

Doom for Farm Workers in North Bihar **The Case of involving Rajasthani Tractors in Embankment Projects**

In a scenario where employment opportunities are non-existent, state government's decision to deploy Rajasthani tractors for earth work involved in the strengthening of embankments can at best be looked upon as an appalling onslaught on the livelihood opportunities of the poor and the marginalised. Since the 50s, embankment related earth work has been a major source of employment, particularly for the landless agricultural labourers of the flood ravaged Madhubani region. In yet another of its ill thought out decision the state government, which rides the crest of committed support of the downtrodden sections appears determined to erode all employment opportunities available to its supposedly unflinching constituency. Like innumerable such decisions the issue of involving Rajasthani tractors would have gone unnoticed but for the existence of Lok Shakti Sangathan (LSS), a vibrant network of community based organisations spread across 600 villages of the 4 districts of Darbhanga, Madhubani, Saharsa & Supaul.

Maintenance and strengthening of embankments, a key flood protection strategy of the government, undertaken on an annual basis has been a source of livelihood for the landless populace of the region. The unskilled daily wage earners are entirely dependent on agricultural work or earth work (ex. Digging, cutting and leveling of earth) available as part of different embankment projects for their subsistence. As floods affect even agricultural work, the vulnerable sections are left with little else than earn livelihood through engagement in seasonal embankment projects promoted by the Water Resources Department. The plight of the Musahar caste is particularly miserable given the fact that their continued involvement in earth work has helped them specialize in earth work and in turn rendered it as their main source of livelihood. In the four blocks of Madhubani the labourers constitute 35% of the total population (as per 2001 census) and among this sizeable section, majority stand robbed of livelihood opportunities.

The Rajasthani tractors, which do not require any manual help except that of the driver,

have not only reduced the labourers to starvation like situation but also deprived the local tractor owners and small contractors from income earning opportunities as they are no longer involved in loading and unloading of earth. According to a rough estimate 180 Rajasthanis tractors are engaged in embankment related work.



Lok Shakti Sangathan, a people's organisation primarily involved in entitlement oriented advocacy and struggle for the marginalised sections of the region, has launched an agitation in cooperation with the local Gram Panchayats against the introduction of these tractors. Besides holding regular meetings to discuss and chalk out an appropriate strategy for persuading the government to reconsider its decision, the affected members have held repeated demonstrations to press their point. The LSS activists also disrupted the operation of Rajasthanis tractors at some sites leading to tension between contractors and locals. Landless peasants including America Devi, Tiliya, Surya Narain Sadai & Anandi Devi, under the banner of LSS have brought out a leaflet to protest against the government decision of utilizing the services of these tractors. Deepak Bharti, founder convener of Lok Shakti Sangathan, has been actively engaged in devising a facilitative strategy to work out a coalition of the affected groups to broad base the struggle around the issue. LSS under his leadership has been able to align the interests of the affected sections in a way largely unprecedented for the region. The active support from panchayat level representatives, local tractor owner associations and small contractors has lend dynamism to the struggle. The issue has been brought to the notice of various political parties but, Deepak Bharti maintains that in this direction little else could be achieved other than a patient hearing from a few of them. The opposition parties inspite of displaying a keen interest in the earlier phases, could not sustain the momentum of highlighting the issue at relevant fora.



However, local assertion has yielded results at several sites spread over 5 blocks of Madhubani & Darbhanga districts leading to re-deployment of local tractors in embankment related work. This In turn has created employment opportunities for the local labourers. Meanwhile, LSS persists in its endeavour to take its struggle to scale and enable optimum engagement of local labourers at all such sites where embankment related earth work is being carried out with Rajasthani tractors.