

# NREGA and the Death of Tapas Soren

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Tapas Soren, a tribal of Birakhap in Jharkhand, committed self-immolation recently, impoverished by the constant demand for bribes by local officials for work done under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. His death soon after the murder of Lalit Mehta who had exposed corruption in NREGA schemes in Palamu is a damning comment on how the scheme is being implemented in Jharkhand.

On the morning of July 2, 2008, Tapas Soren set himself ablaze at Charhi Chowk in Hazaribagh.<sup>1</sup> Just before taking this ultimately fatal step he was heard shouting “aur anyay nahi sahenge” (I will not tolerate any more injustice).<sup>2</sup> Only a couple of hours before these events, Soren had met the block development officer (BDO) of Churchu and the panchayat sevak of his gram panchayat to discuss matters relating to a 20 ft well that was being constructed on his land under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). That the NREGA, designed to benefit people like Tapas, could be the precipitant of such a calamity speaks of a particularly grave state of affairs with respect to its implementation in Jharkhand.

Hazaribagh was among the first batch of districts where the NREGA was implemented. This means that it has been operative for almost three years. Birakhap (where Tapas lived) is exactly the kind of village where it was envisioned as having the greatest impact. Dilip, Tapas’ elder brother described the struggles involved in making ends meet in Birakhap. The family owns and works a total of 4.54 acres of land. The single crop that they are able to produce in the year enables them to run their households for around four months. The rest of the year they are forced to look for employment elsewhere. This is a difficult task. Birakhap has no road: a river must be crossed to reach one. The search for work often led Dilip and Tapas far from home to where it was available – on roads or with contractors in the region. Just as often, employment was not available at all. NREGA would seem tailor-made for Tapas, Dilip and others in their village. To be assured of work at decent wages near home would be a combination that

seemed wonderful to the point of being an illusion.

## An Insidious Pattern

That is because for the most part it is an illusion. Employment generation in Hazaribagh has been quite low. In 2007-08, the average employment generated for the 1.23 lakh households that demanded work was only around 34 days.<sup>3</sup> This year, until June, only 31,658 households have been provided with employment.<sup>4</sup> These macro statistics also find reflection in Tapas’ story. Dilip pointed out that NREGA works had only opened in December and January and no new ones were taken up in the summer, when work is most acutely needed.

Even when employment was offered, there were delays in wage payments. Against the legal stipulation of payment within 15 days, funds for payment of wages were often released only 40 to 50 days after works had been completed.<sup>5</sup> This means that when alternative employment was available, workers would choose to leave an NREGA worksite for immediate wages. At Tapas’ own well, work had been going on for almost three months, although, given the delays in release of funds to Tapas, there was rarely a week in which work would be carried out for more than three or four days at a stretch. Dilip remarked that workers would simply leave work on the well for other kind of employment if it was available in the area.

While delays in wage payments and the low volume of works might simply be put down to bureaucratic slowness, the pattern in which works were taken up suggests something far more insidious. Jemma Mendis, an activist of the Chhotanagpur Adivasi Seva Samiti which works in the area, points out that in the four tribal hamlets of Sarabaha revenue village only two pond excavation works and the well on Tapas’ field had ever been sanctioned. In the one predominantly non-tribal hamlet, no less than 26 wells had been sanctioned. The reason for this stark contrast, she explained, was that there is a system of kickbacks running all the way up the administrative hierarchy. The standard price for having a well

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sanctioned on one's land is Rs 10,000. Tapas against the judgment of his advisers had paid that much and more. Mendis points out that this kind of system simply eliminates the poor from this scheme. Those with some capital of their own can afford to get works sanctioned on their land, and even pay labourers something on a weekly basis while waiting for the administration to release funds (such weekly payments are typically less than the stipulated minimum wage, the difference is usually pocketed by those who have "advanced" money).

### Empty Promises, Greased Palms

These were the forces that trapped Tapas Soren. He lived in a hamlet that was remote and backward; one which was seen by officials like the panchayat sevak and BDO as susceptible to exploitation on a regular basis: be it the public distribution system (PDS), electricity supply, or the NREGA. As Dilip put it, it was a place where politicians promised much, but little was ever

delivered without greasing a palm. This was the "anyay" that Tapas was protesting against. Tapas had come up against such "anyay" and felt its humiliating sting often.

The well was a source of hope that irrigation in their field might slowly raise the yield and improve life somewhat. After paying Rs 15,000 in bribes, Tapas had little money to keep its construction going smoothly. He was entirely dependent upon the Rs 1,63,000, that had been sanctioned for the costs of the well and was being deposited piecemeal according to the whims of the authorities.<sup>6</sup> He had withdrawn money amounting to Rs 70,000 on three occasions to pay labourers, but could not avoid delays. Faced with these delays, the 10 labourers working on the well – including Dilip and Tapas – were reluctant to commit more than the time that they could take off from other work. And when they struck rock in the course of digging, work came to a near standstill.

Jemma Mendis says Tapas was caught between three forces. On the one hand

were the labourers – his neighbours and relatives – who had not been paid and were unable to break through the rocky earth. On the other stood the BDO and authorities who held Tapas responsible for not being able to complete the project. The triangle of pressures was completed by their demand for a steady stream of kick-backs. On July 1, expecting the final instalment of the money to pay labourers, Tapas went to the bank where he was told that there was no money in the account – it had been deposited and withdrawn entirely without his knowledge. Dilip says that Tapas was distraught and had gone to discuss this with the panchayat sevak and BDO on the morning of July 2. What transpired there is not known. What is known is that he returned from the meeting when the rest of the family was working in the field, took a bottle of kerosene and proceeded to Charhi Chowk, setting in motion the course of events that would lead to his death in a hospital bed six painful days later.



## INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY

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*Announcing Autumn School on*

**The 'Oral' as Resource**

*Literacy and writing have lately been so dominant in our societies that we are largely unaware of the presence and influence of orality and its potential as a field of study. While the literate and formal discourse is dominated by power and hierarchy, the oral often expresses counter-hegemonic tendencies subverting the asymmetric social norms.*

*Although the oral culture does not necessarily preclude knowledge of literacy, it manifests itself primarily through the channels of oral performance. Oral discourses have wide circulation in many communities whereby alternate belief and knowledge systems are constructed and communicated. In a multilingual and multivocal country like India, the oral often crosses language borders. It is necessary to bridge the cultural difference between orality and literacy and highlight the oral as indigenous epistemology informing the multivocal cultural practices. With this in view a two week Autumn School is proposed to be held at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, from 3 November to 16 November 2008.*

*The Autumn School will be conducted by eminent scholars from several disciplines who will explore the various aspects of oral culture such as oral narratives, ethnography of popular lore, oral as symbolic form of solidarity and resistance, folk wisdom communicated through the oral, social function of proverbs, rumours and gossip, oral/written interface, the use of oral in literature, Jatha-vachana, oral history, partition memoirs, oral testimony and narratives of riot victims and survivors, etc.*

*Applications are invited from young college/university teachers from the Humanities and Social Sciences that make use of 'the oral' as a pedagogical tool. A batch of 25 participants will be selected from amongst the applicants. Those interested may send their bio-data (that should include their academic qualifications, experience, research interests and areas of specialization) along with a note of 200-250 words regarding the nature of their proposed participation and how they could contribute to the understanding of the 'oral' as a resource.*

*All expenses will be borne by the IAS. This is the first Autumn School and is planned to become a regular annual academic activity. Applications for the above programme must reach the IAS by 15 September 2008. Those selected will be informed by 30 September 2008. Applications may be sent by e-mail to [academic@iias.ac.in](mailto:academic@iias.ac.in) and [profho@gmail.com](mailto:profho@gmail.com) or by post to:*

**Professor Salim C. Altant**

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**Autumn School on: The 'Oral' as Resource**

**Indian Institute of Advanced Study**

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If the murder of Lalit Mehta in Chhatrapur laid bare the brutal consequences of the contractor-bureaucracy-politician nexus that has sprung up around the NREGA in Jharkhand, Tapas Soren's fate reveals a different consequence of the same fact. The state of corruption seems institutionalised and regularised – with its coordinates of 5 per cent here and 7 per cent there. In stark contrast is every provision of the act designed to empower workers and the rural poor – the ability to demand work, the capacity to decide which works get sanctioned in what order, the right to receive wages on time, the disbursement of wages in a public and transparent fashion, the right to inspect the documents relating to the NREGA, and others. These are forced to languish as is the promise of genuine, participatory change that they hold out. In such a system 'anyay' will inevitably be an everyday experience, one that will seek out and

drain those among the poor who dare to try and make the NREGA work for themselves – as Tapas did.

Dilip Soren hopes that provision will be made by the state government for adequate compensation to Tapas' two children and a job will be provided to his widow Dasmitudu. But he is also determined that part of the outcome of this tragedy should be speedy development of the village and that those responsible for this state of affairs be brought to book. Apart from the government enquiry which has been instituted, perhaps the first step towards this can be the social audit that Chhotanagpur Adivasi Seva Samiti plans to conduct. After all, if the crisis is a result of the determination to ensure that the participatory elements of the act break down, it is only an equally strong determination to ensure that they are made operational that will in the long run be the cure.

## NOTES

- 1 The following account, except where otherwise indicated, is based on conversations with Dilip Soren, the brother of Tapas Soren, and Jemma Mendis, an activist of the Chhotanagpur Adivasi Seva Samiti, at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi soon after Tapas Soren died at Safdarjang Hospital on July 8.
- 2 A video, which includes testimony taken from Tapas Soren when he was conscious soon after he was brought into hospital, is available at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=thhLuJSc11E>. On the video, despite the visibly painful burns, he recounts some of the circumstances of his action and repeatedly affirms that people should not tolerate injustice any more.
- 3 All statistics relating to employment generation in Hazaribagh are taken from the implementation status reports provided online by the ministry of rural development. [http://nrega.nic.in/writereaddata/mpr\\_out/MPRimpl\\_34\\_99\\_0708.html](http://nrega.nic.in/writereaddata/mpr_out/MPRimpl_34_99_0708.html); 42.34 lakh person days were generated for the 1.23 lakh households.
- 4 [http://nrega.nic.in/writereaddata/mpr\\_out/empgen\\_new1\\_34\\_99\\_0809.html](http://nrega.nic.in/writereaddata/mpr_out/empgen_new1_34_99_0809.html)
- 5 This was mentioned by both Dilip Soren and Jemma Mendis.
- 6 All the figures relating to Tapas' financial transactions were provided by Dilip Soren.

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