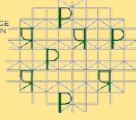




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# At the First Mile, First in Line

**How Gram Panchayat Help Desks in Jharkhand are bridging the digital divide and rebuilding everyday governance**

*In East Singhbhum, 35 Gram Panchayat Help Desks are now active across Patamda, Boram, and Gurabandha blocks, providing doorstep assistance to rural families. Set up under the “Women Empowerment through MGNREGA” initiative by TSRD, each desk is anchored by a trained woman facilitator from local self-help groups, helping residents access job cards, MGNREGA rights and entitlements, primarily pensions, housing, and other key welfare schemes.*



In the remote corners of Jharkhand, particularly in the tribal-dominated East Singhbhum district, a model of local support is beginning to change how rural families access government entitlements.

Spread across remote panchayats, Gram Panchayat Help Desks (GPHDs) are set up inside Panchayat Bhavans under the leadership of the Gram Panchayat and operated by trained women Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) Mate and members from local self-help groups (SHGs). They are quietly becoming the first stop for citizens struggling to access job cards, on-demand support for getting wage payments and other NREGA rights and entitlements, as well as pensions, ration entitlements, and housing schemes. These centres are making governance more approachable, especially for those who have historically found the system either too distant or too complex to navigate.

The initiative has taken root in over 35 panchayats across three blocks (Patamda, Boram, and Gurabandha) in East Singhbhum, anchored by the [Tagore Society for Rural Development \(TSRD\)](#), partner organisation of the [Common Ground Initiative](#). It is under the “Women Empowerment through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)” programme, and supported by field-building expertise from Common Ground partners [Professional Assistance for Development Action \(PRADAN\)](#), these Help Desks are run by locally selected women facilitators known as GPHD *Sahayikas*.

These part-time MGNREGA Women mates or SHG workers sit at the GPHD two days weekly during fixed hours, most commonly on *Rojgar Diwas*. Designed as village-level information and facilitation centres, these help desks respond to long-standing challenges around welfare delivery, such as incomplete forms, unclear documentation, inaccessible offices, and a lack of clear information. They are bridging between Mukhiya, Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS), and the Community.

“At each location, a part-time *Sahayika* is stationed at the help desk. She helps citizens fill out forms, ensures they have the right documents, and follows up on applications and grievances,” said Nandalal Bakshi, Joint Secretary, TSRD. “These roles are clearly defined and grounded in local protocols, ensuring that the *Sahayika* complements the work of the Mukhiya, Rozgar Sevak, and Gram Rozgar Sahayak, rather than substituting for it. Her familiarity with the community and ability to communicate in the local dialect make her an effective bridge between citizens and the state.”



The work of these help desks builds on both local experience and institutional learning. The design of the GPHD has been informed by exposure visits and field inputs from PRADAN, which has played a key role in shaping the operating structure. “Drawing from its earlier experience with block-level Sahayata Kendras, PRADAN has contributed to the development of training modules, record-keeping formats, grievance redressal practices, and methods for community outreach. These frameworks have helped TSRD refine its implementation in the field, where the emphasis remains on consistency, credibility, and responsiveness,” said Sukanta Sarkar from PRADAN.

**“Earlier, women had to walk far or wait for the Mukhiya to be free. Now they come to us directly. They bring their papers, ask their doubts, and go back feeling confident. We are not just filling forms—we are giving people the courage to speak up,” said Manda Devi, GPHD Help Desk Sahayika**

The need for such help desks arises from longstanding gaps in local governance. Despite two rounds of panchayat elections in the past decade, the functioning of institutions like Gram Sabhas remains limited. Women and marginalised communities often do not participate, and many residents are unclear about the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives. In this vacuum, informal actors—middlemen, private agents—fill the gap, charging fees and further complicating access. Help desks address this challenge by making official support visible, available, and free at the local level



For many families, the GPHD has meant the end of dependency on private agents or unofficial middlemen. “Community members report that they no longer have to pay for basic services such as correcting Aadhaar details or tracking MGNREGA wages. The savings—both in money and time— reduced harassment/hassle have been substantial,” said Bakshi.

