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# Rural Camps: Current Assessment and Future Issues\*

Ratlam was one of the four sites where International Workshop on Rural Development was held during the first week of April 1977. Broadly speaking, the objectives of this workshop were to assess the impact of the rural camps organized by the National Labour Institute since February 1975 and to generate strategies of rural change and development with the target population of the poorest sections of rural society (the landless and the poor peasants)—as both the inputs to and beneficiaries of the development. The key participants in these three-day workshops were those rural poor who had attended previous rural camps. At Ratlam, a total of 22 rural participants attended this workshop. They had attended one of the three rural camps held earlier at Ratlam (11 participants), Bilaspur (7 participants) and Udaipur (4 participants).

The basic principle guiding the design of the workshop was participation, and members of the NLI staff and international colleagues played the roles of facilitators, catalysts and listeners. To that extent, the thrust of the workshop was for the rural participants to share their experiences since the previous camp, to examine their successes and failures and the reasons thereof, and to generate alternative strategies to ameliorate their sufferings.

This report is based on the experiences of and the data generated during this workshop. It attempts to highlight the current scene as observed by us and as described by the participants. It is intended to identify some trends which have been set in motion since the previous rural camps. Moreover, some aspects did not

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register any change at all. This report will present both these aspects. In order to provide a reference point against which the changes or lack of it are assessed, the reports<sup>1</sup> on the previous camps held at Ratlam, Bilaspur and Udaipur have been used. After an assessment of present trends, this paper identifies and discusses some issues related to the future design of rural camps and the alternative roles that the National Labour Institute can play.

## Present Trends

Based on our observations both prior to and during the workshop, and the data generated by the rural participants, a series of propositions, and their supporting data, are presented below to highlight the present trends:

1. *Participants were intensely aware of and articulate about their sufferings, its causes and their legal rights.*

Right from the very beginning, it was clear that the participants were very much aware of their misery and what is causing it. About 8 of them were very vocal about it too. They were able to identify the reasons for their suffering as emanating from their own practices and those of the money-lenders/landlords. They did not hesitate in accepting their socio-religious rituals as being the main source of their indebtedness. Similarly, they were vocal about the various exploitative practices followed by their local money-lenders and landlords.

More significantly, they were able to articulate their legal rights. They knew minimum wages in their states, were clear about the abolition of bonded labour and removal of indebtedness. Most of them knew whom to approach in their tehsil or district for obtaining the various legal rights due to them; and nine of them had already approached officials upto the level of the District Magistrate with their grievances. In our

TABLE 1

Groups	Organisation-Building		Improvements/Successes		
	No. of village	No. of People	Relief from bonded labour	Wage Increases	Removal of Indebtedness
1. Ratlam (a)	5	60	47 Halis in Delanpur (Tehsil Ratlam)	Bhils get Rs. 4 (Male) and Rs. 2.75 (Female) as PWD construction workers in Delanpur.	27 acres (65 cases under perrocessing)
(b)	6	100	18 in Sherpur Khurd (Tehsil Aloth)	Minimum wages in 4 villages	11 cases (ornaments worth Rs. 3000 in police custody).
2. Bilaspur	12	50	10 persons	In 8 villages, minimum wage increased from Rs. 2 to Rs. 3 (equal wages for men and women).	16 cases (range from Rs. 300 to Rs. 1000)
3. Udaipur	5	150	10 Halis	In Kotala Tehsil, wages increased from Rs. 1.50 for men and Rs. 1.25 for women to Rs. 3.50 and Rs. 3.00 respectively.  250 ST's got land for agriculture.	Following the arrest of 2 money-lenders forced voluntary return of goods in case of 240 Harijan families.

meeting with the District Collector of Ratlam, we learnt that he had noticed this increased awareness on their part.

It was clear that the previous rural camps had helped the present participants in two significant ways. Firstly, they had become quite aware of the dynamics obtaining in their poverty as well as the various legal measures available to them. Secondly, they had become confident enough to boldly verbalize them in the presence of others. This latter point can be contrasted with the experiences during the first rural camps,<sup>2</sup> where they were experiencing great difficulty in even verbalizing their names.

