

Kol Tribals Come Forward to Expose Corruption

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Kol tribals in Patha region of Chitrakut district (Uttar Pradesh) have taken a big step forward in exposing the corruption which prevents the benefits of various government schemes from reaching them. Patha Kol Adhikar Manch (PKAM), an organisation of tribals active for several years has taken the lead in this initiative with the help of other social activists, several pradhans and elected representatives of this area. On July 6 PKAM organised a public-meeting and demonstration highlighting how the people suffer due to this corruption. At the end of this meeting a detailed memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister through the DM.

A lot of work went into the preparation of this document in which allegations of various kinds of corruption are accompanied with specific details from various villages. This documentation reveals how provisions of panchayat raj, NREGA, right to information and other laws are being violated brazenly and the poor are being deprived of their rights and the resources meant for them.

While it is true that several kol households have received land under the land-reforms programme, many kols still continue to be deprived of the promised land. This can be seen in villages like Kota Kandaila, Ooncha Dih, Chureha Keshrua, Jaromafi and Itwaan. In some villages middlemen sent by lekhpal officials have collected bribes from people but still land promised to them has not been allotted to them, or else the paper work has been left incomplete in some way or the other. This can be seen in villages like Tikuri and Kekramaar. Kols like Chunnital, Ramrati and Ramprasad have been deprived of their meagre earnings in this way.

One reason why kols here are deprived of their land and forest rights is that while in the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh as well as in several other states they are classified as Scheduled Tribes, here in U.P. they have still not received this recognition in official records. So they have placed this recognition as one of their homestead land rights are not recorded properly so that they have to provide free services to some influential families. So in settlements like Chameauri, Daandi, Hata, Chureha of Chureha Keshrua panchayat, Dudhvaniya hamlet of Saraiyan panchayat and Jhari of Sarhat panchayat, an important demand is for properly recorded homestead rights. Another demand is to make available land released from reservoirs for some months to poor families for cultivation, while at present these are given to influential, big landowners. People here are still waiting for justice under the new legislation for tribals' land rights.

Wage of workers who toiled hard for work under NREGA have been held back for almost a year in many cases. A survey of seven panchayats Ooncha Dih, Kota Kandaila, Churesh Keshrua, Jaromafi, Mansaha, Jumunihai and Markundi revealed that for the NREGA work taken up by forest department for planting trees payments worth Rs. 6,60,000 have not been made for nearly a year. For various panchayat

development work under NREGA also dues of about Rs. 1,22,000 were reported in six panchayats.

Fictitious entries in job cards and muster rolls have enabled vested interests to plunder vast amounts in implementing NREGA works. Some persons never worked but small amounts were paid to them while bigger payments were shown in their records. On the one hand development work was never done, and on the other hand employment to genuinely needy persons was denied. In villages like Itwaan large-scale corruption has been well-established and proved.

Middlemen have emerged in villages as well as in banks who collude with officials in such a way that those entitled to pension (on grounds of old age, disability, being a widow etc.) have to give commissions to those middlemen if they want to get their payments regularly. Similar is the case with grants given by terai corporation, or the loans and insurance payment given under kisan credit cards.

Meeting of gram sabha or even all elected members of panchayat are seldom called for free and open discussion of various development work taken up by the panchayat under NREGS or various other schemes. Sometimes the Panchayat Secretary resorts to fake signatures and records to show the approval of various works and estimates. The 'nigrani samiti' or he vigilance committee of the panchayat often exists on paper only and villagers are not aware of this committee and its work. This committee has not been able fulfill its role of checking and maintaining the quality of various panchayat works.

Generally information about various development works and welfare schemes is not provided to the people as required under the right to information legislation. Later if special efforts are made to obtain this information under RTI, then also it is generally not easy to get the required information. In this situation some corrupt elements become very powerful and also manage to save themselves by also making payments at higher levels. Some panchayat secretaries have also earned a bad name for using pressure tactics against elected village pradhans and conniving in various ways to somehow get their signatures for corruption-ridden deals.

It is courageous on the part of Patha Kol Adhikar Manch to take up this initiative of exposing and fighting corruption in rural development with the help of some elected pradhans. Such efforts deserve wide support. □

Make over for panchayats

The village panchayats in the Kerala state will soon sport a new look with front offices that will offer a whole lot of services as part of the Change Management Initiatives being undertaken in these institutions under the 11th Plan objectives of good governance and service delivery.

The state government has issued orders to these panchayats to set up front offices, besides issuing detailed guidelines on the functioning of these offices, the amenities to be made available to the public and the services that will be provided for thousands of people arriving at these institutions for various requirements.

The new order virtually neutralises the Manual of Office Procedures for panchayats as it had several shortcomings in relation to providing services.