

DALIT WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR MINIMUM WAGES

- Sachin Jain

Dalit (SC) women of village Dahi (Dist: Dhar, MP) has been struggling for right to employment and Minimum wages in the Panchayat's work. The whole issue began when SPANDAN began to work among the resident Dalit community in 2002. A women's literacy class was begun which provided an opportunity to have a deeper insight into their problems and issues. One of the major problems besides the lack of basic amenities was the fact that the Dalit women were neglected in panchayat's works. They were facilitated to submit an application on 10/06/02 to the CEO, Dahi and Janpad President demanding the provision of drinking water in their colony [construction of toilets, provision On 6/07/02 panchayat began a dam

Next couple of months did not fetch any work for the Dalit women wage-earners. After quite some efforts they could get about a week's work of 16/11/02. Once again the Panchayat offered to underpay @Rs35/- but the Dalit wage-earners declined to accept the lesser wages in face of prevailing during and the lack of foodgrains at their homes. The Panchayat did not pay for about two months. During this period the women wage-earners met the Dy. Chief Minister Ms. Jamuna Devi and sent a written complaint on Hard pressed by poverty and not being paid for about two months, many women agreed to accept the lesser wage-rates. They were also informed by certain panchayat representatives that they will lose the payments as the New Year has begun. However 5 Dalit wage-earners (including 4 women) did not agree to accept the lesser wagger. On 6/02/03 the matter was brought to notice of the collector through the Jan Samsya Nivaran camp. On In June 2003, one of the women (branded complainant) managed to get the work. But on the second day, the Sarpanch having learnt ordered her to be removed and asked her to collect her wages from his home. She continued visiting his house for three consecutive days. On 21/07/03 When she went to enquire when will she receive her due wages, the enraged Sarpanch not only abused her wit foul language but hurled her down by catching hold of her by neck. Frightened she returned back home and shared the incident with other Dalit women. They all decided to report the matter to the police, while they were on the way, the local police-station in charge and the Sarpanch intercepted on the way and threatened them with dire consequ

The Dalit delegation comprising of men, women and youth met SP Dhar, Labor Commissioner, State women's Commission, IG, Director General of Police, State Human Rights Commission and the media. The dalit representation also held discussions with partner NGOs of Right to Food Campaign, MP. It was felt appropriate to take the matter with Commissioner of Supreme Court at Delhi, Dr. N.C. Saxena and Mr. S.R. Sankaran. A written petition containing all the documents was submitted to the Commissioners of the Supreme

The commissioners responded with a letter on 25 August 03, asking the State Government to investigate the matter and pay entitlements to all concerned. The CEO Janpad Panchayat, Dhar issued a letter dated 19th September 2003 mentioning that the investigations found that the complaint is true and accepted the fact that the wage-earners of Dahi region were paid less than the stipulated Minimum wages. The Panchayat immediately acted with paying the unpaid amount @17/- (Balance of Rs. 52/-). However there remains a confusion over the claims of the Administration that all the payments have been made because the wage- earners of one colony (most of the dalit women who raised th

This has built up the confidence of the Dalits and SPANDAN. We were subjected to terrific oppositions when we began working with Dalits (the untouchables). Twice there were life-taking attempts on SPANDAN workers. There were stiff challenges from the politicians and higher caste communities. But we held out and are inspired to further our Mission of empowering Dalits in a manner that they regain their dignity along with their Constitutional and Human Rights.

A Block wise campaign is planned with the Right to Food Campaign MP Support Group to collect information on the cases where the lesser wages have been paid. The challenges are tough. Local media doesn't publish our news, the women who emerged in leadership role while raising the issue are still denied work in panchayat, the resource constraint is there and the entire nexus of exploiters and pitted against us. We are assured of one fact that we are not alone in this struggle and friends who stood by us will still be around.