

# CRITICAL STORIES OF CHANGE



## Bolangir to Hyderabad and the politics of poverty

*The choice of death in paradise or life in hell*

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international



# Background

## Critical stories of change

*Critical stories of change* is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid International plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. But in their openness, self-criticism, detailed analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are far removed from self-congratulatory 'good practice case studies'.

*Critical stories of change* are full of life, and are intended to impart the insights, advice and confidences of a friend.

ActionAid International often makes claims for its work and achievements. Yet, in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is often one of many players. What ActionAid rarely gets to know is the significant nature of its contribution and the factors (both internal and external) that contributed to the outcomes. *Critical stories of change* launches a new learning initiative in ActionAid International. The stories are the product of a facilitated learning process and aim to explore how change (both negative and positive) happens from the perspectives of different stakeholders. These are stories that explicitly link ActionAid and its partners' grassroots work to a rights agenda and hopefully capture the full complexity of ActionAid's development interventions and experiences: from the perspective of poor people, partners and organisation(s) and other stakeholders involved, as well as ActionAid itself. The documented lessons and experiences will hopefully provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

## Acknowledgements

*One of my favourite development books is called 'Sanitation without Water'. When rights work gets too much there is a soothing comfort in the simplicity and certain benefits of dry pit latrines. But there is no equivalent book on rights and poverty. I doubt there ever will be. There are simply too many ways for the powerful to cheat and exploit the vulnerable; too many ways to temporarily provide comfort and; too much unpredictability in the opportunities and obstacles that are thrown up as people organise, resist and claim rights to provide a manual. Often it is a journey without maps. The challenge is to navigate with clear principles and analysis. This story illustrates this well. But for those whose story it tells it is still open. The journey towards justice and the enjoyment of rights is a long one.*

*The story thus far has been told to me by many people. It is to these people and those that they fight alongside that any credit for what wisdom this story may contain, or renewed commitment against injustice that it may provoke should go. As a writer I have simply joined the points on a map. I would like to acknowledge and thank them all. ActionAid colleagues in India and their partner organisations take care in producing reviews, documentation and personal testimony. ActionAid India's Regional Offices in Delhi, Bhubaneswar and Hyderabad, and the field office in Bolangir hold many documents books and reports from which information was drawn for this report (follow links to their offices from the ActionAid International India webpage [www.actionaidindia.org](http://www.actionaidindia.org)). My special thanks go to Soma Sundaray, Umi Daniel, Supriya Akerkar, Asif Mohammed, Babu Matthews, and the many staff and partners that I met. Also to Harsh Mander who wrote Bilasani's story which has been so extensively quoted in this text. Like a magpie I have picked their shiniest nuggets to line my own nest. Finally my thanks go to Antonella Mancini for inspiring the Stories of Change process and for providing such good support and advice.*

**Koy Thomson**  
**December 2005**

## Introduction



Chris Stowers/Parros/ActionAid

*This is a story of tough, ordinary people surviving almost unendurable lives. It is about those who strive to help them and those who strive to do harm. It is about one organisation in particular, ActionAid, running to catch up with the realities of people's lives and trying to improve things. It is a story written and told to me by many people; an approximate account of how change in the real world really happens.*

*It is also a story of an organisation learning to understand and act on problems of poverty through the lens of human rights. It asks what is being done to people which takes away their freedom to be full human beings and drives them into poverty. It is the story of five years of **Fighting poverty together**, ActionAid's first rights-focused organisational strategy. It is a story about an organisation being challenged every day to reflect upon and rethink approaches and engagements. For the people of Bolangir it is a continuous story of intricate hardship. Age-old systems of exploitation, feudalism and capitalism have combined to squeeze the life blood from some of the toughest but most vulnerable people in India.*

*It is a rude awakening to the depth and cunning of human and institutional relationships that keep people poor.*

## Hyderabad: Bricks

*It is night. Distant twinkles, silhouettes, and everywhere a rhythmic tapping tell of a sprawling activity. At my feet, a man dexterously takes a ball of sooty mud from his crouching son, slapping it into a mould, shaking, levelling and passing it to his wife, who takes four such moulds and knocks them into neat lines: embryo bricks. The team of three will do this up to 1,500 times in their 18 hour working day. They each will have shifted and shaped two and half tonnes of earth. The man is called Nilkanth Khunbher. His home is 1,000 kilometres away. He will repeat this work every day for six or seven months.*

*The air blows thick with heat, fly-ash, mud dust and choking gases. It offends the nose and coats the mouth and throat and eyelids. It softens the delicate tissues of lungs and throat to tuberculosis, emphysema and cancer. There are no places to wash in privacy, nor latrines. Skin and bowels erupt in protest. Retaining a vestige of dignity is a never-ending struggle and you have to be tough and resourceful to keep clothes and bodies clean and the dust out. Homes are knocked together in the first 48 hours from the first raw bricks of their labour. They are too low to stand in. Every movement is watched. The only contact outside the kiln, to buy the chicken feed and meagre extras that make up a diet, is accompanied by overseers. Beatings, harassment, humiliation and intimidation are the industry's Human Resources strategy. It is deliberate and calculated. This is the brick kiln. These are the people from whose labour the flashy lifestyles advertised on the hoardings overlooking the site are subsidised. These bricks are the raw material of Hyderabad's high-technology boom.*

*It is 1pm. Makrand Manjhi and his son Nilamba are squatting in the shade of a mud wall. I am told by colleagues that he and his family and thousands like him are escaping something worse. I think: whatever that is, it must be pretty bad. The kiln is both the most primitive and the most ruthlessly efficient system for exploiting the vulnerable. They come semi-bonded, hoping to pay off the debt and make a bit extra. More often than not they return with nothing, too broken to carry on work back home.*

*What are these migrant labourers escaping?*

## Bolangir: Drought?

*The standard explanation is drought in their fields and villages. Images of cracked soil and withered crops come to mind. Orissa, they say, suffers perpetual drought. And for 30 years the unbroken stream of 'distress migrants' from the fields of Orissa to the moonscapes of Hyderabad would appear to affirm that. Makrand says he has migrated for 15 years in a row. Poduram, another man, has been coming for 20. In my mind I picture the mud-cracked dust bowls from which they must have fled.*

*It comes as a shock therefore to visit the tribal villages from where the brick kiln labourers came. Three hours rough driving out of Bolangir towards a haze of hills and the land is beautiful. In all directions different bursts of colour, with trees of generous canopy and shade. Forests famed for the variety of life, and valued herbs, fibres and creatures fan over the plain and rise into the hills. A canal dug by the community itself and supported by government funds flows two kilometres from its upland watershed, suffusing each field with green. To an untutored eye this is a rural idyll.*

*How can people be fleeing death in a rich green paradise for life in a parched and blackened hell?*

## The drought of the century ActionAid engages

Bolangir, the home of the migrants, is one of the largest districts in Orissa, and is one of the 100 poorest districts in India. Orissa is sadly well known for cyclones, droughts and floods. A quarter of the population is tribal and the main language is Oriya. It is rich in minerals. Hyderabad, nicknamed Cyberabad for its hi-tech boom, is the capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh. Both Orissa and Andhra Pradesh have populations that compare to fair-sized countries. ActionAid has regional offices in both Bhubaneswar and Hyderabad and a field office in Bolangir. These offices plan and budget separately and have their own ways of analysing poverty issues and setting priorities.

It was the 'drought of the century' in 1996 that drove ActionAid to be involved in Bolangir. Droughts are recurrent, but 1996 was particularly severe. Vikalpa, a local NGO, was shocked at the scale of misery which they saw as reaching famine-like proportions. Two ActionAid staff travelled to Bolangir to assess the situation. ActionAid's first engagement in Bolangir was to support Vikalpa in forming a 'Marudi Pratikar Manch' or Drought Prevention Forum, a broad platform of local villagers, NGOs, activists, teachers and social workers. The Mancha undertook an exhaustive social and economic survey in over 20,000 households in nearly 200 villages. The survey documented starvation deaths, dried up water-harvesting systems, people selling household assets and land, crop losses of between 75% and 100%, and widespread migration. An estimated 50,000-100,000 people left Bolangir, many on their first migration.

The causes of the drought were seen as deforestation, failure to maintain traditional water harvesting mechanisms, replacement of traditional seed varieties with input-dependent hybrids, compounded by cheating middlemen, exploitative money-lenders, and land alienation. Government interventions such as the public-works focused employment generation schemes were a boon to a web of deceitful government officials, middlemen and contractors, and the Public Distribution System (PDS), designed to provide

food relief, generated a black-market in ration cards and a nice earner for retailers. Government officials steadfastly denied starvation deaths.

The Manch Report was thorough, though at the time neither ActionAid India, nor ActionAid globally, nor the partners we worked with in Bolangir had explicitly adopted a rights approach to analysis and action. Recommendations included improving land and water management, increasing prices for farmers and extending rural credit and pensions, and extending the PDS and employment generation schemes. The target for action was seen as an undifferentiated mass called 'farmers'. Recommendations addressing migration were vague, although testimonies from local people identified the brick kilns of Hyderabad as the destination and revealed the terrible conditions and exploitation there.

In 1997, ActionAid in collaboration with six local voluntary organisations launched a drought-emergency intervention in the 56 worst affected villages. Over a thousand acres of land were developed, 32 traditional water harvesting systems renovated, seed banks and self-help savings groups established. Around 40 days of work were created for around 1800 families, with the assumption that this stopped them migrating.

The way to move beyond emergency relief was seen to be the creation of a strong platform of local organisations to support capacity building of the community and to act as a pressure group for pro-poor policy advocacy. The platform initially had ten members and delivered ActionAid's emergency programme. By 2002, it became ActionAid's networked Development Area (DA). The forum came to be known as the Collective Action for Drought Mitigation in Bolangir (CADMB).

## The study that changed our world

In 1998, a hugely significant study was undertaken in collaboration with the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The aim of the project was to inform DFID's Western Orissa Rural Livelihood Project, but for ActionAid it formed the basis for a more 'political' engagement with the problem and contained

many elements of a rights-based analysis. The study used Participatory Poverty Assessments which prioritised the perspectives and analysis of poor people and promoted their deep participation. It also put a special focus on differences within the community: men and women, social class, caste, the landed and the landless. It aimed to find out poor people's understanding of poverty, why they were poor, and their hopes for the future.

The powerful conclusion of the study was that drought, far from being a misfortune of geography and climate, was more a misfortune of birth and of governance. In short, drought was manmade; poverty was political. ActionAid published the findings of the study as *'The Politics of Poverty – a tale of the living dead in Bolangir'*.

Publication of *'The Politics of Poverty'* coincided with the first year of ActionAid's strategy *'Fighting poverty together'* and shortly afterward the India Strategy *'Taking Sides'*. Together these provided the empirical base for a rights approach and the permission to develop the political implications of the study into a committed and passionate rights mode. *The Politics of Poverty* became the basis for the shared strategy for the NGO forum CADMB, subsequently added to by the introduction of a common approach to action within CADMB – micro-level planning.