*2. Significant successes had been achieved in the acquisition of their legal rights through their own initiative.*

During the initial rural camps, one of the central messages given to the participants was to organize themselves and to demand their rights. During this workshop, the details of successes achieved by their initiatives were impressive. Table 1 summarizes some of these accomplishments.

The data given in Table 1 should be seen in the context of two critical factors. Firstly, these data about their achievements are only suggestive. Moreover, they are also self-reported by the participants themselves. We were able to obtain some rudimentary confirmation of these figures for the Ratlam groups because we had undertaken some field trips in Ratlam district prior to the workshop. No such confirmation is available for the other two groups. Secondly, the issue of obtaining minimum wages is rendered very difficult in regions where migratory labour is available. In Ratlam Tehsil, we came across a group of Harijans who had no work during the peak harvesting season. We learnt that they had asked for the minimum wages (Rs. 3.50 per day) but the landlords were able to find migratory tribal labour to work for Rs. 2 per day. This group of about 30 families had set up a temporary settlement right across the road from the Harijan colony.

In spite of these factors, the data listed above indicate the changing trends. It may look like 'a drop in the ocean', but it was clear that concrete successes had been achieved.

*3. Two factors—level of organized action and support obtained from the local officials—jointly contributed to the successes mentioned above.*

When the participants described the achievements mentioned above, two factors were almost invariably present in each of them. These two factors were the level of organized action and the degree of support from local officials. The data suggested that the higher the level of organized action and the greater the degree of official support, the better were the chances of success. Some examples, given by them, were:

(a) Police Inspector arrested the money-lender when a group of villagers took the initiative in abolishing bonded labour in village Dhonswara, Tehsil Ratlam.

(b) After being threatened by police in village Richa, the leader went to Tehsil Thana with 150 labourers (all members of his organization) and was able to obtain assurance of help from the authorities.

(c) In village Piplia, 16 cases filed against bonded labour have not been settled so far because "the local officials do not listen".

(d) When the landlord beat up the bonded labourer who refused to work under bondage, the organizers approached the SDO of Ratlam Tehsil. Due to latter's intervention, all those who had kept bonded labourers were arrested and forced to sign a declaration not to perpetuate such practices any more.

(e) In Udaipur district, organized efforts to remove indebtedness did not bring any success for a long time because the local MLA was the main land-grabber and the local officials failed to take quick action against him.

It is evident from the few examples mentioned above that the presence of both these factors—high level of organized action and minimum support from local officials—is critical for success. Any one factor alone will not bring about the desired results.

*4. Instances of resistances to organized action were associated with lack of tactical/strategic planning during organization-building.*

As might well be clear by now, the rural camps had triggered off a number of efforts at building organizations of the rural poor in the districts of Ratlam, Udaipur and Bilaspur. Simultaneously, efforts to build these organizations and to take organized actions in their interest met with various resistances. These resistances came from various sources—the vested interest groups (landlords, money-lenders etc.), the local officials (who do not want to disturb the status quo), and other rural poor (who are either satiated in their present conditions or do not trust those who are initiating organization-building). The local politicians, in general, came from and were aligned with the first two groups anyway. The nature of this resistance varied greatly. Instances of passive resistance were seen in withdrawal or non-participation in organized action by the rural poor themselves. Other examples were a lack of response by the local officials in the form of delay in taking action against cases of violation of the laws, losing applications given by these organizers etc.

Instances of active resistance were of two kind. Most common form was hostility towards and direct attack on the organizers. In the district of Ratlam, four cases of direct attack were mentioned. These were initiated by the money-lenders and landlords who were going to be affected by the actions of the organizers. In a few cases, the local officials also summarily rejected or dismissed the cases filed by the organizers against some violators. Another form of active resistance was exemplified through instances of 'protest-absorption'. From Namli village in Ratlam Tehsil, one key leader of Harijans was given a job in the office of the District Collector. He was the only literate person in that group and he had compiled a list of those who were indebted to the local money-lenders. After he got the job, there was no one left to pursue those cases, thereby undermining the effectiveness of that newly formed organization.

