build his house. “But Rs 35,000 was not enough to build a house. It cost me an additional Rs 7,000,” he adds.

While Doloi, along with several other IAY beneficiaries, took his complaint to the panchayat about the delay in getting money under the public welfare scheme, he is hardly alone. When it comes to Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), each panchayat in Salboni reaches a consensus: the fund allotted is late, and never even enough.

Block development officer of Salboni, Jayanta Biswas raises another problem: Kolkata has stopped releasing funds under IAY to the district. Why? Biswas reasons that they could not utilise the funds properly in his block. “This year, only 55 percent of funds have been utilised so far,” he says. “We give two instalments for the scheme, and since the first instalment was not properly utilised there is a delay in disbursing the second instalment.

“The state has ceased funds to the district.”

The initial puzzle: Who is a beneficiary

Like a tennis player, Subroto Doloi, secretary of gram panchayat number 8, Gormal, lob the ball to the other court. Problems in IAY arise, he says, primarily due to the way beneficiaries spend the money allocated to them. “Some people either spend it on repairing existing houses or on other requirements. But IAY guidelines clearly state that a beneficiary has to build a new house,” he says.

While the IAY guidelines say a beneficiary has to build a brick house with the funds allocated, most villagers opt for mud houses to keep cost within check, though it soars nevertheless, panchayat officials and some beneficiaries tell Governance Now.

At times, after the first instalment reaches beneficiaries, the panchayat reviews the progress and forwards the details to the BDO, who then prepares to release the second instalment, Doloi says.

But a significant problem is figuring out who a beneficiary is. Explaining the IAY beneficiary selection procedure, Subroto Doloi says the panchayat holds an annual meeting around the month of May. It is a forum where people raise their demands for houses. “The list is then compiled (based on demand). In November, the panchayat members hold a budget discussion and the final list is prepared in a gram sabha meeting by December,” Doloi says.

The complete list is then forwarded to the BDO.

The funds are transferred from the block directly to the beneficiary’s accounts to prevent misappropriation. “The beneficiary is required to have a bank account and land to build the house on,” Salboni BDO Jayanta Biswas says.

The secondary puzzle: How to dole out funds

According to Biswas, the Rural Household Survey (RHS) had earlier conducted a study to determine the prospective beneficiaries of the scheme and prepared a list in 2005. Two lists of beneficiaries were prepared according to the score generated on the basis of socioeconomic factors in that survey: P2=1 and P2=2. Those who scored below 20 in the survey were put in P2=1 list and the others in P2=2.

In Gormal panchayat, the P2=1 list has 375 names and P2=2 has around 900 names. Doloi says P2=1 is given priority.

The problem, however, was the same then as it is now: of allocation of funds. Though the survey was conducted in 2005, the funds weren’t released before 2010. “Almost 300 beneficiaries in P2=1 list have been covered (till date). Once it is exhausted, funds will be doled out for

LAL MOHAN PUJARI,
Radhakantapur Village

Says his two-storey house cost him Rs 70,000, though being physically challenged he had had to employ labourers for the construction, which led to the cost escalation. Now, his wife works as an agricultural labourer to pay off the debt, while his children work on weekends. It took a year for the second instalment to reach Pujari.

GOPAL DOLOI,
Radhakantapur Village

Says he borrowed an additional Rs 20,000 at an interest of 12 percent per annum. “We were supposed to get Rs 48,000 but got Rs 35,000 instead. I went to meet the BDO. He has assured me that the money will reach, though it will come a little late.”
PRASANTO MONDAL, Lalerdihi Village

Says he was lucky to get the second instalment after just three months. But that was not before the excruciating wait for the first instalment, which was pending for almost a decade before he could lay hands on the money. He built his house nearly three years ago, and spent a staggering Rs 1.30 lakh on it — money borrowed from relatives.

BHUISHAN RAY and RAMESH MAHATO, residents of Nandaria

They got the second instalment immediately after exhausting the first. They received Rs 40,000 in all, an amount inadequate to build a house. They had to abandon construction after spending the entire amount. Both Mahato and Ray had started building a two-room house with a porch.

P2=2,” Doloi says. The waiting list was updated in March 2011, and subsequently this August, though only two names have been added to the list so far this year. “The first instalment of funds for our panchayat was given two years ago. Some of the beneficiaries have got the second instalment around September-end this year,” Doloi says.

Bakibandh panchayat number 4, meanwhile, has 158 beneficiaries for IAY under P2=1 list, of which 151 have been covered so far. The other list, P2=2, has 313 beneficiaries. Pradhan Jaba Singh says they have no mandate to update the list. “Whenever a new demand is made, we recommend those names under other housing schemes,” she says.

Besides IAY, there are other housing schemes modelled on it — such as Gitanjali for EWS minority, Amar Bari, Amar Thikana, Nija Griha Nija Bhumi — that are sponsored by government departments such as fishery, minority and so forth.

Prasanto Mondal (left) spent nearly a decade waiting for the first instalment of his funds.

The puzzling puzzle: Who is slipping up?

But how do some people get more money than others (see box) under the same scheme and for the same purpose: to build a house? BDO Jayanta Biswas says the difference in unit cost, or the amount given to the beneficiaries, varies from time to time, and thereby leads to the apparent discrepancy in the amount actually reaching the people. “There is also a time gap between policy-making and ground-level implementation — between the time the allocation is made officially and the money actually reaching the people. This also creates a difference of margin,” he says.

From this year, he adds, beneficiaries are getting Rs 48,500 under IAY in two instalments.