### ***Bilasani's story:***

*Leaving Bolangir*

*In the winter of 1998, Bilasani, her husband and three children left home. Her story was documented by Harsh Mander in the book 'Hidden Voices'.*

*Bilasani and her family joined around 100,000 people from Bolangir who each year are driven out of their villages by desperate hunger and debt, for anything between six to eight months. On any day during the months between September and December, you can see them throng the railway platforms, squatting in clusters, clinging tenuously to poignantly tiny bundles of belongings and*

### ***Diary Passport control Delhi***

*He was jovial, talkative, a top irrigation man in an international development agency and in the business class queue at Delhi airport. He looked slightly puzzled at my suggestion that restoring watersheds in a drought prone area might not necessarily be a good thing for poor people.*

*I thought back to my evening in Dhumanal village in Orissa. Daniel waved his hands around trying to solicit views from people about the big nearby watershed project on which many worked. For the villagers it was welcome cash-for-work, but for Daniel, it was an international agency that was meant to support the poor, but instead was dragooning the poorest to restore the lands of the richest. The irrigated land belongs to the wealthiest, and the expansion of these areas is fragmenting old systems of public irrigation, devaluing the land of the poor, and in the end alienating it to the richest. It will be a long hard road raising people's awareness and engaging them in advocacy on issues like land. But what hope can poor people have of challenging the powerful on an issue like land, when they don't even have enough bargaining power to get the legal minimum wage for labouring on the land of the wealthy?*

*crying infants. You can make out the first-time migrants most of all from their eyes, where fear and bewilderment battle with the most tentative of hope. Bilasani was one of the first timers, her infant son cradled in her arms, her older daughter playing with the end of her saree. Next to her sat silently the man to whom her father had given her in marriage some ten years earlier, Khirasindhu Bandhod, and his son by an earlier marriage, Sujan. None were to know that neither Khirasindhu nor Sujan were to return. But what kind of a life were Bilasani and thousands like her leading?*

## ***Bolangir:*** **Poverty and the paradox of plenty**

People's lives are complicated – the more complicated the poorer you are. So let us start with a bird's-eye view of the paradox. Bolangir gets more rainfall than the rest of the state and yet it is the epicentre of the drought; the average amount of land people own exceeds the state average, and yet a quarter of the population are marginal farmers and a third are agricultural labourers; the amount of food grains available to each person exceeds state figures and yet 90% of people are below the poverty line and 30% are undernourished. Relatively speaking, Bolangir is not short of schools, yet there is a 45% dropout rate and 38% literacy. Three quarters of women are illiterate.

Bolangir receives a high level of special government grants, amounting to Rs 30,384 for each individual over the period 1994-2003. The district comes under the Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP), which triggers a slew of relief and support schemes, including public works schemes, money to dig wells and restore irrigation. But just as irrigation channels rain to the lands of the rich and powerful, the downpour of funds is quickly channelled into the influential. When things go global and the international taps are turned on, everyone associated with the aid industry – consultants, experts and non-government organisations also benefit. So let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

The answer to the paradox is inequality. A few people own a lot, and a lot of people own very little. Most of the irrigated land is owned by the big farmers who corner perhaps three quarters of the irrigation; small and marginal farmers own upland plots. Funds for land improvements by aid agencies end up benefiting those who have most, on occasion using the labour of the have-nots. Unlike in other states in India, there have been no attempts to check the steady loss of land by the poorest or to share-out surplus and better quality land.

## **Accidents of birth** **– being poor and staying poor**

In Bolangir, caste and tribe are the most overbearing social institutions. The district population is comprised of more than 15% scheduled castes and 22% scheduled tribes. Tribals are at the lowest end of the caste ladder. Caste places you permanently in a social hierarchy. Caste controls your occupation. It controls who you can marry, who you eat or mix with, whether you can draw water from the well, your participation in decision-making, your access to justice, to work, to social interactions and opportunities. Caste cements inequality and privilege in place, with virtually no mobility. The logic of caste leads those at the bottom, the dalit and tribal people, to land loss, bondage or semi-slavery, debt, death and starvation, even amidst plenty. Inequality is not simply a matter of bad luck nor an accident of geography. It is rather an accident of birth. It is resistant to laws outlawing discrimination, and is wilfully reproduced by the privileged. It sets the poor against the poor. In terms of caste, a roughly equal proportion of dalits, tribals and other backward castes work in the brick kilns of Andhra Pradesh.



Jenny Matthews/ActionAid

*The Politics of Poverty* tells of the infinite variety of routes by which families can reach the point where Bilasani, Khirasindhu, Sujan and the two girls found themselves. This variety of routes is extraordinarily resistant to simple solutions, particularly those based on the simple drought-leading-to-distress-migration narrative.

## A worse accident – being born a woman

The toughest accident of birth is to be born a woman. Your work in the villages of Bolangir will be more time consuming and strenuous than that of men (back-breaking transplanting and weeding, wandering miles in the forest to gather *rengal* leaves, *kendu* for *biddis*, *mahua* flowers, fruits, grasses). You will not take part in the big family decisions about the contract work you take as a family, or the wages paid. You will not take part in decisions within the community. When you form a self-help group, men will disparage and poke fun at it. You will be denied education. In hazardous jobs such as in the brick kilns your health will be more threatened than men. You will cook, share the work of men and care for children. You will be paid less than men for the same job – for agricultural labour, 25 rupees a day for men, and 10-15 for women (the minimum wage is 90 rupees, which in itself is not a living wage). Your ideas of what poverty means and the way out of it will differ from that of men. That men spend on average two days' wages a week on alcohol – and that alcohol is frequently the cause of death according to many widows – matters not one jot.

Bilasani was not to know that she was to return from the brick kilns a widow. The vulnerability of widowhood is much greater for women than men. Men can remarry, and have the option of moving from the family village. They are mobile. Men have many more opportunities for paid work, have a claim on land, and can exercise authority over children, for example who is to look after them. Female widows have none of these, and are also vulnerable to violence and harassment.

Even if an organisation like ActionAid notices your particular plight and places what they call a priority on women, somehow the system squeezes it out, and the big issues become once again the economic and agricultural production-focused priorities of men.

### Diary Binjhore village, Bolangir, midday

*We are sitting in what looks like a pagoda in the centre of Binjhore, goats are everywhere, sometimes participating in the meeting. Two of the richest men in the village are dominating proceedings. But the group of women make up for the desultory and rather banal observations of the men. They are articulate and frequently correct the men, who just seem to shrug it off. In this village the women say migration is decreasing. We ask who migrates. The women say it isn't straightforward: "When we need money for day to day things we borrow from the moneylender, but when we get big debts, we take an advance. But there is no Sardar in this village." One woman whose son was in the brick kilns said that no one gets rich through migration, but the opposite. "When my children get back from migrating they have so many aches and pains that they cannot even work. They rest and then have to take a loan, and the moneylenders and Sardars prey on them, dumping their money on them, then they have to migrate again." This was a story that I heard in meeting after meeting. Migration is a self-perpetuating cycle. Not for the first time I was impressed by what you might see as empowerment of women through self-help and Reflect groups, and wondered why the men act so uninformed. And then as a man it struck me. If as a man you have the power to make decisions, you can let the women go on as much as they like in a public meeting, because in the end, you will make the decision anyway. The men in their charming way were refusing to dignify the women's observations by reacting to them.*

*It is not that self-help groups and Reflect groups don't deliver benefits to their members, they clearly do. But you need political freedom to discuss and participate in the shaping of solutions, and it was clear that in Binjhore the men were denying the women this important freedom.*

## **Bilasani's story:**

*Slipping into debt*

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*Bilasani's mother died when she was three years old. Her only sister had died at birth.*

*Her father did not remarry but struggled to take care of her as she grew in her solitary home. He owned barely half an acre of an upland field, on which he grew millets or traditional varieties of paddy. This fed them for barely three months in a year, but for the rest, he toiled in the fields of farmers in the canal regions, or cut wood to sell in the market. Bilasani never went to school, and she joined her father at work when she was ten years old. He married her off to Khirasindhu Banchod when she was around 15. For the marriage expenses, her father sold half his tiny plot of land to his younger brother.*

*Her husband was not quite as impoverished as her father. Bilasani still had to toil, but she was well used to that. She worked by the side of her husband on their one acre farmland. They grew vegetables behind their earthen home, and owned two cows. She would cut wood, and set out early most mornings, trudging eight kilometres to the nearest market to sell firewood and market.*

*It was for the expenses for their older son's marriage that they took a loan of ten thousand rupees from the Mahajan, a cloth merchant in Kantabhanji. They tried hard to repay the loan, but the interest rate was 10% every month, and they just could not scrape and save enough to repay even the interest, let alone the principal.*

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## **Bolangir:**

### **Losing land and gaining debt – counting the ways**

It is not possible to count the ways to get into debt, but for those at the bottom of the caste ladder, the ball is already rolling downhill the moment they are born. As one woman in Andalardh told me: "The amount of income is never enough for us and the gap is always there to be filled by the money lenders."

Land is the most important thing anyone in a rural area can own. Less than a tenth of the population own 40% of the land. Around a quarter of the total population are landless and 40% are marginal dalit or tribal farmers. Since the big farmers generally own the irrigated lowlands, the majority of farmers will be farming low-quality land. This is in effect subsistence farming. Subsistence farmers also need to join the landless in labouring for income. Agricultural inputs cost money, which you might have to borrow from the big farmer. If you cannot repay, you may be forced to mortgage your land to that same farmer.

Land alienation – the shift of land from the poorest to the rich within or outside the village – is increasing year by year. Most mortgages are taken in exchange for credit to pay for marriages, medical treatment, debt repayments, and when you need to buy clothes for important festivals. When you lose your land you lose all control of your life, and the opportunities for others to cheat and predate you explode exponentially. The way dogs scent fear, there is a never-ending stream of characters who scent vulnerability.

**Diary Green drought, Binjhore, Bolangir**

*Green drought is a phrase coined by an Indian journalist for a drought you cannot see. I am gazing across the fields towards the forested hills. I see lush paddies of nitrogenous green. I hear the chuckles and gurgles of irrigation, the laughter of women jumping canals, and I smell the heady aromas of piles of orange mahua and the damp forest beyond. This land was recently a principality, owned by one man, the King. It is still in the shadow of feudalism. I don't see hunger. Hunger has migrated to Hyderabad. For the landless, the green may just as well be a desert. For those with small plots debt can dry up your land as effectively as the sun. This is green drought.*

*In the team nearly every conversation ends with land. In every village meeting it rumbles beneath the surface. There is a sophisticated market in mortgaging and leasing land to the better off, which in the short term puts money in the hands of the poor, but in the end results in the loss of their land. Often the head man in the village or Panchayat is a major landowner. So in the meetings the issue bristles with tension and difficulty.*

*In the village meetings it was hard to talk about land, about who had it, who was mortgaging it, because to lose land was the final indignity, the stigma of abject poverty. We wonder, is the fear of tackling land issues stopping us from looking at it more closely? We have managed to find some surplus government land for the landless, but what about the dynamics of land alienation, the loss by many and the accumulation by a few? The first step must be to understand land issues better. Fear of the consequences must not paralyse our analysis and the laying of the results before the community for discussion.*

*Freedom of discussion and freedom of information go hand in hand.*



Brick kiln, Hyderabad

**Forests – the hidden harvest**

Tribals and dalits (about 70% of the populations of the villages where ActionAid works) are hugely dependent upon the collection of what officially are known as non-timber forest products (NTFPs). One of the most infamous forest products is *kendu*. *Kendu* leaves are the raw material of the tight green leaf cigarettes called beedis. Their collection, pricing and marketing is government-controlled. The *kendu* leaf business is a huge business with huge profits and money-grabbing political influence to be made. Gathering *kendu* is arduous, repetitive, women's work, and payment is way below the minimum wage. The official in charge, the *Munshi*, who counts the bundles and decides payment, has many ways to cheat the women. The collector will insist that the leaves, packed in bundles of 20, are wrapped in two extra leaves which he will not count. Straight away that is 10% that you are not paid for. Late payment is common, and serious, since you may need to borrow to make ends meet, meaning interest and debts accumulate.

**Being cheated – counting the ways**

Wage labour in agricultural work offers many opportunities for being cheated. If you are a woman you already get paid a quarter to a third less. Contracts to work five hectares of land may actually cover six or seven hectares. Rice paid in kind may have been deliberately underweighed. Employment guarantee schemes are often of no use to the poor or are grabbed by contractors with machinery, so the poor are not even employed. Officials may claim for providing 30 days' work and only provide 20 days, or even none at all. Finally, it is not uncommon for a child to be given in lieu of repayment. The child is then bonded to graze animals, collect firewood, fodder and do other agricultural and household work. The child (from seven to sixteen years old) will work for 12 hours a day. The children are cheated worst of all, of a childhood and of an education.

