

VAGAD LABOURERS AND FARMERS ORGANIZATION

(Vagad Mazdoor Kisan Sangathan)

This Organization was formed in 1998. The People's Organization started with meetings of those tribal farm families whose homesteads were on forest land. The meetings explored with the people ways they could keep their rights over their means of production, their land. Slowly, other issues were raised by the people over the 8 to 9 year period. Issues such as Tribal Self Rule (since Dungarpur District is a Schedule V area), employment, credit issues, migration, women's organization and empowerment. Whatever were the problems of the people in this "Vagad" area, were taken up by the Organization. The word "Vagad" in the Vagadi Language means 'Jungle'. This region was rich in forests, but due to British Rule, laws and policies, the natural resources were destroyed, and over the years, many people had to migrate to Gujarat or to other neighboring states for their livelihood.

This condition led people to have a livelihood pattern of small marginal farming, collection and sale of minor forest produce, and daily wage labouring. This balance requires income from each of the 3 areas. In 1998, the forest land issue emerged and people from Dungarpur District approached Astha to help them to get organized to fight displacement. Astha appointed 1 worker to Dungarpur and with his help, the people formed the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Organization, which now works in the 5 Blocks of Dungarpur District, and in 3 Blocks of Banswara District.

At present there are 15,272 members up to now in the organization.

Objectives:

1. To establish rights of adivasi people over the natural resources for their livelihood.
2. To make people aware of the benefits of the Tribal Self Rule Legislation, and to help them to become Village Republics with greater control over the resources and social life of their villages.
3. To work for employment and income generating activities.
4. To stop corruption and irregularities in development programmes and help in procuring benefits of schemes by the poor people.
5. To solve issues of women like gender inequality, injustice and to stop women atrocities. Make laws known to the people about women rights.
6. To build and maintain a strong structure and fight the adverse effects of economic policies and globalization on the poor people.
7. Develop leadership capacity in the Organization, and to work with them in actions for the development of the poor people of the area.

Activities during the Year

Formation of the Campaign for Rights of Employment and Information (Rozgar Evam Suchna Ka Adhikar Abhiyan)

The Vagad Labourers and Farmers Organization, Dungarpur, was the local host for people who came from all over the country to participate in the NREGA Social Audit in 5 Blocks, during April 2006. About 300 people of the Organization did the main background work of making charts, getting the records from the Blocks, in all ways preparing for the Social Audit in 850 villages from March 25th to April 5th 2006. 31 groups were made for Social Audit done in 200 Gram Panchayats out of the 237. The Social Audit was a tremendous success, and the report with recommendations was given to the District Collector.

The members and leaders of the Organization, with the support of Astha, also did the preparations for the follow-up to the Social Audit in January 2007. There was one panel discussion about the implementation of the Employment Guarantee Act with: the Collector, the officer heading the Employment Guarantee work in the District, BDOs, Programme Officers, and elected representatives – President of the District Council, and the Chairpersons of the Block Committees (Jila Pramukh and Pradhans of the Panchayat Samitis).

Bank Loan Repayment Atrocities

With the help of Astha, the leaders of the Organization have helped their members to question and calculate the loan repayments demanded by the banks. It was discovered that banks were “over-recovering” loans given to the simple tribal farmers. Due to wrong calculation of interest, and calous bank employees, the banks sent demands for the next installment of the bank loans to people who had already paid back the loans, with interest, and more! Cases of exploitation were also uncovered by the use of the Right to Information Act – the Act was used to get data from bank records. 10 people were saved with the help of the Organization.

Tribal Self Rule (TSR)

Vagad has been working on TSR with more than 110 villages in Dungarpur and Banswara District. Each TSR village Gram / Gaon Sabha has formed a “leadership committee” and selected leaders from each committee have come together to form Area or “Pal” Councils or “Parishads”. The “Pal” is a traditional clustering of 12 villages. The collective strength of the Gram / Gaon Sabha leaders, united in the Pal Councils, have strengthened the position of the decisions taken by TSR villages, an important development, in fulfilling the original intention of the PESA legislation (Panchayats {Extension to the Scheduled Areas} Act 1996).