According to Biswas, a big hindrance in getting money under IAY is erratic documentation. “We don’t get reports from gram panchayats on time. That holds up allocation of instalments, and the decision on the next course of action,” he says.

Asked about monitoring cells to look into these issues, he says such cells are in place but monitoring and review cannot be done properly since most officers are “too busy”. “We work with only 40 to 50 percent of staff strength,” he adds. “People responsible down the line have to be made more active. The sense of urgency has to percolate.”

But Biswas is confident that the pending work under IAY will be done by the end of the year.

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Other reports on pages 08, 16, 56
If schools show the future, it’s bleak in Salboni

Lacking adequate staff, ample funds and regular budget for midday meals, primary schools in Salboni plod on under a system that seems to be bursting at the seams.

Funds

Being a para teacher, Asim Mahato motivates people to send their children to school, among his other responsibilities. “On Fridays and Saturdays I visit families of children who are not being sent to school or are playing truant,” he says.

On a crisp winter morning, when Governance Now visits Nandaria primary school in Salboni, Mahato rings the bell signalling the start of classes. As children scuttle towards their classrooms, a look of frustration bordering on exasperation clouds Mahato’s face. “We need a railing for the porch,” he says while pointing out the school’s various requirements, as headmaster Bholanath Dule looks on. “At night, hooligans trash the porch with bottles.

“We also need a boundary wall to protect the school ground.”

Do they have the money? All schools in Salboni, Mahato explains, are entitled to an annual maintenance grant that varies between ₹5,000 and ₹10,000 depending on the number of classrooms. A teacher learning material (TLM) grant of ₹500 per teacher is also given to buy teaching materials like charts, maps and globe. But the maintenance grant is usually inadequate to meet the requirements.

Bhaktipada Mahato, headmaster of Majhipara primary school, says his school is located in the middle of a village and lack of a boundary wall encourages trespassing. “The tubewell meant for our school is used by the entire village. After mid day meals, children have to wait for long as they have to share the water with the rest of the village,” he says. “I had brought this up in a meeting. But I was told that boundary walls are a priority for schools located by the road, and that I will have to wait.”

He is still waiting.

Popped the question, Swati Mondal, sub-inspector of schools and circle project coordinator, Sadar north circle, says: “Five schools have been granted boundary wall funds in our circle. Schools on the roadside are a priority for boundary walls — once these are taken care of, we will move on to other schools.”

Some boundary walls, she says, take years to build, depending on the school’s location. “For schools situated over a large area, the grant for boundary wall is released in instalments, and they take a longer time to be constructed.”

But teachers say the maintenance grant is inadequate for work on repair and upkeep. Rita Sarkar, headmistress of Metal special primary school, says one of her school’s three classrooms is in very bad shape and needs immediate repairs but they don’t have the funds necessary.

“Water leaks from the ceiling. Block-level people (officials) and engineers came and inspected the room. They asked me not to use the classroom, as it is in need of immediate repair,” she says. “But nothing has happened since.”

Fuzzy on funds

When the audit time draws close, Sarkar says, all funds are disbursed suddenly. “Then I am told to finish the pending work at the earliest. How is that possible? I need to hold a meeting, get consensus and find repairmen,” she complains.

Swati Mondal, the sub-inspector of schools, says funds are disbursed by the Sarva Shiksha Mission office after teachers fill up the requisite dise, a form teachers have to fill up explaining how the funds were utilised the previous year. “The maintenance grant is meant for minor repairs,” Mondal says. “For major repairs, a separate requisition form has to be submitted.

“We are expecting to get major grants for repairing for the next two years soon.”

She says funds are sometimes late as utilisation certificates are submitted late by the schools, or it is found to be unsatisfactory.

“Funds are disbursed at the beginning of the financial year — around April. We get them latest by August. Sometimes they come in late due to issues with the bank,” Mondal explains.

Rules for whom?

At Metal special primary school, when we point out that some students are not in uniform, headmistress Sarkar says, “Under rules, only SC, ST, minority and general category girls are given school uniforms.”

What is left unsaid is many parents do not buy them for their children.

Under rules, teachers are also required to conduct parent-teacher meetings on a few occasions each year. “The main concern of parents (whenever such meetings are held) is the midday meal,” says Sheikh Khoiru, headmaster of Sayedpur primary school.
The rule about the parent-teacher meeting is not the topmost priority for several schools. A teacher of Bakibandh primary school (name withheld on request) says the meeting was conducted only once in the two years she has been at the institution.

“The school is required to conduct a meeting on the last Thursday of every month under the ‘mother-teachers association’. The idea is to make parents aware of the education system and involve mothers in the whole process,” Mondal says. “Parent-teacher meetings are compulsory before every evaluation. “Whenever a grant is to be released by the village education committee, parents are informed about how the grants would be utilised under the government guidelines,” she adds.

Midday meal

Problems at the kitchens and meal counters, too, begin at the drawing board of policymakers quite removed from the ground realities. The cost of midday meal is fixed at ₹3.33 per student: this is assuming that only 85 percent of the total student strength is present each day. But teachers say this calculation is somewhat flawed because more than 90 percent students attend school in certain areas.

Of 56 students in Metal primary, Sarkar says almost 50 are regularly present. “I
have brought this to the notice of both the block and sub-inspector of schools’ office. But there has been no result,” she rues.

Rice is supplied by the block office, while the school buys the rest. According to rules, egg is served once every week and fish or meat once day during the last week of the month.

