Dalit women win......

The Dalit (SC) women of Delhi were struggling for Minimum wages and right to work in Panchayat since May 2002. They were the prime movers in the region at raising the issue that Panchayat was underpaying the wage-earners. This caused quite an opposition for Dalit wage-earning women and SPANDAN from every quarter. Few of the Dalit women who proactively denied to compromise were identified and denied work on various contexts. They however kept strong in the face of virtual poverty and drought and being landless and literally at the verge of begging. They could get employment after about six months (November 2002). Once again the problems arose over the payment of wages. Once again the panchayat made a deal to accept mere Rs. 35/-. Now most of the wage-earners kept up the demand. The payments were delayed for more than two months or so. At the onset of new year i.e. January 2003 the wage-earners were made to accept lesser wages on two grounds. Firstly they were misguided that they will lose the wages as the new year has begun and secondly they themselves were running out of grains and had no other alternative income generation source locally. However 5 Dalit wage-earners (including 4 women) kept up the struggle and did not compromise despite all odds. The issue was highlighted once again in media. Dainik Bhaskar, a leading Hindi daily reported that lesser wages are paid and the Supreme Court’s directives in this regard are totally ignored. There was an intermittent enquiry and few wage-earners were abruptly interrogated. Nothing happened. But the Panchayat continue to discard the ones demanding full wages and employing those agreeing in advance to accept Rs. 35/-. In the months of June-July couple of women managed to get the work but as soon as the sarpanch discovered he ordered them to be removed and asked them to collect their wages from his home. The women kept going for three consecutive days but were returned on some or other excuse. On 21st July 2003 when the women went to sarpanch’s home to collect their payments, the enraged sarpanch caught hold of one of the Dalit woman and abused her. She somehow managed to each back home and held discussions with other Dalit women. They decided to report the case to the local Police-station. While they were on the way, the Sarpanch intercepted them on the way alongwith the local Police-station incharge and threatened the Dalit women of dire consequences if they dared to report the case. Both of them made the payments on the road.

The Dalit women were scared and held discussions with SPANDAN. It was decided that a Dalit representation meet the authorities and the other people’s organizations. They met and filed complaints with Supdt. of Police, IG, Director General of Police, State
Women's Commission, Human Rights Commision and the Labour Commissioner. They also held discussions with NGOs and the press.

After all the meetings and consultations it appeared the time to be ripe to file the complaint with Dr. N.C. Saxena, the Commissioner appointed by the Supreme Court to oversee the implementation of Supreme Court's directives in this matter. The dalit wage-earners and SPANDAN filed a detailed case with all relevant enclosures. It was emphasised that the aggrieved have exhausted all the administrative echelon from Block to District to Divisional level. It was also mentioned that the exploitation has reached to the extent of sarpanch manhandling the Dalits and even police becoming a party to it.

It was great rejoicing for the struggling Dalit community to receive a letter from Dr. N.C. Saxena stating that he has already written to the state government asking to investigate the matter and take immediate remedial measures and ensure that aggrieved get their entitlements.

At the local level the impact was felt with panchayat secretary coming and making payments at the doorsteps of Dalit community that had raised the issue but till date the balance payment of only one work has been released.

We received a letter from CEO, Zilla Panchayat stating that an enquiry was conducted and the complaint was found to be true.

The fact was accepted that the wage-earners were indeed paid less than the stipulated minimum wages. However the letter mentioning the fact that all labourers have been made the balance payment is questionable. There are still many workers and many works left for which the payments are to be made.

We have geared up a campaign to get the application of wage-earners across 65 villages across the block stating the rate they are receiving. It is a prevalent practise to underpay and at some villages the rates provided are as low as Rs. 28/-

This has encouraged the resident Dalit community and people's organisation is being strengthened. In more than a dozen villages Dalit people's organisation have begun to emerge around the issue of work and wages, land acquisition, alternative income source exploration and social concerns like dowry and so on.

We have to broadbase our efforts and we intend to free at least the Block (with its 65 villages) from prevalent exploitation of underpayment of minimum wages. Lastly but not the least (as you know) the resource constraint at our end is a big obstacle but our spirits are not beggared.
Seema
Secretary
SPANDAN
Dahi