## **Agasti and Dhina's story**

*Being cheated by those whose job is to help*

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*Agasti and his son Dhina live in Tentenkhuti village in Bolangir. They were cheated and let down by the government drought relief scheme and ended up in the brick kilns of Hyderabad. Despite millions being spent on relief and other schemes, Agasti was completely puzzled by the suggestion that governments are supposed to care about the poor and powerless. Fifteen years previously he and his family were on the brink of starvation due to two successive years of drought.*

*Hope knocked on the door in the form of drought relief from the government. To access drought relief, having a ration card was a must. The family did not have one, so he bribed the local officials after selling the family's household utensils. He was told that by spending Rs 300 he could access drought assistance of Rs 3,000 from the government. But his efforts went in vain. He did manage a ration card but never got relief money after waiting patiently for six months.*

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Whether it is a marriage, an important festival, a family sickness or a life that refuses to hold together, vulnerability breeds vulnerability and leads inevitably to debt.

But people do live with debt. It doesn't always push people to migrate. A little encouragement is sometimes needed. Bilasani introduces us to another important and unsavoury character, who pulls rather than pushes people towards Hyderabad.

## **Bilasani's story:**

*The pull: Bilasani and the Sardar*

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*Bilasani and her family found themselves in considerable debt to the moneylender, unable to pay the interest let alone the original loan. Ultimately, her husband decided that the family must set out to find work in the brick kilns of Hyderabad. On the suggestion of the moneylender, they contacted one Bishna Sardar, a labour sub-contractor. The Sardar worked for a labour contractor named Biswanath Suna. The contractors are paid by commission by kiln owners for the number of migrant labourers that they manage to transport to the kiln. They have close links with moneylenders of the region, who assist in the trafficking of their debtors by 'persuading' them to migrate for the repayment of their bloated loans.*

*The Sardar took Bilasani and her family to the brick kiln. At the time, ActionAid was preoccupied with responding to the findings of the 'Politics of Poverty'. The problem was understood as distress migration, so responses were designed to stop migration. Those who were leaving Bolangir for Hyderabad were, in effect, off ActionAid's radar screen.*

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## **Bolangir:**

### **People's plans for drought: moving towards rights**

In 1997, ActionAid was responding to an emergency. The emergency approach included a longer-term perspective but drought was at this point seen as a natural calamity, and migration a distress option to be prevented where possible.

It was after the 1998 participatory process of understanding the drought that the thinking began to shift. This process revealed deep discrimination as a cause of poverty, and showed a persistent failure to receive entitlements under various government drought mitigation and social security schemes. While ActionAid's partnerships grew from 6 to 10 organisations and from 56 to 110 villages, the team were talking in terms of

organising the poor to assert their rights as a general principle – not as a fully informing rights analysis. Meanwhile, *The Politics of Poverty* was crucial in developing ActionAid's and partner organisations' understanding of drought as a failure of entitlements. Like everyone in ActionAid, the Bolangir office had much to learn about confronting the deep issues of discrimination, gender, and the failure to access entitlements. But the seeds were sown.

During 1999, after the participatory poverty assessments, the logical next step was to move into participatory planning – the solutions would have to be the solutions that the community chose for themselves. Plans were to be the basis of advocacy and assertion of rights, but to make this happen, the skills and knowledge to work on rights and advocacy had to be developed within the partner organisation network. Both the style of work and CADMB had to change.

Micro-level planning needs organisation. Ninety-eight Village Drought Action Committees (VDAC) were formed, at the block level (a collection of villages) there were Cluster Level Committees (CDCs). These were federated at the District level to create the people's' forum for advocacy – the Central Drought Action Committee (CDAC). At the same time 210 women's self help groups were formed. Like the Drought Committees these mirrored the structures of government.

The point of the Micro-Level Plans (MLPs) was to involve the community, particularly the most vulnerable, in developing their own ideas for dealing with drought and for avoiding the need to migrate. *Reflect* methods, extensively used in the Participatory Poverty Assessments, were developed as the CADMB participatory planning 'software', and were effective in building people's skills for analysis and action, and getting villages to act collectively on the micro-level plans. But aside from skills development, and in order to engage people in confronting the deeper causes of their plight, plans also needed to address issues that were close to home. The first phase of people's development planning therefore extended the work on renovating water harvesting systems, providing loans for wells, and improving land.

During the period 2000-2002 there was a strong evolution of a process towards rights-based interventions. Having plans and people's organisations is the first step to asserting rights. You have next to relate to the political processes where decisions are made and resources are shared out. To have political impact you also need a broad base of participation – the numbers game. To achieve this, the CADMB network coverage increased from 110 to 400 villages – approaching a 'critical mass'. The structure of the micro-level planning organisations – the *Lok Yojana and Lok Sangathan* – mirrored the 'official' village level institutions for decision-making and action, the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), which until then had been rather unaccountable institutions, run by the village elites and more interested in elite issues. The people's organisations began to track and engage with key levels of the Panchayat bureaucracy. In many places, the MLPs were taken to the PRIs for endorsement. They became points of reference and accountability, determining what resources existed, what were needed, and where they should go. Later, MLPs were presented to the Orissa Chief Minister who showed interest in their potential as a people's planning mechanism, as did the Central Planning Commission.

During this period, two important workshops were influencing thinking throughout ActionAid: the ActionAid India rights workshop 'taking sides', and the Asia rights workshop in HuaHin, Thailand, which developed rights-based approaches. It was too early for these workshops to influence the entire analysis in the Bolangir office – which had already produced an understanding of the denial of entitlements, involved people in participatory analysis and worked on a programme of social organisation without systematic rights analysis or deliberate rights interventions. But the workshops did, importantly, grant 'permission' to work on rights issues and to have a clear political perspective. Rights were out of the starting gate; the workshops gave the go-ahead to those elements of existing analysis inclined to rights, without necessarily revolutionising thinking on the role of law, governance, power and policy.

### Diary ActionAid's Bolangir Office

*The team in Bolangir had worked hard to educate me. The office was cool, people were enthusiastic at the prospect of feedback, and the ubiquitous powerpoint presentations were excellent. But were things too neat? In telling the story of the past five years, was the team benefiting too much from hindsight? Hindsight can turn what was reactive opportunism into an intricately planned and deliberate strategy. The most striking thing was the absence of stories of change – what good was all of this rights work if people don't experience real benefits? Asking for evidence of change released a dam-burst of anecdotes, adding to those I had heard from the people themselves:*

*“In one village the school teacher, who was part of landlord's family, never bothered turning up. No-one dared ask her to. The different levels of people's organisation allowed the Reflect group to refer the matter directly to the education officer which resulted in the teacher being transferred.”*

*“One group was discussing why public works always went to outside contractors. They decided that they could manage the work just as well and succeeded in getting the work themselves.”*

*“Four villages received an official announcement that they were to be displaced by a dam scheme supposed to mitigate against drought impacts. The people were offered a standard package of compensation and told the benefits would be great. They used the micro-level planning process to do their own analysis of the costs and found that the impacts would be huge,*

*the compensation way too small, and that the benefits were all going to the rich people who occupied the command area. The MLP process helped people to build their case, and they were called to the Collector for a negotiation. They said that the displaced people should be the first beneficiaries, that there should be land for land in the command area, that there should be full compensation for livelihood and common property resources, and that the people should be shareholders in the income generated by the dam.”*

*Negotiations are ongoing.*

*“A women's self-help group was angry at outside contractors taking over common property resources such as ponds that people were using for fish raising. The MLPs helped people to plan how to stop this, even through the resistance of the Panchayat.”*

*There were also stories from the people themselves:*

*“We performed dances and songs to raise awareness in over 47 villages about migration law, insurance for migrants, and labour societies, which resulted in the formation of 36 labour societies.”*

*“In our group we help people to fill out the forms that they need to get entitlements to land, pensions and disability allowances. We stopped the kendu leaf collector leaving the village until he had paid us all of our past dues. We help people with little land to club together and get the benefits of the irrigation canal which we all dug. When we are in this group we are confident to do things on our own.”*



Liba Taylor/ActionAid

### Diary Bolangir Office Meeting Room

*I wanted to find out about ActionAid's 'partnership' with CADMB. Were we growing together or growing apart? In 1997, ActionAid clearly needed local experience and our injection of resources strengthened the original six partners in doing what they were good at: delivering services in an emergency mode. The participatory poverty assessments in 1999 established participation as the main approach and created consensus on the analysis of poverty and drought. Through 2000-02 ActionAid was bringing in a lot of training, on management and delivery of sponsorship, micro-level planning, rights work and advocacy. For the next couple of years the network expanded to bring the development of advocacy and 'people's organisations' to scale.*

*CADMB is an important collective achievement. But it faces considerable challenges in raising the game on advocacy. It is largely a management model delivery system that has divided Bolangir into geographical spheres of engagement. This top-down model brings in the money. And yet the people's organisations and committees build up through the villages, clusters and district, a bottom-up process in which geography becomes less important. Can CADMB adapt to become a social movement model?*

## *Hyderabad:*

### *Bilasani's influence on ActionAid*

Bolangir's micro-level plans had revealed the missing people, the vulnerable who migrate. Although the ActionAid offices in Bolangir and Hyderabad are separate, these cities represent one life for migrants. Restricting the work to Bolangir was at best addressing half a life. In early 2000, ActionAid began paying serious attention to the missing people and their lives in the brick kilns in Hyderabad. Bilasani herself had a role in this, for it was her story, documented by the person who was to become the Country Director of ActionAid India, that was to create the political push internally to concentrate on the brick kilns themselves.

### **The understanding deepens**

There were other, more immediate reasons to understand more about the kilns. In order to persuade the Orissa state government to do something about migration, whether to prevent it, or to protect migrants from exploitation, ActionAid and partners first had to get the government to admit that there was a problem. The first response of the bureaucracy was to downplay its importance. ActionAid Bolangir and partners produced a register of village level data on out-migration showing that 47,000 people from 300 villages were migrating. But the proof of the problem also required details about what was happening to people in the places to which they had travelled.

In Hyderabad, Bilasani's story had prompted an initial economic and social study of brick kiln workers and their conditions, and a further mapping process to find out who was migrating to where. The two ActionAid offices and their partners in Hyderabad and Bolangir were starting to see the lives of the brick kiln workers and the drought as one issue – as the people themselves experience it. But acting as if the issue was one was yet to come.

## *Neither Bolangir nor Hyderabad:*

### *The journey – the missing days*

Journeys are full of uncertainty and dread. As a migrant you lock up your homes, gather all of your belongings (clothes, rice, cooking utensils), and throw yourself to the mercy of the Sardar. First timers will have no idea where they are going. Bilasani, clinging to her small child, was crushed into a truck which gathered tens of other migrants from the neighbouring countryside, and drove to the railway station of Kantabhanji. Hundreds of others were huddled together on the platform, fending off the cold and gangs of thieving thugs. The Sardar got busy bribing police and railway officials to cover his lack of proper licence and to ensure that with his bulk tickets he could pack up to three hundred people in carriages meant for fewer than a hundred.

Into its three unreserved compartments, in the five tense minutes of halt at Kantabhanji station, several hundred of the migrant workers, clinging desperately to their children and their small cloth bundles, were pushed in by the contractors' agents. The Sardar arranged the cheapest route, which means a journey of three days instead of one. Bilasani stood for 18 hours, crushed, holding her child, with no water, food or access to lavatories. Fainting, severe diarrhoea, desperation and pain is common. Death releases some, according to the repeated testimonies of migrant communities.

The journey is a no-man's-land for social activism. You can't have an office on a train. It is hard to work with completely exhausted and confused people if you only ever see them once, and at that fleetingly. The journey remains the time of most complete abandonment.