“Self-help groups are in charge of the midday meal scheme,” block development officer (BDO) of Salboni Jayanta Biswas says. He then goes on to list out the long, tedious route in which money spent on the meals is reimbursed: “Self-help groups place the bills before the headmaster, who places it before the school managing committee elected by students’ parents. After the committee's secretary approves the bill, it is sent to the panchayat, who finally reimburses the bill,”

But Khoiru of Sayedpur primary says, “The reimbursements are often late by two or three months. We borrow the food items required from the shops, and repay them once we get the money.”

Biswa says the money is released to the gram panchayats much beforehand, keeping in mind the assumption that on average 85 percent of students eat the meal daily. “Panchayats are not supposed to hold back the fund,” the BDO says, and then adds as an afterthought: “(I suspect) panchayats release the funds late to reap benefit of the interest on the money.”

The block sends a list of the number of days midday meal is to be served in a month — in November, when details were last available, it was only 10 days. “We have to follow directives. They will pay us according to this calculation,” says Bhaktipada Mahato.
Ananda Hazra is the only teacher who can teach Olchiki, which means he looks after all the subjects barring English. Most children don’t understand Bengali and do not possess any skill to speak or comprehend English.

Numbers lost in policy
“The rice almost always is inadequate,” Mahato says. “How can 15 percent students be absent every day?”

Biswas says the strength of each school has to be checked to correctly determine attendance. “Our hands are tied if more than 85 percent students attend classes regularly. We have to follow directives. But in some cases it has been found that the school shows more students than there actually are,” he says.

He says the roll strength is revised twice each year. “It could be possible that new students have taken admission in between,” Biswas says. “The calculation deals with an ideal situation and is not always totally accurate.”

Teacher-in-charge Ananda Hazra says his school’s midday meal reimbursement are due since January 2012. “We are supposed to provide eggs once every week but now we are giving eggs once every two weeks,” he says.

On a recent visit to Salboni boys school, Biswas says he found that the school has stopped giving midday meals on account of the annual exams “when there was no such order”.

Dhirendra Murmu, a teacher at Baskopna primary school, points out another issue that adds to the shortfall: many students bring their siblings, who share the midday meal. “These children not only disturb the class but are also a pressure on our resources,” says Murmu. “We have complained to the parents but to no avail.”

During the midday meal, some parents also come to supervise their children. “My younger son does not want to stay at home alone. So he accompanies his elder brother sometimes,” says Pinku Ghosh.

Khoiru says 80 percent of students in his school are not interested in studies; they are keen on the midday meal. “The no-fail system is not working,” he says, an observation echoed by Sarkar. “We can’t even scold them,” she says. “They are not afraid of anything, and it is difficult to make them learn under such circumstances.”

But Sarkar denies that midday meal is the only motivation for children to attend school. “They come to school even when there is no meal,” she says.

The state of affairs can be well gauged from even a quick visit to one of the schools, with one classroom in each strewn with jute bags from which rice leaks out. And why are rice sacks stored in classrooms? Because the storerooms are infested with rats.

Medium sends a message
Natundhi primary school deals with an altogether different problem. It’s a small school with only 23 students, with Olchiki as the medium of instruction.

“The local tribal population had demanded that Olchiki be made the first language and medium of instruction at the sub-inspector (SI) office,” Ananda Hazra says. The medium of instruction in high schools being Bengali the question is, how will the children manage after primary school? “We had to start class v here due to popular demand. The pressure is now to convert this school to a high school as well,” says teacher Mrinal Barua, pointing at a two-room dilapidated building.

“It is difficult for them (students) to secure admission anywhere else. Some of the older students knew Bengali but those newly admitted speak only Olchiki,” Barua adds.

But the problem is, Hazra is the only one who can teach Olchiki, which means he looks after all the subjects barring English, which Barua takes care of. Most children don’t understand Bengali and do not possess any skills to speak or comprehend English.

How does Barua instruct them?
“Teachers are more efficient and competent and hence elected as BLO or DO or both. They can efficiently conduct surveys, data entry, enquiry .The election duty is supposed to be beyond office hours. Anganwadi workers are not so competent. A suitable alternative is yet to be found,” says Biswas.

“The BLO, DO is decided on the final consent of the district magistrate,” he adds.

Not all schools have a para teacher. Para teachers are assigned as per requirement.

“The engagements of para teachers have been stopped for now. We had assigned para teachers in schools where there was a shortage of staff. We had sent a vacancy statement to the district Sarva Shiksha office and they made the decision who to assign and where,” informs Mondal.

Puja has been stationed in Salboni, Medinipur, for three months. It is part of a project Governance Now is running with Affiliated Network for Social Accountability – South Asia Region (ANSA-SAR). Follow details at governancenow.com/media-accountability. Read other report on page 08.
Inside the small kitchen, she deftly washes the dishes, pours water in the bowl and lets it microwave for a few minutes. She adds tea leaves into the hot water and sits down to rest. Her reverie is interrupted by a phone call. She politely answers the call and hurries out with a kettle and a few glasses in hand.

Pampa Upadhyay serves tea at the JSW Steel plant site in Salboni, cycling 8 km to work every day from her home in Baskopna village.

In a state where industry has had a rough ride, first for years under the Left Front regime and subsequently the Mamata Banerjee-led drive against land acquisition for industry, with Singur and Nandigram emerging as the bywords of the anti-manufacturing drive, Upadhyay’s is a happy story. There was little, in fact no tangible opposition to JSW's project, with a development agreement inked with the West Bengal government in January 2007.

Her father-in-law sold a considerable part of the family's land to the Jindals, and in return Pampa got work as part of the company's offer for a job to one person per family of those who sold their land for the project. She took up the job since her husband was unwilling — he wanted to concentrate on agriculture and business.

