

## Singhbhum Legal Aid & Development Society (SLADS) in Jharkhand

### *Community ownership of healthcare*

The Skillshare International partnership with the Singhbhum Legal Aid & Development Society (SLADS) in Jharkhand is poised at an interesting and a very crucial stage. Through the four-year partnership so far, 19 health workers - 16 women and 3 men - have been trained from 15 villages of Ghatshila block. Now efforts are on to get the community to take over the health care system, own it as a co-operative and run it. The job is extremely exciting from a development point of view, but at the same time "not easy" to put it mildly.

SLADS was set up in 1984 by Mr J. K. Mahato, then a local teacher and now a practising lawyer, when he found tribals jailed for months on charges of felling trees, while big companies that had systematically denuded the forests went scot-free. He formed a *sanghatan* to provide free legal aid to the tribals. He recognised that plain activism was not enough, and that it must be accompanied by health, education and economic improvements.



This school was built by the community following an initiative by a SLADS village Health Trainer.

SLADS now runs a high school for school drop-outs, has provided irrigation facilities to some villages and has campaigned for the closure of the Jadugoda uranium mines, which are believed to cause genetic defects from radiation in the local area. SLADS works in 75 villages in four blocks. The health-work partnership with Skillshare covers 15 villages in the Ghatshila block, inhabited by daily labourers, subsistence farmers and Backward Castes. None have electricity and many cannot be accessed by road. The majority of people live at subsistence level in little mud and thatched roof structures.

Before SLADS moved in to provide medical care with the help of village health workers trained by Skillshare International, the only recourse the tribals had during a medical emergency was the *ojha* or the faith healer, and if they could pay the fee demanded, then the quack. Malaria was endemic and malnutrition a common phenomenon. Even curable diseases like diarrhoea and TB were taking a toll and the villagers did not know how to prevent them.

The current Skillshare trainer, Dr Sumit Asthana, started work in early 2003. Dr Sumit has been exploring the idea of micro health insurance and the setting up of a co-operative. He is trying to reach the community through the VHWs. As the concepts are new for them, he says that making them understand how the co-operative will work has been his single biggest challenge. It has taken him time to learn how to put across the concepts in as simple a language as possible, and in a way that they are able to explain the concepts to fellow villagers.

Skillshare International's Country Co-ordinator, Julie George, says it is commendable that J.K. Mahato was ready to work with Skillshare at making the transition to community ownership of the health programme. It is the first such initiative of its kind, and if successful, it would be a great model to be adopted for urban and rural poor.