The support extends beyond paperwork. GPHDs also conduct awareness camps, read the preamble of the Constitution during community events, and run ward-wise sessions to explain how different schemes work. Posters listing scheme entitlements, helpline numbers, and public disclosure materials are displayed at the Help Desk for easy reference.

**A woman from Lawa village, who recently received her widow's pension with the help of the GPHD, said, “No one asked me for money. They just filled out the form and told me what documents to bring. The pension came in two weeks,” she said.**



The model is embedded in local governance. Mukhiyas and Ward Members have been involved from the start in approving facilitators, participating in training sessions, and coordinating with block officials to ensure that the Help Desk functions as a support unit of the Panchayat, not as a parallel structure. This ownership has been key to ensuring follow-ups on complaints and addressing grievances. Regular interactions between the GPHD and Panchayat level staff, Panchayat Secretaries, and Rozgar Sevaks are helping ensure that bottlenecks are addressed early

At the system level, these Help Desks are helping address deep-seated governance challenges. A joint exposure visit organised by TSRD and PRADAN highlighted structural gaps—like irregular Panchayat meetings, weak grievance redressal systems, and low community awareness—and laid out concrete steps to build capacity, document processes, and sustain operations. The field-level learning has helped refine operational manuals, design registers, standardise grievance formats, and improve coordination with other actors like Pragya Kendras.

**“These desks are not just service points. They are slowly reintroducing people to what governance should feel like—present, responsive, and predictable,” said Bakshi.**

The model is not without its challenges. Staffing shortages, irregular functioning of Panchayat offices, limited digital literacy, and coordination challenges with decision makers remain. At times, there is also resistance to decentralised ownership or a lack of coordination between SHGs, line departments, and Panchayat secretaries. “These are structural issues that cannot be resolved overnight. However, what the GPHDs demonstrate is that small, consistent efforts can begin to restore faith in local institutions. They can create a sense of belonging where the Panchayat Bhavan is no longer an intimidating space, but a place where citizens can walk in, ask questions, and receive answers,” said Rupali Bakshi, TSRD.

To scale this model, ongoing training and peer learning exchanges are essential. PRADAN and TSRD have already initiated regular workshops, field visits, and documentation exercises to share experiences across panchayats. There is also a growing emphasis on developing standard operating procedures, participatory monitoring tools, and mechanisms for integrating feedback from SHG federations and Gram Sabhas. Some of the immediate recommendations include increasing visibility of the help desks through local media, building stronger linkages with Pragya Kendras and other service points, and developing simplified booklets on key schemes for use by citizens and Sahayikas alike.



**“It is just the beginning. There is potential for these Help Desks to truly benefit the people. We see better complaint redressal, higher community participation, and a more responsive governance structure emerging. However, there is still a lack of adequate awareness and outreach. More needs to be done to ensure that the Panchayat system can reach everyone who needs support,” said Shashi Dungdung, Block Development Officer, East Singhbhum, who has facilitated coordination with Rozgar Sevaks (village-level employment assistants) and local leaders.**

The Gram Panchayat Help Desk is not a parallel system. It is an embedded support layer that restores the role of the panchayat as a site of trust and accessibility. At its core, it reflects a simple premise—that governance must meet people where they are. In doing so, it reminds us that democratic access isn’t just about voting every five years, but about being able to solve a document mismatch on a Thursday morning, with the support of someone who knows your name.

### **Government of Jharkhand Statewide Order**

On January 2, 2024, the Government of Jharkhand issued a state-wide directive mandating the establishment of Gram Panchayat Help Desks (GPHDs) across all 4,246 Panchayats. Designed as embedded facilitation centres within Panchayat Bhavans, these help desks aim to provide doorstep assistance for schemes like MGNREGA, pensions, housing, and social entitlements. Each desk will be staffed by two trained women facilitators, preferably from SHGs, who will operate at least two days a week, including during Rojgar Diwas. The initiative includes provisions for monthly honorariums, performance incentives, standardised training, and monitoring through the DRDA and BDO offices. The GPHDs are positioned not as parallel structures, but as extensions of the Panchayat system, ensuring governance meets people where they are.