Like Upadhyay, 50 others were given training for three months — from July to September this year — to be absorbed as employees. “We were taught how and when to greet people and basic discipline to be observed. They gave us a tour of the plant,” Upadhyay says.

Post-training, she was incorporated in the plant as a trainee for a year. “For now, I am getting a stipend of ₹4,200 per month,” she says. “I will get remuneration once I am a permanent employee,” she explains.

The number game
Gulshan Kumar Saini, project-in-charge,

In industry-wary Bengal, Salboni pens a happy plot
Land acquired primarily in 2006-07, in daze of Singur-Nandigram agitation, JSW Steels and farmers seem to have a happy-ending in sight. Now, land sellers want the promised jobs. And fast.
Salboni, says nearly 900 people have sold their land for the project. “As per the agreement between West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation and Jindal South West (JSW), those who sell land (for the project) would be given a suitable job at either JSW, or Bengal Steel or a sister concern,” he says. “There are two kinds of ownership: single ownership and joint deed. Seventy percent of the land is on joint deed, which means a person has to be nominated (from the deed holders) for the job.”

According to Saini, there are roughly 350 single land owners, of which about 100 have been given jobs till date. The land acquisition office acquired 189.62 acre from individual owners for the plant on a proposal by the state industrial development corporation. The Jindals acquired 288.88 acre directly from individual owners, and were allowed to keep only 24.20 acre as per ownership laws. The remaining 264.68 acre, considered “vested land”, was given to the company on lease for 99 years by the land reforms office.

The lease deed is yet to be executed. Besides these, 3,835.15 acre and 2.34 acre were given to the Jindals on lease, as mentioned in separate lease deeds.

The reactions
Lakhi Kanto Mahato, who got ₹15 lakh for 14 bigha land he gave to the Jindals, says the area has seen “a lot of progress” since and that the project will be a milestone for the region. “I did not have a stable income as a farmer”, so the ready money was handy for him, Mahato says. “Everyone I know wants to work at JSW. It is going to be a huge factory,” he says.

Mahato, who earlier cultivated paddy, eucalyptus, cashew nuts and did odd jobs (like supervisory work as part of national rural employment guarantee scheme), says, “No one wants to sell land easily. But they wanted an industry even more eagerly.”

Dulal Bhuniya says he sold his 1.5 bigha for ₹1.33 lakh. He is happy with the money he received against his plot back then, though he can do little to nip the yearning now that the prices have gone up manifold. “I got a good compensation back then but now the land is worth almost 20 times that amount.”

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Working as a gardener at the plant site at present, Bhuniya says he can sustain himself with the odd job since he owns land elsewhere. “But some people who have given their entire land are desperate for work,” he adds.

Like the other two, Prabhas Ghosh, too, feels the compensation of ₹1.20 lakh for his 1-bigha land was reasonable. “I have worked in agriculture and I can tell you it is no good — the land here is not conducive to farming.”

Who: Lakhi Kanto Mahato
What: ₹15 lakh
How: Selling 14 bigha to Jindals
Now? “No one wants to sell land easily. But they wanted an industry even more eagerly.”

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Plot of the story
4,316 acre: total size of land JSW owns in Salboni
Of this, 189.62 acre acquired by the land acquisition office for JSW
288.88 acres Jindals acquired directly from landowners
3,835.15 acre and 2.34 acre given separately to Jindals on lease

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factory starts operations I will give that to the Jindals as well.”

Both Bhuniya and Ghosh are awaiting a job call from JSW.

Is it all happy-happy then? For now, looks like

According to Saini, of approximately 4,400 acre JSW Steel owns in Salboni (the total size is 4,315.99 acre), most of it was government-controlled plots. “We acquired land with the help of the government without any large-scale opposition,” he adds.

“The Left Front government was in power when the Jindals acquired land. They (Jindals) bought land directly from the farmers without involving any middlemen. The farmers got good price for their land and a person from each family who sold land had been promised a job. They (Jindals) have lived up to their promise,” says Mrigen Maiti, MLA and district chairman of Trinamool Congress, the party that led the agitation against alleged forcible acquisition of farmland in Singur and Nandigram, among other areas.

“I myself inaugurated a training centre at Sayedpur. Jindals acquired land lawfully, so we did not object,” Maiti says. “They bought mostly forest and barren lands, and I will extend my full cooperation to them (the company).”

So is it a win-win situation for all? Haradhan Bhuniya, who sold his 12 katha for ₹69,000 in 2007, says there’s little small owners like him could do either way: “When other big landowners sell land you have to sell yours, too. I did not want the boundary wall to obstruct my land. I haven’t got any paper for shares as of yet (but) I was told that I will get the papers when the project starts,” he says.

Brothers Samarlal and Shekharlal Bhuniya, meanwhile, do not shy away from making clear their displeasure at not having found employment with the Jindals yet. “We sold our land a long time ago. It is time they offer us a job,” they assert.

The acquisition process

Saini, the project in-charge, one issue with they faced was the quantum of land in possession of farmers and landowners in the area. “In Punjab, Haryana or Delhi a farmer could own up to 50 acre. But here a 7-acre piece could be owned by up to 100 people,” he says.

And will the company provide employment to villagers who did not have to sell their land? “That will be second priority. Our first concern is to rehabilitate land owners (whose land was acquired for the project),” Saini says.

Having started acquiring land around 2006-07, Saini says, “Our approach to procurement was different — we offered shares to facilitate villagers to come closer to us, the JSW family, as the compensation package was good.”

