

Who killed Lalit Mehta and Kameshwar Yadav?

The widespread corruption in the flagship scheme of the UPA government, NREGA, is hidden from none. Social audits conducted by civil society groups and individuals have proved the existence of corrupt practices being followed by the district administration of various states. These social audits are threatening the people who have been brazenly siphoning off funds from public schemes for decades. Consequently, this public accountability in grassroots democracy is turning out to be dangerous for those directly involved in exposing irregularities in the scheme. That is, those who want the NREGA to be a success.

On May 15, a mutilated body (eyes gouged out and face smashed) was found near the Kanda forest in Palamu district of Jharkhand. The body was that of Lalit Mehta, secretary of Vikas Sahyog Kendra, an NGO that has been actively working on the right to food and NREGA schemes. He blew the whistle on widespread corruption in the scheme in Palamu.

Lalit Mehta was last seen on May 14 with Jean Dreze, well known economist, former member of the National Advisory Council headed by Sonia Gandhi, and one of the architects of NREGA. He was seen in the small town of Daltoganj. He left in the evening for Chatarpur in Jharkhand. His dead body was later recovered by the adjoining Bishrampur Police Station.

Some people who live near the spot saw a man being beaten by a group. One man in Silda village went to check his well at night since he thought that the body might have been dumped there. No arrests have been made till date. Instead, the district administration has implicated Jean Dreze in its report. Activists claim that this is a brazen attempt to protect the criminals.

The report mentions that Robert, Lalit's brother-in-law, was aggressive and violent and always opposed his marriage with his sister. The report states that the other motive of the murder could have been the huge money transactions that took place at Vikas Sahyog Kendra. "This is totally baseless as it has been 10 years since Lalit has been married. So the Robert angle never arises. As far as money is concerned, Lalit has not paid his rent for months, his LIC policy has expired and his bank account has only Rs 800," says Jawahar Mehta, an activist who worked closely with the activist.

"The report shows that the police have made no serious enquiries into Lalit Mehta's murder. It does not provide any credible clue to this murder, but raises a number of mischievous conjectures using selective evidence. For instance, the report refers to interviews with Lalit Mehta's brother and his sons, without mentioning that the sons are one and three years old, respectively. Meanwhile, evidence from extensive interviews with Lalit's wife, Ashrita, is ignored. Further, the report is full of factual mistakes.

Even the date of the murder is incorrect: Lalit Mehta was murdered on May 14, not on May 15, as stated in the report," said Aruna Roy, Arundhati Roy, Prabhash Joshi, Harsh Mander, among other eminent activists, writers and journalists, in a statement.

Locals in Jharkhand complain of an entrenched nexus of politicians, contractors and district officials. They believe that Lalit was murdered so that no one would dare to enter these areas to conduct a social audit. Jean Dreze and Balram (NREGA advisor to the food commissioner appointed by the Supreme Court of India) in a joint statement said, "If this murder was an act to intimidation, it did not succeed. Friends and supporters from all over Jharkhand gathered at Vikas Sahyog Kendra and unanimously resolved to continue the campaign against corruption and exploitation in the area."

After facing pressure from various quarters, the state government, after more than a month of the murder, ordered a CBI probe. But the case has not yet reached the Public Grievances Cell which will take a call on it and then pass it on to the Central Vigilance Committee, which will then forward it to the CBI. Then, it's up to the CBI to take the case.

The high profile Arushi murder case was taken over by an 'active CBI' in 24 hours after the UP government's request, but no one knows how much time the CBI would take in Jharkhand. The case has been transferred to the CBI, but the local CID is reportedly still interfering. Said NBA's Medha Patkar: "They must get to the bottom of the case. This is not only the responsibility of the Jharkhand government, but also that of the Centre. This is a central scheme."

However, in Jharkhand, the circle of murders continues. Kameshwar Yadav, a prominent NREGA activist of Khatauri village, Deori Block in Giridih district, was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in June 7. Yadav was a member of the CPI-ML (Liberation), an overground organisation working with the poor. He was involved in exposing the corrupt role of contractors and middlemen. He relentlessly highlighted irregularities in the NREGS and mobilised landless labourers and job-seekers for implementation of the scheme. The district administration has arrested two individuals, but the case has not been cracked.

The Congress-RJD backed coalition in Jharkhand seems rather non-committal, even while NREGA is the UPA's baby. Tek Lal Mahto, JMM MP in Giridih, told : "I am not aware of any of these murders as I am not involved in any of the NREGA work. I am aware of the high level corruption among senior government officials in my constituency. I have also raised this issue in Parliament."