## Annexures:

### Women's Empowerment through the MGNREGA Programme

The Tagore Society for Rural Development (TSRD) has been instrumental in implementing the "Women Empowerment through MGNREGA" initiative in East Singhbhum, Jharkhand. This program focuses on establishing Gram Panchayat Help Desks (GPHDs) operated by trained women facilitators, known as Sahayikas, who are members of local Self-Help Groups (SHGs). These help desks serve as vital access points for rural citizens, especially women, to obtain information and assistance related to MGNREGA, pensions, housing, and other welfare schemes. By positioning women at the forefront of these facilitation centers, the initiative not only enhances the delivery of government services but also empowers women to take active roles in local governance and community development. TSRD's approach underscores the importance of community-led models in strengthening grassroots governance and promoting gender equity in rural areas.

### What is the incentive mechanism for Sahayikas?

The Gram Panchayat Help Desk model is conceptualised and piloted by TSRD with support from PRADAN. The funding for GPHDs is currently being mobilised through community-centric mechanisms, and in some cases, limited Panchayat-level budgetary allocations or development grants

### Cost Breakdown:

- **Honorarium for Sahayika:** ₹2,000 per month
- **Per Day Demonstration Cost:** ₹250 for a 2-day/week setup
- **Performance-linked Incentives:** Range from ₹1,200 to ₹2,000 based on deliverables like number of forms processed, grievances resolved, or awareness events conducted
- **Furniture and Infrastructure:** Basic provisions within Panchayat Bhavan, often repurposed or co-utilised
- **Operational Support:** In-kind support from the Panchayat (space, furniture), with community buy-in

The model rests on community ownership, with Sahayikas acting as bridges between residents and government functionaries like Rozgar Sevaks and Mukhiyas. These part-time help desks function typically around Rojgar Diwas (Sunday/Monday), when employment demand applications are processed.

## Opportunities for Institutionalisation

- Aligning and embedding the idea and institutional design into the cluster-level federation of SHGs supported under JSLPS and the Department of Rural Development, Jharkhand.
- The institutional spaces created through various programmes need to be aligned, such as Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra, Common facility centres, Aarthik Sahayata Kendras, Custom hiring centres, etc, with a greater interface of community representatives and improve their community connect by considering the idea of a help desk as described above.
- Has to be made as an integral planning component under the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) to advance PRI-CBO convergence with financial support from the 5th Finance Commission provisioning and Own source revenue of Panchayats. Rent and incentive models for service provision can be promoted by panchayats under the OSR framework.
- To give an initial push and build necessary capacity in the panchayats to institutionalise help desks, CSR projects, and provisioning under the District Mineral Fund could be made.



## xSummary table

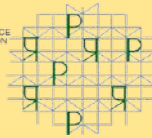
Component	Details
Initiative Name	Gram Panchayat Help Desks (GPHDs) under Women Empowerment through MGNREGA
Location	East Singhbhum district, Jharkhand (Patamda, Boram, Gurabandha blocks)
Lead Organisations	TSRD with support from PRADAN
Total GPHDs	35 GPHDs (as of May 2025)
Facilitator Role	Assist citizens with forms, documents, applications, and entitlements
Facilitator Source	Women from SHGs / MGNREGA Mates
Honorarium	₹2,000 monthly, with additional performance-linked incentives
Operational Days	2 days per week, including Rojgar Diwas (typically Sunday/Monday)
Key Services	NREGA wage access, pensions, ration, housing, Aadhaar corrections, grievance redressal
Target Beneficiaries	Marginalised communities, especially women
Community Engagement	Awareness camps, constitutional preamble readings, & scheme explanations
Government Coordination	Mukhiya, Ward Members, BDOs, Rozgar Sevaks, Pragya Kendras
Challenges	Staffing gaps, coordination challenges, limited digital literacy, and Panchayat infrastructure
Support Frameworks	Training modules, monitoring formats, and record registers from PRADAN's field experience





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