The plant, says Saini, will be ready after issues regarding forest and land agreement are worked out with the government. “As soon as the government hands over all land to JSW, it will take approximately 36 months from then to commission the plant,” he says.

Sources say water will most probably be sourced from Rupnarayan river, which also remains a big challenge for the project developers.

puja@governancenow.com
Only 18, Bijol Mahato is expecting her first child. She listens keenly as Chhobi Mahato, an accredited social health activist (ASHA) with Dakhinsole sub-centre, explains that though counselling about early pregnancy has helped in some cases, there is still pressure from in-laws to deliver the first child quickly in villages.

Like the young would-be mother, Nilima Mahato also listens quietly as Chhobi patiently explains the techniques of breastfeeding.

Like Bijol and Nilima, Chhobi, who recently completed a year working as an ASHA, takes her health-related help to nearly 170 households across three villages.

On a balmy January afternoon, as Chhobi comes visiting expecting mothers in her village, Nandaria, Governance Now catches up with her to gather the life and times of a field-level health worker. And cutting across a maze of mess and misconception prevalent among residents, it’s hardly an easy job.

**ASHA: a ray of hope for others, ‘pittance’ for self**

In West Medinipur, accredited social health activists (ASHAs) have brought down maternal and infant deaths, but are an unhappy lot.
“Once the first child is born, a moth-er-in-law usually relaxes,” Chhobi says, referring to her advise to young Bijol. “The second child usually is born after three to five years but they (locals; more specifically, in-laws) don’t seem to understand that it affects a woman’s health.”

Corroborating, Bijol’s sister-in-law Mal-lika says she experienced complexities when she delivered her first child at 18. “Doctors told us that either the mother or the child can stay healthy,” she says. Her first child is now five years old, and Mal-lika suffers from high blood pressure — a result of the complications encountered at the time of delivery.

It is very important, for instance, for an expecting mother to take regular doses of iron pills to ensure development of the unborn child. “I have given iron pills to high school girls to treat anaemia, and I have had meetings with mothers of girls, explaining to them why iron is essential,” says Chhobi.

Sometimes she enlists the help of the school headmaster to reach out to the parents, through their children.

**Fighting unfounded fears**

Reluctance to use contraception is another challenge health activists like her face in the villages, Chhobi says. And her observation is validated by the likes of Shefali Mahato, who just had her second child. “I have never used any kind of contra-ception. My husband had said that we will take care,” Shefali says.

Another villager, Papia Ray, says she became pregnant immediately after marriage — an unplanned pregnancy, though she had “never even thought of” taking pills or using contraception.

The deep-seated misconception about contraception is evident from people like Seema Mahato, who says that both she and her husband are afraid of using contraceptives. “What if we die?” she asks, alarmed.

Chhobi says she has been trying to convince people to wear intrauterine device (IUD), telling them that it is safe and hassle-free. “Pills dry up breast milk, while condoms are unreliable,” she says. All a woman needs to do is go to the health sub-centre and ask for an IUD — the ANM, she says, will do the needful.

But Shantana Mahato demonstrates the fallacies associated with IUD in particular and, often, contraception in general. “I don’t want to wear an IUD,” Shantana says. “What if something happens to me? My children are too young...” she reasons, equally alarmed, when asked why she did not try IUD.

**Fighting frustration, irregular payments**

Besides addressing the ground-level challenges, Chhobi says ASHAs also have to deal with irregular, in fact a paltry, pay, among other issues. “We do not have a fixed income. We earn only when a woman gets pregnant, or a child is born,” she says. “Our work is hectic but we will work with more enthusiasm if we get our payments regularly.”

Anima Piri, an ASHA with Kashijora sub-centre, says: “Our dues have not been cleared since October 2012. Though maternal and infant deaths have reduced significantly due to our services, we are not even entitled to something as basic as pension.”

Frustrated, many ASHAs had recently stormed the district magistrate’s office to voice their grievances, Papia Adhikari, district secretary of the ASHA workers’ union, affiliated to the All India United Trade Union Centre (AIUTUC), says.

She says ASHAs were initially paid ₹800 per month. But the earlier format was scrapped and a new one implemented in October 2011, through which ASHAs receive remuneration based on their work. But Adhikari says that’s not enough: “We want a fixed salary, gratuity, and pension. Our payments are delayed by eight months. We have to nearly revolt every time to get our money.”

“We don’t have a stable income. If there is no expecting mother or newborn in my area, I am not entitled to any payment.”

Each ASHA gets ₹200 on successful delivery in a hospital, and an additional ₹100 for staying the night at the hospital. “Where will we stay (otherwise)?” Adhikari asks. “There is no accommodation facility; besides, who will guarantee our safety?”

Pointing out the case of neighbouring Sikkim, AIUTUC’s district coordina-tor Narayan Adhikari says, “The Sikkim government pays ASHA workers ₹3,000 per month, besides their entitlement as per the central government’s format. But we have got no response from the state government till date.”

Highlighting another issue, he says, “There is no gynaecologist at the Pingla block hospital, so women (expectant mothers) from the area come to Medinipur. As a result, ASHAs working there (in Pingla) are not getting money.”

ASHA workers, he stresses, are “ha-rassed” in many such ways.

Popped the question, Dr Trideep Das, deputy chief medical officer (CMO)-1, West Medinipur, says: “Pingla is a block primary health centre. But the gynaecolo-gist posted there was detailed to Ghatal in view of the (prevailing) law and order situation.”

But conceding that public demand is for a specialist at Pingla as well, Dr Das says, “We will depute a gynaecologist as soon as manpower is available.”