In recent past, several such incidents have occurred in different parts of the country where social audits are being conducted. Members of these teams are warned, physically threatened, provoked and sometimes brutally beaten up. Recalling the violence in Jhalawar, Rajasthan, Aruna Roy, member of the Centre's Employment Guarantee Council, said, "When we went to do social audit in Jhalawar, we were chased away. Someone even tied a noose around the neck of one of the women. If a little force would have been used, she too would have died."

The Bheri River in western Nepal's Surkhet valley flows along the road that connects the valley to Nepalgunj on the Indian border. It was a hot summer noon with the sun shining at its brutal best. I was on my way back from Surkhet to Nepalgunj on a treacherous road full of potholes caused by the massive landslides that inevitably follow after a heavy downpour. Our Maruti van, which seemed two decades old, made loud rattling noises each time it struck a pothole. My Nepalese driver, who was doing his best to avoid them, would curse government officials for their shoddy work each time we hit

a bump.

As we passed several tiny villages along the road, whose names my driver announced with encyclopedic joy, I could see the occasional truck or bus, and small groups of people dressed in colourful attires looking curiously at every passing car. The children were waving while the women turned their backs with shy smiles. Men were smoking bidis or working at construction sites and fields along the road. Others were resting in the shade to avoid the blistering sun.

Halfway from Surkhet, my driver informed me that the van had overheated and needed to cool down. He went to fetch water from a nearby mountain stream while I stood on the road watching the remains of massive trees that had washed away during the rains at the banks of the Bheri. After some time, the driver announced that we were fit to go. He started off the engine and we once again followed the serpentine road. A few kilometres ahead, I saw an old man and a small boy at the side of the road attending to a woman in her mid-twenties who seemed to have fainted in the heat. We stopped our car and got off to see what was going on. My driver asked the old man in Nepali. He replied that as he was on the way to Surkhet, he spotted this woman lying on the road. She was unconscious. The old man and the driver did their best to revive her, and after water was splashed on her face, she regained partial consciousness.

A woman, who was working in the field nearby, said the woman belonged to a nearby village and her name was Vinita. We helped her into the car and took her to her village. When we reached the bus stop, we figured out that her house was on the top of the hill and it would be difficult for us to take her there. We decided to take her to the only shop at that bus stop and enquired whether anyone knew about her. Initially, the two women sitting in the shop refused to recognise her but later revealed that she was their sister-in-law. One of them said, "She is not a girl of good character and should rather be dead. We are not responsible for her anymore as she has left her husband's home and has nowhere to go."

By now, the woman was feeling better. She said that she was an orphan and was brought up by her cousins who then got her married to a local boy. "Two days after I was married, my husband went to India with the promise of returning soon to take me with him. I was pregnant but he never called and did not come back in five years. Then my mother-in-law told me that my husband has abandoned me and I have to leave the house and go somewhere else."

Her brother later revealed that she was forced to marry her husband's polio-stricken elder brother, an alcoholic. "I had no choice as I had to feed my baby. I had nowhere to go." But fate had other plans for Vinita. Two weeks after her marriage with the elder son, the younger one returned from Delhi. After he came to know that his wife has married his brother, he was enraged. He beat her up brutally. She told him her compulsions, but her husband, along with his family, announced in the village that she was a woman of loose morals. They took her son away and beat her up and asked her to take care of herself. Even Vinita's brothers refused to take her back.

"After all this, I decided to go to India and work there. Since I had no money, I decided to walk, but I just couldn't take the heat and collapsed. Now I think I should die and then everyone might be

satisfied," Vinita said, constantly crying. Her brothers and sister-in-law didn't want to help her and even refused to serve her water. After much pleading, they decided to help her in getting a bus to Nepalgunj. "It is rightly said that education ruins women and in her case it is so true," said her sister in law.

Despite her terrible condition, Vinita's pride was hurt. She gave her a sarcastic look and told us that she is a graduate -- only girl in this backward area who has studied this far. She told us that she can take care of herself and thanked us all, and planted a kiss on the cheek of a little boy who had no clue of what was happening.

We gave her some money and joking asked her take a bus next time - instead of walking. She wearily smiled at us and wiping her tears said, "I have no option but to die, but thanks for everything you did." We left her at that shop and moved on. After a spell of long silence, the driver said, "There are many girls like her who have been abandoned by their husbands in these villages. These girls are left here to die and I don't think she is going to long for long. She too must die."