## Hyderabad:

### The first taste of the kilns



Nilkanth Khnunbher and son, brick kiln, Hyderabad

At Hyderabad, utterly exhausted, disoriented, Bilasani and others are pushed and herded like livestock into trucks to the final destination – the brick kilns. There is neither shade, nor cool, nor place to wash, nor shelter, nor drink, nor food. Only choking dust, fly ash, and heat. The journey is the first stage in a process of degradation and humiliation that will make Bilasani and others compliant and cooperative. As well as the beatings and harassment that the labourers will soon learn of, the kiln owners and Sardars explain the rules of the game: at no time, under any circumstances, are any family permitted to leave the site all together. Some family members must stay on site, to ensure that the others do not run away. In general, no workers leave the site unless accompanied – for whatever purpose.

The advance, the journey, the system of payment, the bullying and harassment are not the random acts of evil men. They are the logical outcome of capitalism wedded to semi-slavery. The owners and Sardars have created a perverse Human Resources strategy that extracts the maximum quantum of labour and creates the maximum opportunity for dishonesty and theft. Others join this train of exploitation. Quack doctors serve as the kiln health service. Local markets gear up for the one special period in the week when labourers are allowed out to purchase food by cranking up their prices. And ticket sellers at train stations have been bribed not to sell tickets to anyone looking like a migrant to prevent escapes.

So compelling and lucrative is the human trade that one of ActionAid's own volunteer teachers on learning about the business promptly left and became a Sardar.

### ActionAid engages

ActionAid struggles to understand this reality. In 2000 it had yet to fully grasp the complex web of interests and exploitation and to look at the whole problem through a 'rights' lens.

As we have seen, denials from officials in Orissa that migration was a problem spurred a research-based fight back. *The People's Report on Drought in Orissa* laid bare the scale of migration from villages around Bolangir, and surveys of labourers in Hyderabad made the link to specific brick kilns. Inadvertently, the harsh light of the drought had illumined a deeply disturbing and primitive industry on the scruffy boundaries of a city selling itself globally as India's up and coming cyber-city. This was an industry that was laying brick-by-hand-made-brick the foundations of the city's wealth. Each brick is rolled raw by a child, moulded by a father, and carried tonne by tonne by a wife, daughter or sister to dry.

It is not enough to be shocked by the brick kiln industry and to conclude that the only option is to prevent migration, which is where we started. The option to improve conditions of labour must be examined, leaving the big questions about whether a 'decent' industry would be a viable industry until later. In this examination you cannot separate the social, economic and political questions.

The brick kiln industry is simple, ruthlessly exploitative and highly evolved. It is profitable enough to get all relevant people to turn a blind eye to its illegality. 'Officially' nearly 100% of the brick kilns in Hyderabad are illegal. They simply do not have the licences to operate, or the necessary registration for migrant workers. None of the worker welfare requirements within the 1967 Interstate Migrant Workmen's Act are met. Unofficially, a most influential web of landowners (who rent the land), politicians (who are often the landowners), policemen, labour and revenue officials (who all turn a blind eye), Panchayat officials (who may own land, kilns, or be Sardars), and a host of other petty and not so petty officials make lucrative 'bonuses' from the industry.

Back in Bolangir, the Sardar has done his work: kiln owners give him money to provide as advances for work to be undertaken. Advances are large (Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000) and seem at first to be interest free. With a big chunk of money the farmer can rid himself of the debts racked up to the moneylender. He will also be able to leave money in the village to care for elderly relatives or children. The family will be confident of paying the advance back because the work is assured and predictable, unlike agricultural labour.

### **The human cost of a brick**

But once the farmer takes the loan they are caught, bonded, and, in effect, slaves. Bondage is illegal in India. So is child labour. But the child is an integral part of the basic production unit called the *Pathuria*. People work in threes. One, usually the child, expertly splits balls of mud from a big mound, hands them on to another to pack into moulds, usually the man, who then relays in moulds of three or four to the last person to lift and bang out, usually the woman. This mirrors a universal gender division of labour. The man gets to do the 'skilled' labour with the tools, the women gets to do the strenuous work involving a lot of to-ing and fro-ing (as well as looking after children, home and cooking). This reinforces the role of man as the decision-maker and manager. No mystery there. But why the division of labour by teams of three?

The main reason is that wages are paid by fixed piece-rates. The rate varies between Rs 100 and Rs 127 per 1,000 bricks, sometimes lower. Families have an interest to produce as many bricks as they possibly can in their waking hours. There are three distinct operations to hand-making bricks, and dividing labour by operation creates the most efficient production line.

The minimum wage for unskilled workers in Orissa is about Rs 90 for an eight-hour day. A team of three brick labourers may work 14 hours to produce 1,200 bricks. At Rs 100 per 1,000 bricks they would have earned Rs 120 for 42 person hours. This works out at Rs 23 for an eight hour day (or around £0.30) way below the minimum wage, which in itself is not a living wage. The statutory minimum wage for piece work (for a pair of workmen – the law does not recognise the *Pathuria*) in tile and brick making is around

Rs 150 per 1,000. The law in Andhra Pradesh states that piece work shall not be paid less than the minimum wage for similar work based on an eight hour day. It clearly is.

Even at this miserable wage, how long would it take for someone who has typically taken an advance of around Rs 5000 to repay? First you have to subtract the daily food advance of around Rs 30 a day. There may be other expenses, and the Sardar takes a commission of between Rs 7 to Rs 15 per 1,000 bricks. But perhaps you can make Rs 80 clear per day. At this rate you should have no problem covering the advance in 2-3 months. Workers therefore look forward to both paying off the loan and receiving a fat wage to take home. So how come at the end of the six-month period it is so common to be told that you have no wages due or else you still owe money?

We have not yet accounted for the institutionalised cheating.

### **Cheating the vulnerable**

The cheating starts with the Sardar, who may have taken Rs 10,000 from the kiln owner as an advance for a farmer but pockets Rs 2,500. The kiln owner will make the worker pay back Rs 10,000, saying it is not his problem if what they say about the Sardar pocketing the Rs 2,500 is true.

It continues in counting the bricks. The *Munshi* or supervisor counts the bricks and although the tally is recorded in a note book that the *Pathuria* keeps, strenuous efforts are made to ensure that the workers cannot read them. The records are kept in English or Oriya, or if a worker can read Oriya, in Telegu. One young girl told us that she used to read the records for her parents, but when they complained of under-counting the language was changed to Telegu which the girl could not read.

A deeper cheating is revealed in the economics of brick production: it is estimated that the kiln owners make between Rs 300 to Rs 500 *profit* per 1,000 bricks.

### **A 'de-humanise resource strategy'**

All this cheating requires a human resources strategy that ensures that no-one challenges or complains. The kiln owners are off to a good start

### Diary Meeting the bureaucracy – the good, the bad and the ugly

*The Assistant Labour Officer, a comfortable, not very energetic fellow with round face and greying hair explains that the brick industry is the toughest industry of the 400 industries that the Labour Office is responsible for. There appears to be no part of the industry that is actually legal. They are not registered under the Factories Act for the use of the land which they lease, and they have no licences from the Mines and Geology Department to extract and process minerals. They do not pay for electricity. They seem to be breaking every provision of the Migrant Workmen's Act and are flouting the minimum wage. They are almost certainly breaking the Bonded Labour Act and the Child Labour Act. With five to six officials monitoring different things, it is very unclear who will enforce which act.*

*A paralysed bureaucracy creates a perfect business environment. Attempts at reform will be obstructed by an impenetrable tangle of interests and beneficiaries.*

*A later meeting with the Labour Commissioner for Andhra Pradesh restored some hope. She is dynamic, hugely knowledgeable about the challenges of the brick kilns. She was full of ideas about what the government*

*could do to cut out the Sardar and encourage workers to be insured. She believed that the piece wage should be at least Rs 275 per thousand bricks which was the first realistic estimate I had heard from anyone. She was genuinely passionate about child labour and the hardships of women. But she was also pragmatic, insisting on the need for dialogue with the owners of the kilns.*

*We also met the person holding the highest possible post in the administrative service. Surrounded by the grounds of his comfortable colonial residence, he gave us a dazzling display of the dark bureaucratic arts:*

- *First deny there is a problem or if the evidence is overwhelming, downplay its importance (“the number is not huge and migration is a tradition”)*
- *Second, shift the onus of action from yourself to others (“through labour societies people will sort out their own problems”)*
- *Third, blame the victim (“the labourers are exaggerating their problems”)*
- *Fourth, move action into process (“we are forming a legal forum with NGOs, please take part”).*

since the people of Bolangir are in an alien environment with an alien language and with little sense of what is a fair wage or condition of employment. Poor working and living conditions such as lack of privacy for washing, or latrines, shaky lean-tos for living in and food only fit for animals serve to dehumanise and rob people of their dignity. If people do complain, then harassment and beating is common. And while there is no honour amongst thieves, the farmers of Bolangir hold the rather simple notion that if they borrow money they are bound to repay it, no matter what the costs.

This need to intimidate, control and soften-up answers the puzzle of why the kiln owner needs the Sardar. Why not cut out the middleman? After all the Sardar has to be paid and also occasionally ‘cheats’ the kiln owner (although the kiln owner

simply passes on the cost to the innocent labourer). The reality is that the kiln owners are embedded in an intricate economic and political web, sticky with hundreds of dependents. They don't just need labour, they need compliant, cheatable labour. The system of advances works well to bond the labourers and you need a good marketing system to promote advances at times when people need it most. The informal network of Sardars also help to catch and return migrants who try and return home. The Sardar extends the network of people who depend on the brick kiln industry and who will therefore work to protect it.

This is the background against which the struggle for rights takes place. Unless it is well understood, interventions will remain conscience-salving sticking plasters. The structural causes of poverty, and the system of privilege that maintains it, are intricate and stubborn.

*Diary Andalardh, Bolangir.  
Sitting with the enemy*

*Every story needs a villain. And the pink-shirted, pomaded youth sitting on the edge of the village meeting, ostentatiously twirling his motorcycle keys and surrounded by his pals seems a good one. He is the Sardar. Perversely, whereas outsiders are more likely to want to take a stick and hit Sardars on the head, migrant labourers often call them their saviours. Perhaps this is a classic abusive-dependent relationship, such as you find in situations of domestic violence.*

*The three highest level government officials in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh who were sympathetic to the plight of migrant labourers all had suggestions for cutting out the Sardar. Two said that the state should create their own advance system to replace that of the Sardar. Another suggested information booths or kiosks to give labourers direct information on conditions of work (creating a kind of ethical market). One had gone much further and was promoting hundreds of migrant labour societies in Orissa to share information and to collectively bargain, perhaps through the organisation of labour camps that brought together 3-4 Panchayats.*

*The hard reality is that there is little hope of replacing the Sardar until we understand the lives and choices of people vulnerable to migration as well as the Sardars do. And this either means being as hungry to exploit them as the Sardars are, or getting better at listening to people. There is no denying that taking a lump sum to solve a lot of problems, against predictable and regular work, is very attractive. Until we understand the poor as a Sardar does, we will be designing solutions that simply serve our own analysis and prejudices.*

## **Hyderabad:**

### Women and children suffer more



Jenny Matthews/ActionAid

Kiln owners claim that they are good employers because they provide accommodation, water, fuel wood, medical facilities and travel. Indeed they do, and the standards are as might be expected from people who pay a mere 1% of their weekly profits (about Rs 50 per week per head) towards worker facilities. The long hours, the heavy and repetitive work, the heat, dust, ash, smoke, polluted water, the absence of sanitation facilities, the poor shelter, poor food, and for women and adolescent girls, the stress due to lack of privacy, result in widespread pain and sickness. Many suffer from asthma, fatigue, bronchitis, tuberculosis, dysentery, jaundice, fever and skin diseases.

In addition to working as a full member of the *Pathuria*, young girls or mothers have the responsibility of looking after young children, cooking for the family, maintaining the home, caring for the sick, and fetching water from the tubewell. This may add an additional 3-4 hours onto the working day. Pregnancy not only adds to women's vulnerability but may also be threatened by the working environment. Women are sexually harassed, exploited and can suffer sexual violence. Single migrant women and widows have the toughest life.