**Plight of link person**

Monideepa Chakraborty, ANM of Kashijora sub-centre, highlights the plight of link persons as well: “ASHAs have been working for the last four years but link persons helped us before that. They are our link in places where there is no ASHA. They inform people about upcoming immunisation and vaccinations.”

But for all that work, they take home a paltry ₹100 per month, Chakraborty says, adding, “There has been no hike in their salary.”

Shikha Singh, a link person at Kashijora sub-centre, says she is holding on to this job despite the meagre and irregular pay only with the hope that things will change for the better. Singh says she hasn’t received remuneration for the past eight months.

The CMO’s office refused to comment on the issue.

While sources in the CMO office label most such grievances as “politically moti-vated”, AIUTUC’s Narayan Adhikari says, “We are planning to launch a central (nationwide) movement soon to voice our complaints.”

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Read other report on page 58
Kashijora is a quaint village spread like a thick vine around sporadic clusters of sal trees. Though administratively part of the Salboni block in West Medinipur district, the village is a world in itself. Nested in an expanse of green, it is a curious mix of huts as well as both adobe and pucca houses. The village has 158 households and a population of 847. Professionally, the villagers till land, mostly their own and in cases also others': they grow paddy, mustard and potato.

Quite close to the panchayat office, which roughly forms the centre of the village, in a mud house lives eight-year-old Puja Mahato. Her father is a farm labourer like many others in the village while her mother is a housewife. Today, Puja got up from her bed with a bad earache. Before she could wake up properly and figure out the area of her pain, her father like any other day had left for his work. She knows her mother will not get free from her share of domestic chores before afternoon. So when her pain becomes excruciating, she leaves on her own for the health sub-centre in the village. Luckily, it is merely a stone's throw from her mud house.

Villagers’ first point of contact in cases of medical emergencies, the Kashijora sub-centre has on any given day two auxiliary nurses and midwives (ANMs) and an unfixed number of accredited social health activists (ASHAs). In case of a doctor’s help, the first point of contact is the block hospital. One of the ANMs in the Kashijora sub-centre, Monideepa Chakraborty, is known to the Mahato family and it is this acquaintance that has allowed Puja’s mother to send her daughter alone to the sub-centre. But today, it is a different scene here.

Puja arrives at the sub-centre to find quite a crowd of patients there. There are equipments, a pathology technician, a pharmacist, an x-ray technician and above all a doctor here. Puja is confused and keeps loitering here and there unless she is helped by someone and taken before the doctor.

What Puja witnesses at the sub-centre is a mobile medical camp, which operates in the remote areas of Paschimanchal under the Jangalmahal project of the national rural health mission (NRHM). Under this
project, a mobile medical camp consisting of a qualified doctor, an ANM, a pathology technician, a pharmacist and an x-ray technician visits six different sub-centres in Salboni block of the district six days a week to give health services to the villagers free of cost. The programme has been outsourced to an NGO, Child Support and We, which runs it in the block. The team visits six sub-centres – Madhupur, Satpati, Kashijora, Dakhinsole, Sarashbedia and Jara – one each day. Health services, check-ups, blood tests, x-rays and medicines are provided to the people for free.

The camps are operational in 18 blocks of the region so far, since mid-January. Camps in two other blocks will begin from March. Besides West Medinipur, mobile medical camps are operational in Bankura, Jalpaiguri, Purulia, North and South 24 Parganas. In West Medinipur district, five NGOs conduct the mobile medical camps in 11 blocks.

Here is an account of a week spent with the mobile medical camps, one each in a different village.

**People**

Dulal Chalak coughs repeatedly as he awaits blood tests and an x-ray in the porch of Jara sub-centre. His son Budhawaits blood tests and an x-ray in the doorsteps, even if it is once a week.

A few days ago, people like Chalak would have gone to the Salboni block hospital for a check-up. But now, help arrives right at his doorstep, even if it is once a week.

The working conditions are not always conducive to run a health camp. In Sarashbedia, the medical camp is run in an under-construction sub-centre. The floor is littered with iron rods; there is no electricity or running water. “We were shifted to this place from the original sub-centre as there was no space,” says ANM Sunaini Pal. Due to absence of electricity largely, x-rays cannot be performed. The doctor is examining patients by the light streaming in from the windows. Only in the Kashijora sub-centre, there is adequate space to set up medical equipment properly. Even then, frequent power cuts play spoilsport.

Sambhu Mahato, 10, has cycled from his village in Balkanthapur all alone. When asked why no one is accompanying him, he says that his mother is busy with her daily chores. He hurt his ankle a few days ago and is awaiting an x-ray. Luckily for him, the power came back and he got his x-ray done.

Not everyone is lucky though. At Jara sub-centre, Srimanta Mandal waits for his x-ray report. A few days ago a heavy pady sack fell on his leg. “It has been aching ever since. The doctor advised me to get an x-ray done,” he says. A few moments later, x-ray technician Biswajit Jana comes out with his undeveloped plate and asks him to come back the next week.

“Medical is very old and needs to be changed,” says Jana when asked what went wrong. Chalak meets with the same fate. Chalak, who was coughing badly all along, was positioned with great difficulty under the x-ray machine by Jana and his son. He waited almost twenty minutes to get his results. “If his condition deteriorates, I will have to take him to Salboni,” his son says.

**Problems**

“Illiteracy is the biggest challenge,” says Dr Sivananda Acharya, the doctor associated with the team. “Breastfeeding is advised for six months from the time of birth. I have women coming and telling me that they have been breastfeeding kids till four years. They are unaware of the nutrition deficit being caused due to this,” he rues.

