

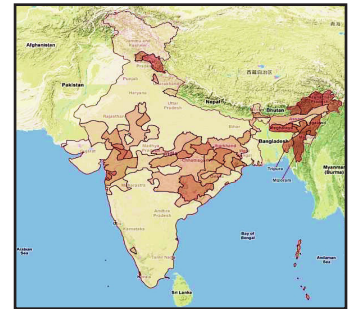
TRIBAL EMPOWERMENT: Jharkhand Fellowships

(HEMANT DAS, LUKAS KORWA, POONAM DEVI, SAVITA DEVI)

Background

Tribals, as the indigenous people are commonly called, constitute as much as 9% India's population and are spread across the breadth of the subcontinent. Over millennia, they have lived in relative peace, content to follow their life style in the abundance of nature.

This self-sustaining, self-sufficient way of life has been threatened by modern India's quest for land, minerals and other natural resources. While this is destroying their livelihood, there is little in return by way of genuine development. As a result, in spite of providing so much of nation's wealth, the people of these areas remain mired in poverty. Popular resistance has been met with ruthless force. The resultant upheaval has wrought tremendous suffering of which the Maoist insurgency is just the most glaring manifestation.



IFA Fellowships

IFA supports several fellows working for the benefit of these tribal communities in many states. In Jharkhand IFA is supporting Hemant Das whose fellowship was started in 2017. Surekha and Prithvi visited Hemant in November of 2019 and since then three additional Fellows have been added to the team. Hemant Das is a social worker with many years of experience. Since becoming an IFA Fellow in 2017, he has devoted himself exclusively to organizing the Jharkhand Mazdoor Kisan Union in Latehar, Palamu and Gadhwa districts.

The Challenges

Many of the tribals in this area have been agriculturists with ample land who grow a multitude of crops. The state has declared them encroachers, forcing them to produce all kinds of documents to prove their ownership, a daunting task for these mostly illiterate communities. And even when they fully comply, the elusive *patta* (title) remains a mirage. Ironically, the state machinery that procrastinates so callously in complying with law (the Forest Rights Act) is relentless in using its power to harass, hurt and impoverish these people. Lacking the '*patta*' they are jailed for tilling land that should lawfully be theirs! It is ironic that with so much poverty and so few means of employment, the system is so intent on uprooting people who are making a living without any handouts.

A Role for the Jharkhand Mazdoor Kisan Union

Getting the '*patta*' is a major task for anyone working for the welfare of tribal people. While there are several non-governmental organizations in the area their impact has been minimal since they often end up representing themselves rather than the people. This is where Hemant's pioneering efforts in organizing JMKS have brought great relief. The people met by the IFA members showed tremendous trust and hope in the ability of the Union (JMKU). The union works for many marginalized communities including:

*Forest dwellers

*Small-scale fishers

*Small and marginal farmers

The union functions from a modest one-room office in Hemant's Daltonganj home. Members pay monthly dues of Rs. 20 or so. Some make additional contributions. The funds are utilized for the legal costs and to support a part time staff for secretarial and fieldwork. The union cultivates the support of many **professionals particularly from the lawyer community** since humanitarian work on such scale cannot take place without a **network of fellow travellers**.

2022-23 Update

The year 2022 has been a year of organizational expansion and consolidation for the union.

- Union has been strengthened politically.
- Increase in activity by the volunteers and villagers after the leadership workshops were conducted
- Reduction in harassment by civil servants
- Increase in the Gramsabha awareness of government schemes

- 2021-22: JMKU membership was 5,159
- 2022-23: JMKU membership at 6,377
- 73 Applications for land rights from 3 village
- Around 700 MNREGA job cards issued.
- Overall, more than 36,000 direct/indirect beneficiaries from JMKU activities

Forest Rights (Individual and Community)

Awareness meetings were conducted in several villages to spread messages of unity against the tyranny. The public representatives are sometimes misleading those who submit the claim form, but the union urged people to be united against atrocities. During these programs, the journalists made a significant contribution. The union provided legal aid to those fighting for forest rights.

Gramsabha Jagrukta Abhiyan In conjunction with ICAN (Indian Community Activists Network), this group has taken up a campaign to promote strengthening of the rural gramsabhas so as to fully materialize the concept of local self-governance envisioned by Gandhiji as a 'Village Republic' and enshrined in the Indian Constitution via the Panchayati Raj amendment.

The JMKU union is in constant dialogue with the local organizations to spread awareness of Gramsabha from grassroots level to the national level. Cultural organizations, writing organizations and community organizations active at the local level are included in these discussions. In addition, several street plays are being conducted for awareness and a web series in Hindi (Discovery of

Swaraj) is being produced with the help of several local cultural and professional groups. The episodes are available on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/eiqoNO-ji70>)



Fellow Hemant Das (right) meeting with villagers regarding awareness of Community Forest Rights



Gram Sabha Awareness Journey from grassroots level to National Level

Campaign to fight Famine: Every 3 to 4 years the Palamu region is affected by famine. It is a rain shadow region and as the land is uneven there is very less retention of water. There are no assertive actions being taken to combat this situation. Every time an attempt was made to bring systematic changes, the union was confronted with corruption practices and not much progress could be made. The Gramsabha is not familiar with these. Keeping these things in mind, the JMKU organized several sit-in meetings and workshops throughout the year with the help of regional activists to sensitize the Panchayat officials to the problems due to famine.



Meetings with the Panchayat to bring awareness related to famine and potential counter-measures



Gathering of locals and union workers to inspire them for the campaign against famine

Primitive Tribes Convention: In the memory of Tribal leader Uma Shankar Baiga, JMKU conducted a gathering for awareness of tribal rights. Focus was on teaching people to be united against injustice and educating children about their culture heritage and awareness about the ongoing schemes and constitutional rights. This convention had a strong participation of more than 400 women and men. It was decided to hold an agitation to seek Government's attention to run the ration, pension and housing scheme in a sustainable manner and to continue until the claim of land rights is achieved.



Hemant addressing the Convention

Organizational Empowerment, Training for Government schemes and Legal awareness:

A one-day training was organized to create awareness about Government initiatives like Ration and Pension schemes, development schemes as per provision of Panchayat Raj Act and related laws. MGNREGA was also discussed in detail. The workshop was attended by 30 people from 10 villages. The attendees were given responsibility to spread the same message in their villages. To drive Organizational Empowerment within JMKU a **membership drive** was conducted. The JMKU union invited new members by educating them on the union's purpose. For developing leadership skills among new members, a **two-day leadership development training program** was conducted in Palamu, Gadhwa and Latehar districts. The participants were given social media training as well.

Hemant Das explained that per JMKU our freedom without Swaraj is incomplete and for that it is necessary to strengthen the village government so the members of the Gram Sabha can exercise their constitutional rights including the right to prepare their own rural development plan for their village and implement it according to the collective decision. A strong village can solve almost 70% of the problems. IFA fellows Savita, Lukas and Poonam motivated the audience by narrating many successful stories and inspired people to actively participate in JMKU activities. After the training, the participants organized sit-ins in their respective areas and told the villagers about the programs. They urged the villagers to participate actively to prevent the administrative officers from acting arbitrarily and depriving the community of the expected benefits.