From the data provided by the participants, it was also evident that active resistance occurred mostly in those cases where the organizers made tactical mistakes. It was clear that in the zeal of building organizations, these participants had not given enough thought to various strategies and tactics that they were going to adopt. They rarely identified local resources, people who can

and who cannot be trusted, officials who are sympathetic and who are corrupt etc. They failed to think about how to use information as a source of power, how to keep some plans secret till they are implemented, how to build trust among the various groups of rural poor etc. It is not implied here that they were expected to do all of the above. What is being described here are those issues related to tactics and strategies of organized action which are critical. There was some evidence that overlooking the tactical and strategic aspects was associated with active resistance from the other parties. To that extent, it can be posited that tactical and strategic considerations in organization-building of the rural poor can reduce instances of active resistance.

*5. Mechanisms for continuous flow of information to the grass-roots rural organizers are still non-existent.*

As was evident during the initial rural camps, no mechanism exists to provide continuous information to these rural organizers. The participants mentioned that they looked forward to this workshop as a source of fresh information about events, laws and issues which affect them. The rural camps had provided them information about their legal rights vis-a-vis minimum wages, abolition of bonded labour, removal of indebtedness, etc. The lack of any mechanism for valid information led to the widespread belief in the myth that with the change in the central government all the laws protecting the rights of rural poor were rendered void. The participants told us that some money-lenders and landlords had started demanding that their loans should be returned in cash or kind. In the absence of any valid information, these organizers and participants felt hesitant in protesting or opposing the moves made by the vested interests. In fact, the participants were unsure if the old laws had still existed when they came to the workshop.

This workshop acted as a source of information to break that myth. Another example of this lack of information mechanisms was narrated by the District Magistrate. The 'legal aid' committee formed in the district had not been used by these rural poor primarily because they did not know of its existence. Moreover, the participants themselves mentioned that they need some ongoing mechanism which can inform them about various

events and decisions affecting them.

*6. The semi-urban trade centres continue to be under the control of the few.*

Previous reports<sup>3</sup> from Ratlam and other districts have indicated the sizable hold that a few persons have over semi-urban trade centres. The grain *mandis*, milk-products and vegetable markets continue to be under the tight control of these few. In spite of the governmental influence in the form of registration of traders and appointment of an official secretary etc., the grain *mandi* of Ratlam was still oligopolic in nature, and small peasants had to accept the prices established by the traders' cartel. To that extent, rural camps had not been able to help the small peasant. Till these *mandis* provide opportunity for free sale, exploitation of small peasants will continue.

#### **Future Issues**

In the preceding section, some central aspects of the present trends that were noticed during the workshop have been described briefly. Based on a number of these trends and other data generated during the workshop, this section will identify some issues which need to be resolved in future. The issues presented here are grouped in two categories: (a) issues related to the future design of the rural camps and (b) issues related to the future role of NLI.

*(a) Issues related to the future design of rural camps.*

The central question concerning the future design of rural camps is : what kinds of grass-roots rural leaders is NLI interested in helping? Answer to this question will lead to the mechanics of how. If it can be assumed that the purpose of these rural camps is to bring about an awareness among the rural poor about the need for organized action, then consciousness-raising dialogues can fulfil that purpose. However, if the purpose of rural camps is defined more broadly to include some concrete training in building organizations of the rural poor, then the design of future rural camps has to include specific skill-building efforts. In this context, then, two related issues also need attention. Firstly, can some structured exercises, simulations and games be used in facilitating specific skill-building among the rural poor? And,

if yes, such materials need to be modified and developed to suit the special context of the rural poor. Secondly, the various roles to be played by the NLI staff during these rural camps will include the roles of group facilitator, resource-person, trainer and consciousness-raiser. To that extent, the staff of NLI engaged in rural camps also need to learn skills relevant to these roles in order to perform them more effectively.

Since organization-building among rural poor is included in this broader definition, the questions of resource-networks and support-systems become critical. In order that the participants of the rural camps succeed in building viable organization in their areas, some local resources, resource-persons (e.g., those who are literate), support groups etc. need to be identified, developed and linked with the participants. It might be unrealistic to expect that they can go out of the camp completely on their own, and develop effective organizations among their brethren.