Dhanonjoy Mahato, 70, is suffering from an acute stomach ache. He had stopped taking medicines sometime ago and has come back for a check-up. “He won’t listen to us. He stopped taking medicines as soon as the pain was relieved. If we try to make him finish the course, he would accuse us of trying to kill him,” his son says.

Jagannath Bishnoi is suffering from acute diarrhoea. He had been referred to the Salboni block hospital by the doctor but still he comes back every week. “The OPD was closed when I went to Salboni hospital. My farming activities don’t allow me time to go there. So I come here,” he says.

Bijoy Bhandari, 68, has been suffering from stiff arms and legs for the past 2 years. “I cannot afford the medicines prescribed at Salboni hospital. So I come here. The free medicines given here provide me at least some relief,” he says.

“Absence of awareness, prevalence of customs combined with the reluctance to know what has really happened make our task very difficult,” says Acharya. “The biggest challenge is not to get frustrated.” he adds.

On Monday, the team arrived late at Madhupur sub-centre. Mamon Tudu, who is cradling a baby in her arms, says that she will go to the local quack if the team doesn’t show up. When told that quacks are not really doctors, she looks a bit confused but walks away nevertheless. Soon after this, the team arrives and the patients queue up in front of the doctor’s room.

Patients mostly are not aware what their problems are. Some of them come without cards or have lost their cards. At times like these, the doctor is clueless about the nature of their ailments and their medical history.

Dr Trideep Das, deputy chief medical officer of health 1 (CMOH1), West Medinipur, says, “These 65 gram panchayats, where the medical mobile camps are being held, have no primary health centres. So there is no facility for clinical services. The micro plan for fixing dates of camps is made in consultation with the block health and family welfare samiti. For every block, an NGO handles the entire operation starting from manpower to logistics and equipment. It is their responsibility to make people aware of the existence of the camp.”

In Salboni, the camp so far has catered to 10,438 patients. The medical camp has, to quite an extent, been able to weaken
members complain of inadequate pay and manpower constraint. “Our salary is always late. We get paid every three months or so,” says Bhurishrestha. Dilip Das, who ferries the team to and from Salboni, gets ₹440 per day. “When I cannot come, I have to arrange for another car. Nobody agrees for such a meagre amount. Then I have to pay them out of my own pocket,” he says.

**Monitoring**

The monitoring of the camps is done by a GPS-based tracking system. An SMS-based information collection has been started since the beginning of each camp. After each camp, the organising agency has to send one SMS to a dedicated number informing about their performance for the date. The information is ported in the database as well as for public viewing on the website www.wbnrhm/jangalmahal. Locations are ported automatically in the Google Map.

On instructions of the state government to check whether the mobile medical camps are fulfilling their duties, now a district-level team comprising prime minister’s rural development fellows, West Bengal civil services executive probationers and IAS probationers will be closely monitoring the progress of the project. Inside sources say that the need for monitoring has been felt following some negative feedback about the camps.

A source also says the present monitoring system is not foolproof. “NGOs can hire someone to login from the site of the camp and hence mislead us,” he says. “There have been complaints that the doctors hired by the NGOs are not qualified and that the camps are irregular,” he adds.

But deputy CMOH1 Dr Das rules out any such a possibility. “The camps are monitored regularly. Many NGOs have been black-listed as they failed to adhere to the guidelines,” he says.

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ICDS: no child’s play this

In Salboni, child development services is a bit of a joke in the absence of proper funds and monitoring, coupled with infrastructure deficit and official apathy.
Early one February morning, Rashida Bibi, an employee of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) sat with a handful of children outside the ICDS centre in Sayedpur 2. The ration to cook the meal for the children at the anganwadi centre, Rashida explained, had depleted a week ago, leading to fewer children coming to the centre.

“I have informed the ICDS office of the situation. The supervisor told me that the shipment has been released and will reach in a few days,” she said.

The centres get rice, pulses, cooking oil and salt under the ICDS, which the staff says lasts two to three months. The ICDS workers said they pay for spices and vegetables from their own pocket and are reimbursed the following month.

While the ICDS centre number 55 at Sayedpur was deserted inside, children could be seen playing around the perimeter. Fatema Begum, the cook, said the children were let off as the teacher, Sita Mahato, had gone looking for cooking fuel. “It is impossible to leave the children on their own while I am busy cooking,” she said.

Trudging in a little later after an unsuccessful search for cooking fuel, Sita Mahato said, “I used to have two malnourished children till December but right now every child is healthy. Begum added, “The food is never wasted – the excess is given to children a little older.”

At ICDS number 337 in Sundra khalpar-2, Sarada Mahato said they ran out of food supply nearly 20 days ago but were yet to get refill. “The ICDS office told me that the food will reach soon,” Sarada Mahato said, though it was yet to arrive nearly three weeks on.

Meanwhile, eight or nine of the 28 children enrolled at the centre come regularly, Sarada said.

Asked about the food supply, an official (name withheld on request since the official is not authorised to speak with the media) said ration is distributed every two months. “We have a supply of buffer stock to ensure there is no dry period. The supervisor prepares requisition for the ration requirements (of each ICDS centre), which is consolidated and sent to the district ration department,” he said. “Ration is delivered according to requirement and strength of each centre.”

Problems of sourcing
Explaining that gathering wood for cooking is a “big challenge”, Sarada Mahato said, “Wood is very costly and we are reimbursed only a month later. At times, it is financially inconvenient (for the staff to pay for it). Unlike vegetables and spices, we cannot take wood and pay later – the payment has to be made immediately.

“At times, we have to make do with wood powder and leftovers at the local wood factory.”

