

BIHAR

New Dynamics of Agricultural Workers' Struggle

Mukul

Agricultural workers in Madhapur block of Madhubani district of Bihar are successfully organising themselves to demand minimum wages from landowners.

"SINCE July-August 1993, the Mushhar agricultural labourers of the village are facing the wrath of total boycott by the landowners. We were getting only 1.5 kg paddy husk for a day-long work. But when we organised ourselves, demanded a little more and called for a bandh, the landowners retaliated like this"—so narrates Rameshwar Sadai, an agricultural labourer of Hashauli village in Madhapur block of Madhubani district, revealing a new, unfolding situation in various villages of northern Bihar. Not only Hashauli, but other villages in the same block, too, like Nandanvan, Navlakha, Vindeshwar, Mushhari, Kheri, Khashyam, Rahuwa Sagram, Bheja Fakirana, are witnessing for the first time a major dispute over payment of minimum wages to agricultural labourers.

Behind this issue lies a deep socio-political polarisation, which is taking place in the remote rural hinterland of Bihar. On the one hand, even the most downtrodden castes, like Mushhar, are organising themselves together with the agricultural labourers of other backward castes, like Mandal and Yadav. On the other hand, the landowners, who are all from forward castes, are not ready to accept this and are conspiring to crush the labourers.

Thus, in the months of January and February 1994, many Mushhar labourers received anonymous, threatening letters. Nasiblal Sadai reads one such letter: "Now the last time has arrived. This is our final

statement. Bloody holi will take place. You have reached your last stage".

Though it all started in Madhapur with the formation of Lok Shakti Sangathan, a mass organisation working primarily among the Mushhars, the socio-political scenario dominated by Laloo Yadav regime seems to be a constant reference point for the contending parties. The Mushhars, Mallahas, Yadavs and Mandals feel a sense of security and hope, even though the state government has not done anything to enforce the Minimum Wages Act or to resolve the conflict. And the forward caste landowners hold the Laloo Yadav government to be primarily responsible for creating these types of disturbances.

Hashauli is a remote Mushhar village, almost 4 km away from any road or regular transport. All the 50 families of the village are totally landless, and dependent on agricultural work, available in Bhagwanpur village. This village is dominated by the forward caste landowners who own vast amount of agricultural land in the area. Only one adult Mushhar is skilled in carpet weaving and has recently come back from Varanasi. The male workers do the main agricultural work, like ploughing, sowing, harvesting, and the female workers do the supplementary work, like carrying the crop load, taking care of crop, cleaning the field, etc.

These Mushhar families are one of the worst victims of socio-economic exploitation in the rural set-up of Bihar. Deprived of

land and other productive resources, they are at the mercy of landowners for their day to day survival. Their poverty and helplessness is strengthened by beliefs such as the Mushhars in Bihar eat rats and snakes to feed themselves. Hashauli village is a typical example of Mushhars' plight where they are continuously being denied even the minimum legal and democratic rights. In 1978 and 1981, altogether 2 Mushhar families were given 'pattas' of land, but they are not in a position to take possession of that land even today. The common and government land in the village is under the control of landowner Kaushalya Devi and other women complain that they have been beaten up and humiliated a number of times by the landowner. The villagers allege that the landowner murdered one, young, Jhamalo Yadav who tried to organise the Mushhars and other backward communities in the 80s.

The payment of minimum wages to agricultural workers is the most burning issue today in Hashauli. The Bihar government has fixed the daily minimum wage for agricultural labourers as Rs 24.50. But in Hashauli, the Mushhars are getting 1.5 kg paddy husk, wheat or maize for a day-long work, which comes to Rs five to eight. No other benefits are being given.

Deepak Bharti, convenor Lok Shakti Sangathan, explains the issue in Jharkhand: "The conditions of an agricultural labourer are pathetic, since he is getting such meagre wages since the last 10 to 15 years. But they have not demanded the government wage rate and are only asking for a daily wage of 3 kg paddy husk, wheat or maize. This would only cost Rs 12 to 15. The rationale for this demand comes from the specific situation of the area. Every year floods come in this area and destroy most of the crop. Thus the landowners are also suffering. In this situation there should be a workable rate of minimum wage by which agricultural labourers can survive and landowners can also continue."

The landowners are not ready to accept this workable rate and complain about carelessness, lethargy and limited working hours of agricultural labourers. Chandrakant Jhankhia of Bhagwanpur village, says: "We are not going to give 3 kg wage. We cannot bear this burden, and above all, the Mushhar workers are working for very few hours. They are not delivering the goods. The ways of demanding higher wages are all not acceptable to us, as they have suddenly decided on it and are now asking us to implement it."

Hashauli and the surrounding villages are in a constant state of tension and trauma since July 1993. When the Sangathan asked for an increase in the minimum wages and threatened with a bandh only, the landowners aggressively decided on a total boycott of local labourers. The landowners are now hiring labourers from outside and

their desperate need are even paying 3 kg wages to them. The labourers are being **threatened** in many ways and the **landowners** are imposing various restrictions to **break their struggle**. The cattle belonging to **Mushhar** are not allowed to go in the open fields and lands of landowners. They are not allowed to use some of the common ways **which pass near the houses of landowners**. **The use of tanks and wells is also being heavily restricted**. Some stray, violent incidents have taken place between the landowners and agricultural labourers, but they were controlled within a short span of time.

The Mushhar agricultural workers and their Lok Shakti Sangathan have successfully organised protest during the last nine months. Facing a boycott from landowners is really difficult but the labourers are continuing with their struggle and sometimes they go out to find some casual work.

Hashauli has also initiated similar protests in nearby Mushhar villages. Though

the degree of protest is limited in other villages up till now, it is just the beginning. The most significant development lies in the fact that the agricultural labourers from the nearby villages are not working in the fields of **Bhagwanpur**. In some cases, they are actively joining the protest of Mushhar labourers. Even the Yadav and Mallaha agricultural labourers of Bhagwanpur village have refused to work in the fields of landowners. Kheli, the mukhia of Bhagwanpur Mallaha 'toli' and Dhyani Yadav, the mukhia of Yadav toli jointly assert: "We are not working. We will not work until the demands of Mushhar of Hashauli are settled."

The emergence of organisations like Lok Shakti Sangathan, the rising aspirations of the most downtrodden castes like Mushhar and the coming together of persons Kheli Mallaha, Dhyani Yadav and Surya Narayan Sadai are some of the notable dynamics in Bihar today.