

MGNREGA CORRUPTION

4 March 2010

The exploitation of impoverished tribal people by corrupt officials continues. All the well-meaning attempts to protect the implementation of MGNREGA projects from mischief have turned out to be inadequate. A case in point is that of 30 labourers of Kharsapada village. On 28 February 2010 these 30 people discovered that their wages, in the amount of Rs. 49,490 were deposited on 19 December 2009 and withdrawn the same day.

The facts leading up to this fraud are as follows. The Soil Conservation Department (Machhkund) implemented an MGNREGA project of planting cashew trees over 80 acres of land. The people of Kharsapada were happy for the opportunity of employment and that the project would create a productive asset that would be distributed to the landless villagers. 30 workers joined the project for 35 to 40 days in the months of September and October 2009.

After the completion of the work, Sri Debiprasad Jena, the supervisor of the Soil Conservation Department (Machhkund) told the workers to sign the muster roll and asked for their post office passbooks. The people, wisely, refused to give their passbooks but the supervisor was able to persuade sixteen people to do so on the pretext that anyone who refused to give over their passbooks would not receive rights to the cashew land. While taking the signature on the muster roll, Mr. Jena also took the thumb impression of the workers on withdrawal forms of the Machkund post office where the workers have their accounts. Because they are illiterate, the workers did not recognize the impropriety and left the Soil Conservation office unaware that they had fallen into a trap.

Subsequently, these workers went to the Machkund Soil Conservation office several times to ask for the wages and passbooks but Mr. Jena was either absent from the office or said that the bill had not been prepared. Finally, on 28 February 2010, Mr. Jena bowed to pressure from the workers and returned the passbooks, but he told the workers that the bill had not cleared and they would have to continue to wait for the wages.

Some of the workers showed their passbooks to Mr. Harihara Hantal of Mantriput village, who, being literate, was able to see that their wages were deposited on 19 December 2009 but withdrawn the same day. On 2 March they tried to confront Mr. Jena but he was absent and to this day has not been located. On 4 March some people went to the Lamtaput BDO to make a complaint and others went to meet the District Collector. As the DM is on tour in the field they are waiting for Saturday, grievance day, to meet the DM.

This is not an isolated case in the district, where illiteracy makes workers vulnerable to abuse by the unscrupulous. There is a saying in Oriya that if you will go by branches the corrupt will go by leaves. Sadly, this holds true for the people of Kharsapada.

The recent government call for criminal proceedings in the case of MGNREGA frauds may prevent such exploitation. Let us hold our government accountable to make that a reality.