One such woman, Dhanmati Bhoje, travelled to the brick kilns in 2003. She is from Lesunpali village in Bolangir. She was widowed at 50. Both her husband and her son have died. She was left to

care for a daughter-in-law and a small granddaughter. In the village she was only able to earn Rs 20 a day as a wage labourer, but employment was scarce and unpredictable. Dhanmati took an advance of Rs 2,000 from a Sardar. She left some of the advance for her daughter-in-law and granddaughter to live with in the village and travelled to Hyderabad. Her job was to transport raw bricks from the drying yard to the kiln for burning. The target of up to 10,000 bricks transported per week is tough enough for someone who is strong and healthy. This is a relentless life of stooping, lifting and marching back and forth in the heat, dust, fly-ash and smoke, hundreds of times a day, 25 tonnes a week, for 25 weeks. Dhanmati developed asthma and her health deteriorated. Her output plummeted and the Sardar reduced her food allowance by half which made things worse. Soon Dhanmati could not even cook for herself. She could not return home because no-one was allowed out to accompany her. Instead she had to wait, hungry and sick, until the season ended.

### ***Bilasani's story:***

*The final tragedy*

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*Two months into their brick kiln ordeal, Khirasindhu, Bilasani's husband, was taken sick with severe stomach cramps. He was taken to hospital by the kiln owner, Sardar and Munshi. Bilasani insisted that their son Sujani accompany their father. Two days later the Sardar told Bilasani that her husband had died. Bilasani retrieved his body outside the hospital, swollen and with two long and suspicious cuts in the region of the stomach. Sujani, she was told, had disappeared, lost in Hyderabad. Distraught and troubled by allegations by passers-by that her husband had fallen victim to trade in trafficked organs, and her son got rid of for protesting, Bilasani, after many ordeals, returned home. Her brothers in law refused to return her father's land to which she was heir, and though she sought justice through the labour office and the District Collector, it came to nothing.*

*Bilasani makes ends meet for herself and her two young children through cutting firewood and trudging eight kilometres every other day to sell it in the market in Kantabhanji.*

## ***Hyderabad:***

### **The children**

Children travel with their parents to the kilns for two reasons. The first is because they are valued members of the *Pathuria*, or if they are too young to roll mud, they can look after younger siblings and contribute to household chores. The second reason is that parents fear what may happen to them if left alone at home. This is most common for girls, who are rarely left with relatives in the village. Children of migrant workers are regularly missing school for six to seven months of the year and as a result are struck off school registers. Nearly 10,000 children migrate from Bolangir every year; at least one third of them have never been to school. In effect they become full-time child labourers learning only the trade of brick making, passed on by their parents. The cycle of poverty turns smoothly to the next generation.

Children's bodies take a worse beating from the unhealthy surroundings than adults. Physical and mental development is threatened by pollution and poor nutrition. The labour is equal to that of adults, and there is neither time for play nor education. In short, their childhoods are lost. Malnutrition and stunted growth is rife, with girls unsurprisingly faring the worst, since they are assumed to work less hard than boys and hence get less food.

### **Making choices**

#### **– ActionAid rolls into action in Hyderabad**

How do you address the scale of need and abuse in a situation such as the brick kilns? For ActionAid the choice of what to work on was a product of what those in distress were telling them, the competence of ActionAid, the broader analysis (which is influenced by its current strategy and political perspectives), leadership, and the likelihood of progress on the issue (influenced by the prevalent political context).

At an early stage ActionAid and partners worked closely with the brick workers to build a picture of the most pressing issues and needs. The Hyderabad office had an existing focus on the 'left-out children' of informal workers, sex workers

and migrants. Set this against the background of a national campaign to end child labour called 'Back to School', ActionAid's funding mechanism (child sponsors) and education competence, and it was clear that education would be a priority. All of the kiln workers, particularly the children, were malnourished. It was a particular shock to learn that the staple food of the workers was literally chicken feed – cheap broken rice, flavoured with scraps of potato, onion and chilli. The right to food was an emerging civil society campaign in which ActionAid was a major player. The programme manager in Hyderabad was a gender expert, and championed the needs of women as another priority.

How much of this reflected a rights-based analysis? As with the Bolangir office, there was a high level of participation in setting priorities, and those priorities were expressed in terms of rights – the right to food and education, and women's rights. It was understood that the state had a duty to respect, protect and promote these rights, and that people would need to be organised to get their entitlements. However work was proceeding through 'trial and error' advocacy and negotiation with the state. There was a human rights perspective but not a full analysis. Analysis was evolving 'on the job'.

### Women, health and food – three issues that weren't runaway successes



ActionAid

Let us start with the three issues that were not runaway successes: the so called woman's issue of child care; the right to health and the right to food.

Brick kilns are not safe places for young children. There are endless ways to drown, wander off never to return, or be crushed beneath mud or brick. And for a woman it is not easy cradling a toddler while maintaining the Pathuria's endless repetitions of brick lifting, hauling, and banging out. A proposal for crèche centres was pursued with the Commission on Women and Children, and showed promise with a sympathetic Commissioner. But when the Commissioner moved and the next one proved to be less than enthusiastic, the advocacy slowed considerably. The critical importance of sympathetic officials is a repeated theme, and the higher up the bureaucracy the better.

### Diary Hyderabad: discussing the amazing disappearing women trick

*Why do women's issues fade from view even if they are a programme's initial priority, even with leadership from a strong gender champion, even when confronted with the daily reality of women's lives? Between us we came up with all the standard reasons – lack of women field staff or partner organisations working specifically on women's rights. In the state structure, women's issues get departments rather than ministries; in the kilns, the pathuria makes gender invisible. It might be reasonably guessed that women's issues were blocked by a system problem. The issues that are seen by society as those of women (health and child care) and not the hard economic issues of men (jobs, wages) often lack status in the bureaucracy. Progress rarely snowballs through networks of interest – as we see through the harder economic issues associated with men, but is almost always reliant on championing by individuals and hence vulnerability to the individual moving on. Success on issues creates its own momentum, a momentum that overshadows other priorities. If it is easier to make progress on men's issues then even advocacy success can threaten women's issues.*

*To the team this was hardly a revelation, but they were polite enough to humour my late initiation into the world of patriarchy.*

Health interventions went in another direction. Every year health camps are held in the brick kilns to address the health needs of women and children. Volunteers, doctors and students are mobilised to take part and drugs are donated. Emergency needs of women, for example during pregnancy or in the first few months after giving birth, are identified by ActionAid's teacher-volunteers, who then support the women in getting to hospital. Efforts to get the state to take responsibility or to institutionalise a shared approach have only just, after four years, started to progress.

### **The right to food – Please sir can I have some more?**

Talking to the children from the brick kilns it is clear that they come to school hungry, and probably go to bed hungry. The quality of the food eaten by all the workers in the kiln was also shocking. ActionAid picked up on these issues by trying to help the workers access entitlements under the government Public Distribution System (PDS) and, for children, the Midday Meal Scheme which provides cooked food to the children in schools. The PDS is a nationwide system which stocks and sells rice and other essentials at subsidised prices to people registered locally. Despite the help of the Food and Civil Supplies Commission, transferring the registration of the migrants from Orissa to Andhra Pradesh proved bureaucratically too cumbersome to be practical, so in the kilns they continued to be unable to buy provisions from PDS shops. ActionAid tried a second approach, again soliciting the help of the Food and Civil Supplies Commission to persuade rice mill owners to provide higher quality rice for the same price as the chicken feed that the workers were eating. The negotiations were going well until the Commissioner was transferred, and that, together with the end of the migration season, halted their political momentum.

To what extent did ActionAid in Bolangir and Hyderabad have a 'right to food' strategy? In 1996, work had initially been focussed on strengthening people's ability to grow their own food, access

their entitlements under the government's emergency food programme or earn income through engagement in public works. By 2001, the involvement of ActionAid in a Right to Food campaign, stimulated by drought in Rajasthan, was also in the background.

The general interpretation of the right to food is that it is the state's duty to ensure that food of a necessary quality and quantity is accessible and available to its people at all times, within the limits of its resources and capabilities. But what in very practical terms does a state have to do to ensure the right to food? The question cuts to the heart of the deepest beliefs of politicians. Do they believe in social welfare and protection, or do they believe that this leads to dependence? Do they believe that the state should take charge of providing jobs or should the market determine where jobs are and at what price? Do they believe that inequality requires a redistribution of resources, or do they believe that this will undermine – via distorted prices and corruption – the economic growth which in the end will provide for all?

There is truth on both sides. But it is often forgotten that for a free market to work as the theorists would like (and they never, never do), requires the most efficient and effective public laws and bodies. Similarly, effective public services require efficient and effective public laws and bodies. It is a huge mistake to believe that if corruption and political favours are the problem, then markets are the solution.

The right to food also cuts right to heart of beliefs about democracy. Famine or starvation deaths, according to the most famous writer on famine, Amartya Sen, cannot happen in a democracy. But is democracy what the ruling party does by hook or by crook to keep in power? Is democracy a once in every five year chance to elect people who make promises you know will be broken? Or is it a way of exercising power day by day to ensure that people have a say in decision making and the running of a country's affairs, at all levels from the very local to the international? To end hunger, big policy choices confront the public. This is why hunger must be brought into the orbit of democratic politics – day to day and at every level.

### Diary Government offices Andhra Pradesh, leaky local economies

*The Principal Secretary for Rural Development in Andhra Pradesh is a man who looks beyond quick fixes to long-term solutions. He says “small initiatives will not make a difference, even if we spend the entire existing budget meaningfully. Big changes in the macro-policy environment are needed. Public works may provide short-term jobs, but do not address the structural problems, the lack of productive land for the poor, weak local economies, poor marketability of products and lack of fair prices. If we want to develop the poor as a stronger force to deal with vested interests, we must nurture poor people’s organisations at a local level. Social deprivation and marginalisation is perpetuated by the caste system, and the government is part of the system of perpetuation.”*

*Later, we reflect on why, despite so much money being poured into rural areas through agricultural development and public works, international aid, money*

*from money lenders and Sardars, local economies aren’t getting going? We conclude that it has a lot to do with leakage of these funds out of the area. Rather than circulating locally, creating jobs, multiplying and increasing economic transactions, big contractors and wealthy landowners capture the money and transfer it outside, investing externally on goods and services in big cities. Some public works only benefit a shifty nexus of outside contractors, bureaucrats and politicians, such as elaborate bus shelters in places where buses only come once a day, or big dams that are only suited for high rainfall areas. This nexus of interests even interferes with an already unacceptable lag between a drought occurring and drought being officially announced. At times of drought the interests of the poor take priority, so certain people have an interest in making declaration of drought as difficult as possible. The problem, we conclude, is of governance, not money.*

If you look at the entirety of ActionAid’s work in Bolangir and Hyderabad, many of the ingredients of a right to food strategy are there, but they are not yet deliberately assembled and cooked to make a fully satisfying meal. Some important elements – like the right to a minimum wage, and to guaranteed employment – were being pursued in the context of migrant workers’ rights, not as right to food strategies.

#### **A child out of school is a child labourer**

The challenges of children’s education fared a great deal better than women, health and food. A government-led nationwide campaign was underway to eliminate child labour, focusing on getting children ‘Back to School’. Political changes at the same time resulted in the appointment of key officials who were sympathetic to child rights and child labour issues.

The struggle to provide a decent education for migrant children pursued a triple track, evolving in parallel. The first, in Bolangir, pursued the goal

of dissuading parents from taking their children with them to the kilns. And when it was clear that this was not going to stop the flow completely, the second, in Hyderabad, aimed to find places for children in existing schools. Finally, when it was discovered that most schools were too distant from the kilns, ‘shed schools’ run by Oriya-speaking ActionAid volunteer teachers were set up in the kilns themselves. The most interesting issues in this story are the role that ActionAid played as a facilitator between two state administrations and the hidden but courageous human rights role the volunteer teachers came to play.