Under TSR Programme, a general meeting was held between the 4th and the 6th of January, 2007 at Dungarpur. In February, 220 people took part in a rally and gave a memorandum through the District Collector to the State Government, with demands about various problems – displacement, heavy rainfall, housing, compensation, bank loan repayment etc. Two members of the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Organization also attended a workshop on Tribal Self Rule in India, held in Hyderabad from the 28th of July to the 6th of August, 2006.

Village Republic Convention (8th Convention)

About 2,800 people participated. Dr. B. D. Sharma was invited as a Chief Speaker and Mr. Dilip Singh Bhuria was the Chief Guest. The objective of the Convention was to take stock of the progress of Tribal Self Rule in the District, in Rajasthan, and in the country, and to encourage the people to continue to take their villages into their own control. It is a time of solidarity, of encouraging the people that a “new world for them is possible”, and of enjoyment in being together.

The Kadana Dam Displacement Issue in Banswara District

The Kadana Dam was constructed about 25 years ago in Gujarat, and when completed, the dam backwaters extended into Anandpuri Block of Banswara District of Rajasthan, displacing many villages of tribal farm families. Early on in the Dam construction process, the tribal families who would be displaced were given land papers for alternate land in the area. But the people could not imagine how that river *down there*, in the valley, could over come *up here* to their hillside homesteads, and so they didn’t go to occupy their new land sites. When the dam was finished, and the waters flooded their fields and homes, they went to the land that had been allotted, but by then, other poor tribal families had occupied the land. So they returned and have been struggling ever since, to survive and to get some sort of justice. The Vagad Labourers and Farmers Organization has taken up this issue with the

struggling people, and have done a survey of affected families. The work on the issue is ongoing.

Forest Land Displacement Issue

The people of the P.O. have been struggling for almost 10 years, as part of the Forest Land People's Movement. Just before the Central Government Forest Rights Bill was passed, 400 P.O. members went to Delhi and participated in the major rally on the 29th of November 2006, to put pressure on the government to pass the Bill for Forest Rights for Tribal people whose homesteads are on forest department land. The People participated from different villages and Gram Panchayats of Dungarpur and Banswara Districts, and the P.O. took the lead in raising awareness and mobilizing the people, along with Astha's help. Land rights files for 230 people in Banswara and 340 people of Dungarpur have been prepared. About 1200 files will be prepared to provide proof of land possession.

Microplan

A survey was done in Kushalpada Panchayat of Kushalgarh Block of Banswara District. The survey was done by Astha and the Vagad Labourers and Farmers Organization, working together. In this microplan survey, the objective of this survey was to give the Gram Sabha concrete information to make village level schemes and plans, etc.

Support to Supreme Court Food Commissioner Research Project

The Vagad Organization supported the Supreme Court Food Commissioner's research on the food security situation of handicapped people, old people and single women/widows. The work in Dungarpur District was the Rajasthan sample of a 3-state study which also included Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. The survey was done in the months of December 2006 and January 2007 in 3 villages: Manat, Kodiagud and Holilemda. 3 persons among the people involved in the survey took part in the workshop at Bhubaneshwar from 7-10 March 2007.

Participation in Large Events

- Women's Training Forum from 13th to 15th February
- Gram/Gaon Sabha Committee Camp at Simalwada on 20th and 21st February, 2007.
- 22 members participated in the Social Audit from 14th to 20th February, 2007 at Udaipur.
- 13 members participated in the Gordwad Adivasi Organization annual convention in Bali, Pali District on 22nd and 23rd February, 2007
- 8 members attended the Advocacy Camp in Udaipur on 24th and 25th February, 2007.
- 12 members participated in a meeting/workshop organized by Jarga Samiti at Kumbalgarh.
- 15-20 Gram Panchayat representatives attended a Regional Camp on Tribal Self Rule in Beechiwada Block, on the 11th and 12th of March, 2007.