Another issue is organizing rural camps for women. When asked about it, the participants in the workshop approved it overwhelmingly. It appears that such camps would provide the much needed local support to the already 'trained' participants. If such camps are to be planned, then NLI has to consider the various aspects of staffing them.

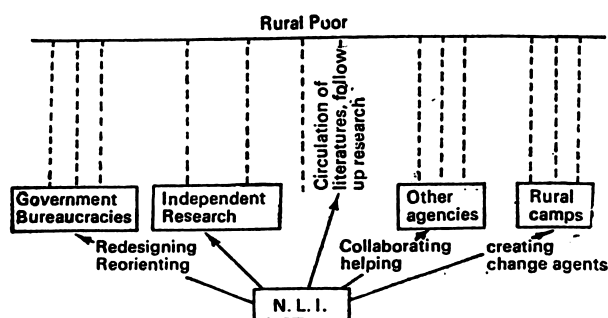
Finally, some follow-up mechanisms need to be built into the very design of the rural camps. Various options exist. Circulation of literature, field-visits, camps inviting participants to NLI etc. are some of the options. Circulation of some kind of literature seems to meet another need mentioned earlier—the need for a mechanism for continuous information-flow. However, this will not exclude using other options. Moreover, undertaking field trips to do a comparative research on the impact of various rural camps can be another mechanism to provide follow-up.

These are some of the key issues which can affect the future design of rural camps. However, these issues are submerged under the overall questions about the future role(s) of NLI in rural change.

*(b) Issues related to future role(s) of NLI.*

The central theme in this category is: should NLI

continue to be directly involved in rural change (e.g. through rural camps) or should it be indirectly engaged in it? Indirect involvement in rural change implies creating change agents, training others (individuals, groups, associations etc.) to organize rural camps, coordinating, collaborating with and providing help to other agencies engaged in various rural change efforts of various kinds, redesigning and reorienting government bureaucracies which deal with rural poor etc. Given the resources and expertise of NLI and the magnitude of the clientele (roughly 250 million rural poor), it appears more appropriate for NLI to play the indirect role. It is conceivable that the NLI's involvement in rural change may take the pattern shown in the figure below.



The model presented here shows a number of ways in which NLI can directly as well as indirectly engage itself to bring about rural change. The most direct form of direct involvement can be through independent research and action-research projects. One such example is the ongoing research in the nature, sources and impact of peasant organizations in India. It is clear that such research efforts can be the bases for some future policy and planning decisions. Another mechanism for direct involvement suggested in this model is the circulation of literature to the rural organizers and other grass-roots leaders who might lack any ongoing source of valid information.

Besides these direct mechanisms, the model also suggests a number of indirect mechanisms. One of them is training the change-agents or trainers who can independently organize rural camps for helping the rural poor. These change-agents can be individuals, groups, agencies or associations interested in rural change. Another mechanism that can be effective in the long-run is the collaboration with other agencies in their ongoing rural change efforts. One such example

is the current action research project being undertaken in collaboration with Seva Mandir, Udaipur. Other mechanism of indirect involvement is through the re-design and re-orientation of the government departments engaged in rural change. NLI has been doing a number of programmes for government agencies and these can be reorganized to provide the thrust outlined above. This model is only an example of the roles that NLI can play. Of course, various other possibilities exist, depending again on the kinds of resources and expertise available with the NLI.

Anyway, the question raised earlier in this section is more important than the particular answer provided above. Future role(s) of NLI vis-a-vis rural poor and rural change needs to be explored

in depth. This second issue—role of NLI in rural change—is to be resolved prior to considering the issues related to the future design of rural camps. It is hoped that the International Workshop has generated enough data and ideas to make this exploration meaningful and valid.

#### Notes

1. Refer to the articles on Udaipur, Bilaspur and Ratlam in the *National Labour Institute Bulletin* Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 1976) and Vol. 3, No. 3 (March 1977).
2. Refer to early reports on rural camps, especially Vol. 2 of the *National Labour Institute Bulletin* (1976).
3. 'Cacuts, Suction Pump and Invisible Men', Anisur Rahman, K. Gopal Iyer and R.N. Maharaj, *National Labour Institute Bulletin* Vol. 3, No. 3, March 1977.

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