Whose responsibility is it to educate migrant children? In 2001 it was still proving to be a big problem persuading officials in Orissa that migration was a problem. How could a deal be struck? ActionAid decided to demonstrate the problem first-hand to people at the top.

### **The first interstate meeting on migration – ‘exposing officials’**

Sympathetic high-level officials in Hyderabad were persuaded to use their convening power to set up an interstate meeting of the Bolangir Collector, the Orissa Panchayat President, the Andhra Pradesh Commissioner of Food and Civil Supplies, representatives from the Women and Children Welfare Department, a representative of the Ranga Reddy District Collector and labour officials from both states. In the meeting, ActionAid highlighted many issues, including the high drop-out rate from education. Along with a powerful encounter with kiln owners and workers held on the same day, this meeting convinced the collectors, education officials, and an influential member of the Legislative Assembly, that there was a problem. They took a strong message back to their constituencies in Orissa.

Interstate meetings are held on a number of issues that flow between state borders, and judging from the minutes of the migration meeting, the culture of hierarchy and bureaucracy creates admirable clarity on follow up and mutual responsibility. The action list is long and specific and keeps people exploring solutions.

### ***Bolangir:***

#### **Residential care centres – leaving the children at home**

Back in Orissa, continuing dialogue with the District Collector resulted in Residential Care Centres being set up to keep children back in school while their parents worked in Hyderabad. ActionAid and CADMB, in collaboration with the state government, aimed to create residential care centres for an initial 58 migration-intensive villages from seven Gram Panchayats in five blocks. Nearly 900 children would directly benefit. At the time of planning, rights language and planning was explicit: the aims were to ensure that migrant children access their right to education and health and to push the government further to ensure that the children enjoy a secure, happy and carefree childhood – which is the spirit if not the letter of international child rights law. It was also envisaged that the school environment should be used in health promotion – in this case by ensuring the children get access to the government Midday Meal Scheme. ActionAid also planned to continue work with CADMB for advocacy and lobbying to increase resources for education. Finally, it was planned that parents, children, and the broader



Shed School, Hyderabad

## Diary Bolangir, Ankamara, Binjhore and Kendubhata

*Here's a test. What is dark, colourless, with four bare walls, an earthen floor, no chairs, tables, or beds, barred windows, and a couple of blackboards? Not a prison, silly, that would have a bed. The blackboards are a clue. Yes, at their worst this is a Residential Care Centre. Attendance is declining in the Residential Care Centres, and for once the explanation is not that complex. The worst centres are just not very nice. To be fair, this scenario is a composite of badness. In one centre, the children were pressed into the shadows while the Village Education Committee (all men and of the higher castes) and other dignitaries (all men) sat at the front and answered for the children. The teacher hovered threateningly over the children, prompting and admonishing them in equal measure. To provoke, I asked the Education Committee what good suggestions the children had given the committee to improve the school. They looked completely blank – asking children's opinions seemed completely alien, and why would the school need improvements?*

*In the same poor area, and with the same resources, is Kendubhata – a beautiful school, with a veranda, a double slide, a spacious garden and a small sculpture*

*with a dip to hold sand that children can sift through their fingers. Rather than meeting formally, the children were hustled to sit outside in a more relaxed way. They spoke honestly about missing their parents – not the stiff replies about liking school.*

*The big difference? In this school the women's self-help group was running the show. The children were at the centre, or being cuddled by the women. The classroom was bright and the blackboard was in the shape of an elephant. The difference was not money – state payments for the school were two months behind, and the community was giving the teacher food and accommodation.*

*Judging by the way ActionAid celebrates the achievement of the Residential Care Centres, I would say that we are possibly in denial. It is not good enough to crow about the numbers saved from child labour – child rights matter too. Migrant parents have already told us of their worries. Have we dismissed them too quickly because we believe they will come up with any old excuse to keep their children working in the Pathuria?*

community should be involved in the decision-making, and participate in the running of the schools. Early communications to the District Collector recommended mobilising mothers of the migrant children into forming self-help groups and then transferring ownership of school management to them, building up their financial management skills through starting savings groups. Local NGOs in the CADMB network would do the community mobilisation work.

However, a visit to the field suggests that rights language is running somewhat ahead of practice. From a rights perspective, numbers don't tell you much, and reviews of this work have so far focussed on numbers of schools and children. From a rights perspective, being in school is not enough. In Bolangir, this is nothing that a return to the proposal and a bit of interaction with children and parents won't fix, and these initiatives are already in motion.

The institutional care of poor children does not have a great name anywhere in the world. Parents seemed to know what was going on and have been voting with their feet. From the beginning, however, many children – mainly young girls – were still travelling to the kilns. Parents were unwilling to entrust their most precious possession to the care of the higher castes who had never done anything but exploit them in the past. Because the reality was that Residential Care Centres would not hold all children back, alternative schooling arrangements had to be explored in Hyderabad.

## Hyderabad:

### Shed schools, bridge courses and care centres



Shed School, Hyderabad

Alternative schooling for Orissan children in Andhra Pradesh faced a number of challenges any one of which could have run initiatives into the bureaucratic sand for months. The children spoke only Oriya, the language of Orissa. Even if schooling was provided in Andhra Pradesh, would they have to restart at the point where they broke off in Orissa or could continuity be arranged? And who would pay?

Not for the first time in this story, progress was assured through the presence of an official already sympathetic and known to ActionAid. The new Head of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in Orissa had previously been the District Collector in Bolangir and had attended the Interstate meeting in Andhra Pradesh. With ActionAid vigorously chasing-up action points and facilitating regular communication between state officials, it was eventually agreed that the Orissa DPEP would pay for textbooks and part pay (with ActionAid) volunteer Oriya-speaking teachers. In Andhra Pradesh, the DPEP agreed to provide school space, supervision, learning materials, and midday meal. The DPEP also agreed to support ActionAid in setting up schools in the brick kilns themselves. These 'shed schools' consist of six mat surfaces: four walls, one roof and one floor. By 2002, the dozen sheds covered more than 100 brick kilns. Energetic and committed volunteer teachers more than compensate when compared to the rather sullen, brow-beating (or worse) state teachers you often encounter.

At some point in time ActionAid will have to pull out of the tripartite collaboration with the government of Orissa and the government of Andhra Pradesh. But for now the volunteer teachers also perform a role in community mobilisation and protecting human rights that could never be imagined for a state employee.

### Teachers as human rights activists

The volunteer teachers at the shed schools also serve a role as community organisers. They are an inspiration. ActionAid India has a special strength in training and supporting young volunteers to be social leaders and activists.

Kiln owners reacted in different ways to the request to establish shed schools within the kilns. Most were hostile, preferring to stay invisible – since establishing schools would be tantamount to admitting they were reliant on child labour, and hence doubly illegal. Some were threatening to the teachers. Others were cooperative, helped to set up shelters and provided slates and writing books. Following the interstate meeting and the collaboration with the DPEP, things got much easier – the official nature of the schools providing a degree of protection to the volunteers.

Parents in the brick kilns were much happier to send their under fives to the schools than children aged 6-14 who were valued members of the Pathuria. Many excuses were given but the hard reality is that more than just schooling is needed to compensate for the loss of income. Some parents requested that all of the child's food needs be met by the school. However, at the end of the school day, nearly all of the children return to work in the kilns, often until 2am. Encouraging parents to allow their children to attend school is a perpetual struggle.

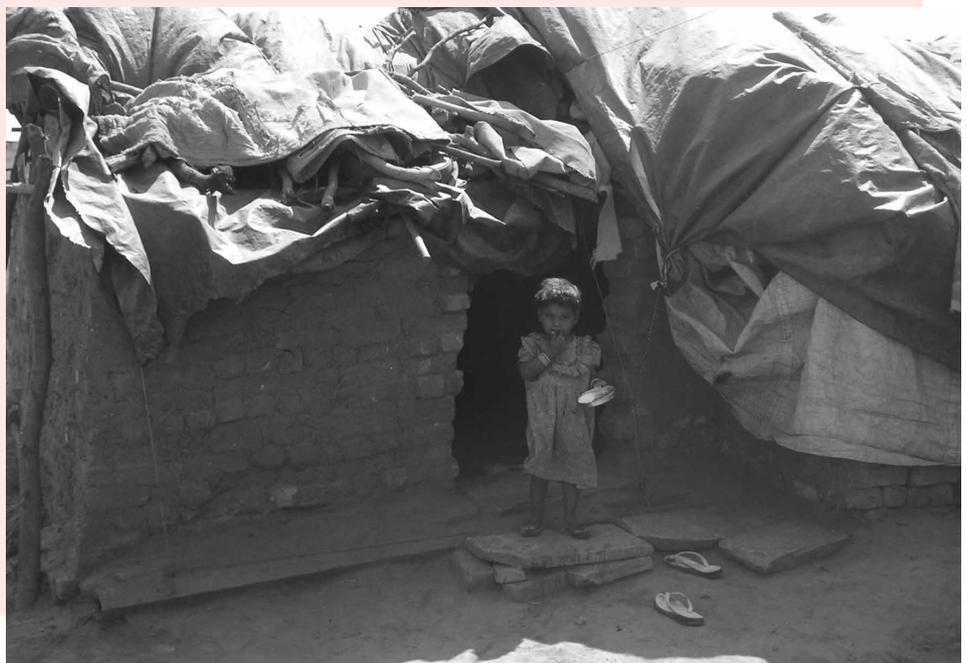
The school is the teacher's foothold in the brick kiln. The volunteers come with some degree of 'social cause', without which they would not last five minutes in their jobs. As well as training in progressive educational methods, volunteers are trained in participatory work and counselling methods. They know how to relate to children, to parents, and also the young cronies of the Sardars and kiln owners who maintain servility and order. This last group are in many ways their peers, sharing a common banter and slang.

## Diary Bolangir, brick kilns, schools and Mandal offices

*It was surprisingly cool in the shed school. Eleven-year-old Rupadhar Mirdha and brother Tana Sunder, eight, lay down their slates, and stood up amidst the 30 children sitting on the mud-packed floor to tell me about their day: up at 7am, work until 10am mixing the raw material for the bricks, then school until 3pm, back to work making bricks, and to bed at 2am. If Tana didn't have a sister to fill in for him in the Pathuria, his father would not allow him to come to school. The volunteer teacher tells how he is pleased that the shed school can issue certificates to allow these children to re-enter school at the right level when they return home. He says these are all the youngest children: the older children, and especially the girls, are working in the kilns. He says that the parents who often visit the school have a vague hope that education will prevent their children from leading their same lives. He has heard of children helping parents to read the accounts, spotting cheating and referring the matter to the teachers.*

*One of our team, Soma, is obviously unhappy with the lack of facilities in the school and struggles with the dilemma of ActionAid having money to build proper schools, but with a rights approach having to undertake years of negotiation with officials to get even the basics. Do we have to watch out for rights-based fundamentalism, she wondered? I thought back to the time when ActionAid had done nothing else but build schools. In 15 years ActionAid had not made one bit of difference to national levels of enrolment. Now with a rights and campaigning approach we were getting millions into school, and improving quality at the same time.*

*Progress at this level requires good working relations with the Mandal President. The Mandal is the next administrative unit up from the block, and is made up of about 20 Panchayats. The President is a political figure elected by the Panchayats. Get them on your side and it is much easier to work with the police, education, labour and other government officers. ActionAid staff are masters of local politics. And officials would rather negotiate with middle-class, reasonable ActionAid, than a bunch of rowdy people's organisations (a challenge for the future). The President controls the entire development budget for the Mandal. I asked him how far he felt he could take the education work. 'It is good that the schools are functioning' he said, 'but my vision is that the child should have a better life and be able to contribute to nation-building. If in this generation you can educate the child, they will ensure their child is educated'. He has been very helpful in establishing a residential bridge school (a stone's throw from his window), convening negotiations with kiln owners, and facilitating health camps for workers. When we visit a school a short drive away where he helped negotiate class space for 80 children from 27 kilns, he is filmed ladling out the midday meal, is interviewed in a classroom and ambushes me with an interview, where out of courtesy I say very nice things about him. All, in the end, is about politics.*



Worker housing, brick kiln, Hyderabad

As had been expected, workers came to the teachers with their problems and complaints. These would range from day-to-day problems with payments, water and food, to minor abuse. In most cases these issues can be resolved directly with kiln owners. The very presence of the volunteers and a place where workers can go for protection does seem to have curbed some of the beatings and abuse in the kilns, but major abuses set in train an increasingly frequent 'rescue' response, requiring a whole new level of human rights and legal knowledge.