ICDS worker Arati Singh said sourcing cooking fuel is a “real headache”. “We have been instructed to buy wood according to strength. But when the price of wood goes up, we have to pay from our own pocket,” Singh said.

Stressing that “our hands are tied,” the official said, “The rate of wood for use as fuel is fixed by the government. ICDS workers are responsible for running the centre smoothly. So, would they stop cooking at home for a day because no wood is available? It all boils down to the eagerness to work properly.”

Most ICDS centres in Salboni, expected to add coloured vegetables to the khichdi they make, add only potato, soya bean and cabbage in the name of that ‘colour’. “We cannot store pumpkins (for long) as they rot easily. The vegetable vendor promised to bring some fresh vegetables this morning but hasn’t shown up yet,” an ICDS worker said.

But “it is not the workers’ fault,” an official said. “At present the price of vegetables is fixed at an abnormally low 34 paisa (per student per day). The price of the ration supplied to them varies from time to time, and the price of vegetables is fixed accordingly.”

The official who spoke with us on condition of anonymity agreed that community participation is an integral part of running an ICDS. Vegetables, they said, can be sourced from local farmers through community participation. They also said that the workers get hardly any recognition for the hard work involved. “They will be enthused to do more if they are acknowledged for the work they are doing,” an official explained.

Problems of infrastructure
Not a soul was in sight at 8.30 on a Monday morning at the Rajbandh ICDS, when classes should ideally have started by 8 am. ICDS worker Jamuna Mahato hurried to the centre on learning about Governance Now’s presence on the premises, and the centre was up and running within minutes – and with a decent attendance to boot.

“It is too cold – I come by 7 am but no child arrives before 8 am,” Jamuna said, when asked why the classes weren’t on time.

To address this very problem supervisors are supposed to make random visits, ensuring that the workers are doing their job properly. But there are only six supervisors for entire Salboni district at present instead of the sanctioned 17. Proper monitoring, therefore, is hardly possible, officials reasoned.

With many ICDS centres across Salboni yet to have their own buildings, classes are held in some local villager’s house. But that, too, is a problem at centres with a large number of children, as ICDS workers find it challenging to accommodate the children.

Gowaldih’s ICDS centre number 222 is one such: it has no building yet, and classes are held in the house of ICDS worker Malati Mahato. It is a tiny one-room accommodation, and the only room is used to store food items for children. Classes, meanwhile, are held under open sky, and shifted to a makeshift tarpaulin shelter.
when it pours, said Sushama Singh, a sahayika (assistant).

Malati Mahato, the ICDS worker whose house was the cynosure of all this attention was, however, nowhere in sight. Singh said she had gone to get eggs. A local resident, Namita Mahato, who had come to drop off her daughter at the centre, said, “I come here every morning (but) rarely see the teacher.”

She left the child with Singh.

A little distance away, at Sundra, ICDS number 337 faces a similar problem: without a building, the staff are forced to hold their classes in the shishu shiksha kendra. “The ICDS office wanted locals to contribute land to build the centre. And though a spot was even decided, the location would have been near the river. So many people objected – they felt they won’t be able to frequent the river bank (once the ICDS building is raised there) since the area would be cordoned off,” said Sayed Mukhtar Ali, a resident of Sayedpur.

Meanwhile, Karnagarh Dudepara’s ICDS (number 163) has only room to store food grain and conduct the classes. Though slightly lucky than others, Aparna Patra, the ICDS worker at the centre, said, it has its own share of woes. “We need cement floors to prevent water seepage, which spoils the ration,” she explained. “The exoskeleton of the centre is in very bad shape and parts are damaged. The beams need to be reinforced.

“The panchayat office has, however, said repairs cannot be carried out due to lack of funds.”

She said the tin roof was replaced with an asbestos one eight months ago. “And funds were insufficient to carry out other repair works even then,” Patra added.

Problems of open kitchen
Rashida Bibi said the whole area is flooded during monsoon, forcing children to stay off the centre. “I have spent ₹100 to trim the bushes and the ICDS office had told me that they will make a proper road,” Rashida said. “But nothing has been done till now. I have even submitted an application for a shaded kitchen and a water source. But I was told that to wait for funds to arrive.”

Absence of shaded kitchens is a problem faced by most ICDS centres. At Pathor kumkumi’s ICDS centre (number 126 in Salboni) sahayika Nirmala Mahato said she has to request locals to accommodate her in their kitchen during the monsoon.

“We have no source drinking water even. Officials come here to inspect and go away but no action is ever taken,” Archana Bhuniya, an ICDS worker there, said.

What officials say
According to ICDS officials, there are no funds available. So if there is a defunct tubewell or requirement of a water source, ICDS workers first have to approach the panchayat. If that does not work out, the BDO is contacted. Funds from backward region grant fund (BRGF), integrated action plan (IAP) and Paschimanchal Unnayan Parshad (PUP) funds are utilised for anganwadi centres, they said.

Told about the complaints, Jayanta Biswas, the block development officer (BDO) at Salboni, said: “Funds from Integrated Action Plan (IAP) can be utilised at the BDO’s discretion. Planning is being done in such a way that all centres will have their own buildings within three years. We are waiting for details from the land department on availability of land and will start work once adequate funds are available.”

Emphasising that nearly 20 ICDS centres were constructed from IAP funds last year, Biswas said: “The panchayats have limited supply of funds (and thus) 90 per cent of all repairing work is carried out by the BDO office. Drinking water and toilet provisions can be made through supplementary schemes. Right now we have a model estimate of ₹6.40 lakh.”

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