

## Jharkhand Fellowship: Ensuring Rural Livelihoods with MNREGA

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### MNREGA Watch

MNREGA is a national jobs program against rural poverty, starvation and destitution. It has proved particularly critical during the disruption caused by the Covid-10 Pandemic. The MNREGA Watch is a set up of activist units whose goal is to monitor the program and ensure that it is reaching intended beneficiaries. It consists of a state-level coordinating body and block-level units doing everyday MNREGA work throughout the State. It is part of a national network the *NREGA Sanghrsh Morcha*. Each State has its own Watch and James is the convener for the State of Jharkhand. The block-level units are known as “*Sahayata Kendras*”. They are usually made up of two or three volunteers who do the day-to-day monitoring work as well as solve problems that come up in the administration of the MNREGA work assignments and **ensure that:**

- Workers get paid within 15 days of having performed the work and if timely payment does not happen, that workers are compensated for more than their actual wages for work performed
- Pregnant women under MNREGA receive maternity benefits in the form of wages paid out without having to perform work
- Job seekers who are denied work are paid unemployment compensation
- A muster roll is made available at work sites well on time. Absence of the muster roll at a work site before work begins create problems – workers who begin working later have difficulty proving that they did any work for a work site
- Work entitlements are provided for unskilled laborers and their families
- Job Card IDs are provided to tribals and adivasis
- Social audits are initiated to ensure that MNREGA work is carried out inclusively, fairly and in line with each village’s annual plan for MNREGA. Social audits involve the review of MNREGA schemes that are active as well as those that have been abandoned. They look for irregularities such as the misappropriation of funds and report findings to the panchayats. It includes pursuing follow-up action such as making sure that funds misappropriated are recovered through disciplinary action.

### James’ role in MNREGA Watch as the Convener

- Offer guidance and solutions to problems encountered on the ground by *Sahayata Kendras*.
- Take problems in MNREGA implementation to the State Government and press for their intervention and action.
- Highlight problems with the workings of the MNREGA in newspapers and social media. This includes interviews with the newspapers and uploading videos of his comments and analysis on YouTube. He also uses Twitter and Facebook to reach a wider audience so that there is greater public awareness of deficiencies and irregularities in MNREGA.
- Another critical role of the Convener is to participate in a broader coalition of all activist movements joining hands with various activists, even those outside the ambit of MNREGA, so as to provide strength in numbers as well as contributing to a broader perspective on MNREGA.



**James Herenj (4<sup>th</sup> from right), along with other activists, submitting a request for action to Chief Minister Hemant Soren. To his right is the economist Jean Dreze, Professor at Ranchi University, the prime architect of the MNREGA act of 2005. Prof. Dreze has been the driving force behind the concept of the Sahayata Kendra.**



James leading the MNREGA Day March in Manika



Women’s rally demanding an increased female police presence at the Manika police station

**2022 accomplishments of the NREGA Sahayata Kendra, Manika (James' base of work)**  
**2022-23 Update**

	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Results</b>
1	Applications to register previously unregistered people into the MNREGA system	60	Approved in time
2	Applications for registered people to be assigned MNREGA work	746	Obtained in time
3	Applications submitted demanding payment delayed for work already done	144	Obtained in time
4	Applications submitted under the National Food Security Act (NFSA)	159	Mostly approved, see Note below*
*Note: NFSA applications can involve complex situations such as the issuance of Primary Household cards that take more time for the administration to respond. But other than such cases, most applications are approved timely.			

**Successful Campaign for MNREGA worker widows: 3 widows receives compensation**

Regulations enacted by Jharkhand State under the MNREGA Act provided that if a MNREGA worker is between the age of 18 and 65 years, works for a minimum of 15 days in the financial year that he dies, his next of kin would be paid compensation in the amount of Rs. 30,000. However, the experience of MNREGA activists has been that energetic follow-up with the State Government is needed to make this happen. The determined pursuit of this issue by Jharkhand MNREGA activists ensured that the State Government paid Rs. 30,000 as compensation to three qualified widows - Smt. Tetri Devi, widow of Basdev Singh, Subhaagiya Devi, and another widow from Bariatu village, all during the 2022 year.

**Effective activism by MNREGA activists results in changes to three important State policies**

- The payment rate for MNREGA workers was raised, during 2022, from Rs. 210 per day to Rs. 237 per day.
- In order to provide food grains to deprived families per the National Food Security Act, 2013, the Jharkhand Government launched the Jharkhand State Food Security Scheme, in which 2 million new members were added.
- The State also launched, the CM's Sarvajana Pension Yojana, in order to provide pension payments to needy families.



*Successful campaigning for Policy changes is extensively covered in the print news media as well as social media.*



*James addressing local women in Manika on joining hands to stand up for their rights.*

**Gramsabha Empowerment: 16 Forest Dwellers get land-owning rights on Jan 16th 2022**

James is one of several IFA Fellows who are working to empower the rural Gramsabhas to exercise their rights under India's Forest Rights Act and demand control over local natural resources. Obtaining land-owning rights for the forest dwellers is a major objective of the FRA. Unfortunately, the govt. has failed to implement the law and forest dwellers all over India are suffering due to inability to earn their living from working on their land. 2022 was a successful year for this issue – 16 families submitted proper evidence under the FRA and were issued, on January 16th, 2022, land-owning rights. **The photograph below shows the 16 family representatives proudly holding the land-owning documents they received.**



*-- IFA Liaison: Sai Chandavarkar*