The teachers are in the kilns at all hours listening to people and learning about their lives. They accompany them to Public Health Centres, forcing the kiln owners to pay for the medicines. Special meetings are organised to inform people about their rights and how to protect them.

### **Rescue from the abyss**

Technically, because the migrants have all taken advances and cannot leave the kilns until they have paid them off, all of them are illegally bonded labourers. Technically, they can be 'freed', provided with compensation, and rehabilitated. Technically, it is very hard to prove. There is little documentation to refer to, and labourers are unwilling to speak out and do what it takes to make a case against the Sardars and kiln owners. Things need to get very bad indeed before people overcome their fear, and when things do go bad, other laws are also applicable.

Stories of severe abuse are picked up by the volunteer teachers in the kilns or by CADMB partners speaking to returned migrants who have had family members kidnapped or forcibly retained.

When severe human rights abuses are encountered, such as kidnapping, assault, rape, forced 'mortgaging' of daughters, and forcible detention, higher levels of legal knowledge and skill are needed to ensure justice and compensation. Nearly 100 cases of severe abuse taken forward by ActionAid and partners have resulted in labourers being freed, successful prosecutions, and promises of state compensation.

### **Diary Union Offices Hyderabad**

*The President of the Medak District Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) tells us that he has wanted to help migrant workers organise for at least two years but language has been a problem. Now with the Oriya speaking volunteer teachers and an organiser seconded to the Union from ActionAid, things are moving fast. 150 men and ten women have joined the union in three months. He says that the owners are often powerful Panchayat members, so membership and organisation is very difficult. But he is confident that there will be a critical mass of membership within two years. We have just returned from a kiln and noticed that you can't walk ten yards without a kiln crony stepping on your shadow. So how, we ask, did you manage to recruit those members? Your teachers helped, he said. They told the kiln owners that they were taking pictures of parents, needed for membership, in order register their children for exams. In the adjoining room a dozen volunteer teachers were receiving training from union staff. Learning about worker's rights is critical for these front-line human rights activists, and the services that a strong union like CITU can provide are critical, for example in campaigning both for the minimum wage and an increase in the wage and signing them up to government insurance schemes, for health, accidents and pensions. I asked the teachers what motivated them to do the work. With a youthful confidence which shrugs off frequent threats and occasional beatings, they all replied (in one way or another) that it was a desire to work for social justice. Outside in the car the team agreed that they would have to keep an eye on the union strategy. The kiln owners would catch on soon to what was going on, and maybe there are other approaches to worker organisation.*

### *Diary Bargan Village, Bolangir. return of the migrants*

*Over a period of months, four young women from this village were held against their will and repeatedly raped by cronies of the brick kiln owner. Two young men had escaped, had been caught and beaten senseless with wooden planks. ActionAid and CADMB partners rescued them, and now they are back in the village waiting for justice. Their lives have been exhaustively documented and I felt I practically knew them. I was dead wrong. Because of the way their stories had been told I had images of victims. But here in front of me, confident, strong, handsome and beautiful were the last people on earth that you could imagine being pushed around by Sardars and kiln*

*cronies. Balmikisuna the 16-year-old boy who had been badly beaten, showed me a blood-stained and torn shirt, evidence of his ordeal. These were people who had waited for months for the compensation due to freed bonded labourers, and the physical evidence was priceless for people who have learned that their own words count little against the word of others. But there is hope on the horizon. Despite a lack of interest from the police and some underhand work from the District Administration to trick them into signing their rights away, a cross-party Parliamentary Committee will be arriving in the village to take evidence.*

### **Rights knowledge and confidence builds**

Throughout 2003, and against a continuing backdrop of addressing community needs more deeply in both Hyderabad and Bolangir, far more explicit analysis of, and action on, rights was happening. There was no 'big bang' but a steady build-up of experience and confidence. Four factors stood out as important:

- The India country programme had discussed and agreed a rights-centred strategy with all staff. Staff were clearer about what a rights-based approach was, and as a result 'had permission' to engage in the more political aspects of the challenges experienced on the ground.
- Interactions with government bodies had increased and were taking a strong rights perspective. This required a better analysis of what rights were applicable to migrant workers.
- The volunteer teachers had been thrust into the role of human rights workers, and, by simply being supportive to the labourers, were gathering evidence of abuse.
- Work in Bolangir was moving from supporting people's organisations to produce plans, to supporting people in getting information on rights and entitlements.

### ***Bolangir:***

#### **The right to information: Social audits and Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D)**

Shine the light of knowledge on a problem and it will wither under its powerful glare. Or so the theory goes. This is true for corruption when public resources are channelled into private pockets, and more generally when people simply need knowledge to receive what they are due. Knowledge and rights are inseparable.

Two exciting knowledge-based initiatives have taken place in Bolangir. Both are wonderful examples of the power of bringing people's knowledge and external knowledge together. The first was a social audit process in Bolangir. The second was an Information and Communication Technology for Development initiative, refreshingly user-friendly.

The social audit is the product of the right to information movement in India. For ten years social activists lobbied to make the social audit of all state-sponsored development a statutory requirement. By 1993, the Constitution of India was amended to make this so. The village community is now empowered to do an audit of

all development work in their village, and the concerned authorities are duty bound to facilitate them. The process involves people finding out what public services and resources are due to them, documenting which have arrived, and holding the providers to account. It is a participatory process grounded in the right to information. It is a process that allows the user to enforce accountability and transparency.

In 2001, ActionAid decided to facilitate a model social audit process, gathering nearly 100 social activists from CADMB, right to information NGOs, committed officials and 3,000 local villagers. Good relations between ActionAid and the District Administration guaranteed support from the top. Without this there is little chance of information on public works and schemes being released. Three years of letters and documents relating to contracts, bills, vouchers, and records of work done were analysed and sorted by the village. Various violations were immediately revealed, but the key process was ground-truthing by villagers in the places where the work was supposed to have happened.

Villagers were prepared for the social audit through street plays about the right to information, and visits by teams from CADMB. Huge teams of villagers and outside activists were organised in the villages to sift and verify the claims of private contractors, government departments, and also of international NGOs who were doing work in the villages. Careful strategies were designed for villages where it was known that there were problems with important Panchayat officials. Engineers checked physical works, and a chartered accountant reviewed the Panchayat accounts. Particular efforts were made to determine what services were reaching the poorest in each village. The audit culminated with a presentation of the audit findings illustrated through charts in the local Oriya language and 2,500 people participated.

The highly sensitive process resulted in threats to activists and revealed high-level corruption in some Panchayats, ineffective and unaccountable governance in most, and ended with criminal

proceedings against wrong-doers. More importantly, in respect to migration and drought, the audit revealed what meagre government funds that were arriving in the district were siphoned off by outside contractors. It also raised political awareness amongst villagers that the district should be entitled to receive a wider range of government schemes on employment generation, social security and food security, and raised their confidence in their power to hold the powerful to account. As a model it was not perfect – for example the poorest and most marginal groups were hugely under-represented – but it showed how ActionAid could use its convening power amongst both community based organisations, professionals, and government officials to facilitate a revolution in governance.

The ICT4D starts with the same premise, that despite government laws, systems and institutions designed to bring decision-making, services and accountability to the lowest level, people are either kept in the dark about their entitlements or they are stolen from them. The project was part of a three country pilot (India, Burundi, Uganda) to examine the relevance of communication technologies to issues of information, empowerment, transparency and accountability.

The project was developed in 2002/2003 at the time when work in Bolangir was shifting to supporting communities to analyse their own situation and plan for themselves, thus laying the foundation for a more assertive approach to rights. Using *Reflect*, ICT4D was an important way of getting villages to collectively engage with the Micro-Level Plans. At this stage, information and knowledge was critical so that communities could match their own analysis of what they needed with knowledge of the available entitlements.

The process started with ActionAid's participatory discussion and planning groups, called *Reflect* Circles. The key issues for the Circles to analyse were their information needs and their most important and reliable sources of information. Communications technologies are just a means, so these were not the centre of the discussions. Their most reliable form of information sharing was

agreed to be verbal, through informal and formal meetings, and working together. In terms of technology, radios were preferred. With high levels of illiteracy, the traditional government forms of communication through posters, leaflets and wall paintings were thought to be least useful.

The key thing with this project is that people were asked about their information needs, and talked about what forms of information sharing and access were important to them. Of even more significance was the presence of the *Reflect* Circle to deepen the coming together of people's knowledge and knowledge from outside, to ensure that the form in which it comes, and its content, are suited to their needs and motivations. How outsiders bring knowledge to a community to strengthen a community's critical engagement with outside issues is one of the greatest challenges in rights-based work. The *Reflect* ICT4D project has started well, but perhaps driven by the imminent end to the pilot, is too rapidly institutionalising resource centres, people and management committees shadowing every level of government at village, block and district levels, and inevitably looking too quickly at where the donor-attractive electronic media can be installed. It may be better to have an even more important understanding of the information and knowledge that people need for specific things that they need and want to do in life, and to reflect with communities on how to acquire it.

Development of the social audit process and the *Reflect* ICT4D project could help ActionAid take a very important step in rights work. Much more must be done to nurture these shoots of citizenship and voice that they have produced, for a greater challenge lies ahead. While people

struggle to get the most basic survival rights, the world is being shaped around them. Decisions are being made and courses of action being set that will profoundly affect their lives. An army of professional pro-poor organisations, consultants, government departments, academics and development agencies (including ActionAid) is busy shaping policy on behalf of the poor and the marginalised. What could be wrong with that? Seen through a rights lens there are quite a few problems. In so far as these policy makers insist on being the experts, they push poor people out of this important political space. In rights work you often hear the phrase 'people-centred advocacy'. What this means in Bolangir and Hyderabad is taking local advocacy by the people to a larger district or national level, and supporting people to shape their future lives through influencing alternative national policies. It is a huge challenge and will require new skills in using knowledge, supporting small local organisations to become part of larger social movements, and strengthening their influence within networks of people and organisations whose aim is to work in solidarity with them.

For traditional NGOs this is a brave step outside the comfort zone. For this reason it needs to be driven by a vision. The vision in Bolangir is to gradually build the people's organisations towards Lok Shasan where justice and equity are the prevalent principles governing the people. This is a vision of active citizenship where every citizen is capable of being a leader in their own struggles against deprivation and poverty. But for people's advocacy to be sustainable, traditional 'professional' advocacy must change to work in solidarity with it, making room, and building capabilities for people's own voices to be heard.

## Joining Orissa and Andhra Pradesh: working with the State on rights

In late 2004, ActionAid initiated a second interstate meeting on migration. It created huge pressure to be clear about what needed to be done. Was ActionAid ready?

What happens when you want to tackle the big issues, the ones that can make a nationwide difference – not problems caused by drought and migration in particular localities, but the problems of drought and migration themselves?

This work has showed us that it is not just a question of doing ‘more of’ – bigger networks, more geographical coverage, more research, addressing all possible needs. A change in perspective is needed. Working in Bolangir and Hyderabad was teaching us to make sure our field methods are appropriate to rights and citizenship work, and that organisational systems (funding, management, partnership policies) are suited to supporting social movement building. And in interactions with the state, it is hugely important to understand what laws and rights apply, and gather solid evidence that a problem exists and of legal infringement and abuse. The first and continual response of bureaucracy is denial. This is their instinct and ActionAid’s must be to challenge it.

By 2004 a framework of rights was informing work in Bolangir and Hyderabad. It may have been more in people’s heads than on paper, but it was there. It was built around two key questions: how to reduce distress migration and how to reduce distress in migration. The important thing is to protect people’s rights wherever they are and whatever occupation they are undertaking. By this time there was greater clarity on what rights were applicable and where. This is summarised in **Table 1** overleaf. This framework of rights emerged through interactions with the state machinery. The framework is applied through the design of policy initiatives and campaigns. It was particularly important in the preparation of the second interstate meeting on migration.

## Making rights work – the second interstate consultation on migration

What happens when you apply a rights framework? Does it lead to changes in people’s lives? Does it bring benefits and if so, how long does it take? Sceptics of the rights approach are not convinced that it leads to tangible changes in people’s lives, or believe that the promises of change are too speculative and far in the future to matter.

The Inter-state Consultation of Orissa Migrant Labourers, held in October 2004, is a strong indicator that the machinery of change is grinding into action for the benefit of poor and marginalised people. It was a workshop involving, at the highest level, all of the main players – government and non-government.



ActionAid

Table 1 Migration and drought: a framework of rights

<b>Laws and rights</b>	<b>Reducing distress in migration</b>	<b>Reducing distress migration</b>
<b>Equal treatment and welfare of scheduled castes and tribes</b>	Empowerment of minorities	Empowerment of minorities
<b>Children's rights and the elimination of child labour</b> Child Labour Act 1986 (Ministry of Labour) Early childhood care (Department of Women and Child Development)	Education – bridge courses, kiln schools, Residential Care Centres Creches – mini agarwadis	Education – Residential Care Centres
<b>Education rights and rights in education</b>	(see above)	(see above) Community involvement in school management (SHGs, VECs)
<b>Women's rights</b>	Equal wages Curbing atrocities on women Property rights Participation of women in decision-making Women's health and child care	Equal wages Property rights Participation of women in decision-making Minimum and timely payment for kendu leaf Women's pensions
<b>Health rights</b>	Institutionalising kiln health camps	School health visitors
<b>Food rights and food security</b>	Increasing access to the PDS/BDL Minimum wage Midday meal programme	Increasing access to the PDS/BDL Land rights Minimum wage See employment guarantees Midday meal programme Household food security
<b>Enforcing labour laws and employment rights</b> The Interstate Migrant Workmen Act 1979 Bonded Labour Act 1976 Minimum Wages Act 1948 Factories Act Employment Guarantee Act (EGA)	Registration and licensing of migrant workers by contractors and kiln owners Minimum wage Employment allowances Interstate mechanisms for Rescue and Rehabilitation of Bonded labourers Union membership	EGA 100 days employment per household on minimum wage (could stem 50% of migration) Food and cash for work in drought mitigation programmes Labour societies
<b>Social security and insurance</b>	Accident insurance	Pensions
<b>Land rights and equitable access to livelihood resources</b>		Preventing eviction from forest lands. Land rights for minor forest produce. Revival of land reform. Rights to land, water, minerals, forests.
<b>Rights to information</b>	Legal literacy for migrants ActionAid Open Information Policy	Social audits. ICT4D ActionAid Open Information Policy Knowledge of wage employment
<b>Citizenship rights</b>	Union membership Participation in local governance School governance	Social audit Participation in local governance (for example Local Area Development Schemes and institutionalising micro-level planning) School governance Voice and political space for people's organisations

In comparison to the first consultation which had more of an emphasis on getting official recognition that a problem existed, the stakes in the second meeting were much higher. ActionAid was to come to the meeting with a clear rights perspective, authority on rights violations, and the urgency that comes from the issue gaining wide press coverage. The aim was to resolve and take action on the issues and concerns that had built up over the past three years.

The role of committed high-level officials was once again striking. When the bureaucracy wants to, it moves. But any gaps in arguments and evidence, any senior person not warmed up, and it will resist, deny, and put-off. ActionAid emphasised that migration was a fact and that the law was supposed to protect migrants. People's rights needed to be ensured in their lives as farmers or labourers, while they migrated, in the kilns, and when they returned. The implication was that there was no single quick-fix solution.

The outcome of the meeting was a detailed list of actions for state officials in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh covering the gaps in rights and entitlements that ActionAid and partners had identified in the previous three years. In Orissa, the government would collaborate with ActionAid to ensure migrants were properly registered, that they were informed of their rights, that the employment guarantee programme would be improved to check migration at source, and that the Residential Care Centres would be expanded. The National Employment Guarantee Act provides for at least 100 days of employment on asset-creating public works programmes, at the minimum wage for at least one person in every poor household. Bolangir and Nuapada in Orissa are two of the 100 districts identified for implementation of the scheme. According to the Commissioner for Rural Development in Andhra Pradesh this should stem 50% of the migration.

In Andhra Pradesh, a major effort was to be made to ensure that the Labour Ministers and departments in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa would interact with kiln owners to ensure that the provisions of the Interstate Migration Act would be enforced, and that where needed, migrants would receive support from the Labour Welfare Fund. There would be joint inspections between the labour department and NGOs of brick kiln sites. The collaboration between the DPEPs in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, and with NGOs would be expanded. Commitments were made from NGOs to campaign on the eradication of child labour.

The representative of the Commissioner for Rural Development in Orissa said that he would pursue compensation and rehabilitation of the freed bonded labourers, and that right to food schemes would be implemented in Western Orissa. Special cells were created within Rural Development and the Labour Commission to deal with issues of migration.

And in a real turn-around in the lack of interest in issues that were not directly concerned with the economic interests of men, the Women and Child Welfare Department and the DPEP agreed to collaborate to set up mini aganwadis in the kilns. Aganwadis are government schemes to take care of pregnant or lactating women, and very small children. They provide supplementary food, awareness on health and child care issues, help mothers to access health centres, and in certain places provide crèche facilities.

## From being a human to being a citizen

The struggle to secure the basic rights which show that, at a minimum, the state and society regard you as human, is continuous. Being fully human means the freedom to shape your own solutions and futures and to realise your creative potential as a citizen in society. The Bolangir and Hyderabad offices look forward to a time where, through strong people's organisations, everyone realises their capability to sustain the struggle for rights and for shaping their futures. This vision of justice and equity they call Lok Shasan. But for now they plan for at least another five years of work to strengthen the move from local empowerment to putting people at the centre of their own advocacy efforts and their own policy analysis. The team has recognised challenges at many levels, both in relation to the issues and the ways of working.

### Challenges to ways of working

- Methods of bringing information and knowledge to communities so they are appropriate to their needs and priorities, and involve them in influencing higher level policies as well as for securing entitlements;
- Developing participatory methods better suited to people-centred advocacy and governance;
- Activating CADMB as a people-centred research and advocacy network.
- Supporting CADMB as part of, and a catalyst for, social movements.
- Engaging in more campaigns such as the national food rights campaign.

### Challenges on issues

- Strengthening programmes on women and disability rights.
- Strengthening migrants' organisations and unionisation of migrants.
- Ensuring quality education for all migrant children.
- Organising legal aid and literacy for migrants.
- Working on land reform and land for landless.
- Strengthening access and control of livelihood resources for poorest and marginalised.
- Creating employment/earning opportunities.
- Increasing household food security.
- Institutionalising micro-level planning and other ways to strengthen local governance.
- Incorporating ICTs into *Reflect*, institutionalising social audits and other action on the right to information.
- Generating policy alternatives, for example on local development and the development of local economies.

### Hope

In Bolangir and Hyderabad we uncovered a system that preys on the poor. It is well organised and influential, drawing in those whose job it is to help not harm the poor. It is enough to make you give up. But the situation is far from hopeless. There are many friends in the system and many allies too, without which the following achievements could not have been made:

- Research that set the agenda for government, donors and civil society.
- Formation of 137 migrant labour societies and a start to unionising workers.

*Diary Two weeks in the company of sharp, experienced and passionate activists*

*In my short time in Bolangir and Hyderabad, I interacted with and learned a huge amount from individuals who were always striving for improvements on the ground, always prodding for ideas and suggestions. They were intellectually white hot, as familiar with obscure European philosophy as Indian feminism; well connected politically into networks of activists and the press; diplomatic and strategic with the bureaucracy; patient organisers and managers backing up those with the wild ideas and schemes;*

*skilled in film making and communicating people's lives in plain language.*

*I got the strong impression that the rights approach means never being satisfied that you have done enough. Humorous self-criticism, a perverse pleasure in spotting mistakes and a professional approach to moving on seems to be a culture. It is these qualities that gives you hope that in Bolangir and Hyderabad ActionAid will rise to the challenges.*

- Registration of 16,000 migrant labourers by 2003, compared to 351 in 2000.
- 3,500 migrants insured compared to none in 2000.
- Wages increased by one third (but still not the minimum).
- 93 community-managed RCCs in Bolangir and 35 shed schools for 1,500 children and 50 teacher-activists.
- Development work contracted to labour societies.
- Rescue and rehabilitation of over 100 'bonded' migrants.
- Community-managed food banks.
- Land rehabilitation.
- Linkage to PDS and other food security schemes.
- Support to women's self help groups.
- Formation of a multiplicity of people's organisations.
- Payment of kendu leaf wages.
- Linkage of people's plans to local self-government, leading to many local benefits.
- Successful social audit.
- Training and networking of Panchyat Raj Institutions.
- Land found for some landless through district administration.
- CADMB network: 18 organisations covering 400 villages – most of the drought-prone villages.
- A clear framework of rights that is being implemented through influential relationships with the state at the highest levels.

The achievements are a reflection of an organisation that can change when it wants to, and catalyse change around it.

## Change

Motorola's state of the art black razor phone was being promoted in Hyderabad ahead of London and other European capital cities. India's elite get what they want. And shielded from view, both metaphorically and physically by those very Motorola hoardings, Bolangir's sons and daughters provide the bricks for their success. The people of Bolangir will continue to struggle. Securing basic rights is the first step towards a day when they will stand alongside the elites of 'Cyberabad' as full citizens in shaping the future of the nation. For those already standing alongside the people of Bolangir, the civil society organisations, enlightened officials, journalists, activists, ActionAid, and many thousands of kilometres away, ActionAid's supporters, the agenda, despite the gains, is unfinished.

The exploitation is relentless, and those who benefit will not give up without a fight. Awakening to the almost pathological violence against the poor demands dislocating changes in the way an organisation acts. But this is a story of hope. Change towards justice in India, while not as relentless as the exploitation, has many champions. This story shows how change is happening. ActionAid's work in Bolangir and Hyderabad shows how the pool of champions can grow, as clear analysis, advocacy, and supporting people to act and speak for themselves bring reality to light.

This is also a story of organisational change and awakening – being in the company of people who are perpetually seeking out the next step, perpetually learning and perpetually in movement. Because it is only through movement that ActionAid can continue to be relevant to people's lives.

ActionAid



Worker housing, brick kiln, Hyderabad



*Critical stories of change* is a joint project of The Knowledge Initiative and ActionAid International's Impact Assessment and Shared Learning Unit.

The Knowledge Initiative is a new organisation being nurtured within ActionAid International. The Knowledge Initiative reflects the importance ActionAid International attaches to the generation and use of knowledge for empowerment, and hence action. The Knowledge Initiative aims to help civil society organisations and others to realise individual and organisational potentials as generators of knowledge for progress, and for empowering poor and marginalised people to use their own and other people's knowledge as a source of power. It does this through new alliances and networks for experiential training and learning, action research, rights-based participatory approaches, and the pursuit of alternatives.

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Copies of this report and other Impact Assessment materials can be downloaded on:  
**[www.actionaid.org/503/further\\_resources.html](http://www.actionaid.org/503/further_resources.html)**

#### **Photographs**

The majority of the images in this document are illustrative only and do not depict any person or community mentioned in the text

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**ActionAid is a unique partnership of people who are fighting for a better world – a world without poverty.**

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