

Learning to Dream Again: The Successful Implementation of MGNREG in Balimundi, Paschim Midnapore

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With detailed planning of the processes of implementation of MNREGA, and collaboration among the people, the gram panchayat and PRADAN, the villagers are witnessing changes on different fronts—from an increase in assets and in knowledge about agricultural practices to enhanced production, leading to financial and food security.

Rajani Singh of village Baksa is a happy man. His daughter has just got married and the ceremony went peacefully without any financial hitch. “This has been possible because of my earnings from the MGNREGA work,” he says. Last year, Rajani Singh and his daughter earned Rs 14,000 as wage labour. His neighbour, Barju Singh, and his family earned Rs 17,000. He is now confident that his sons’ educational expenses can be met now. The stories of these families are not exceptions in Balimundi *sansad* of Arrah *gram panchayat* (GP). Ashok Kumar Rana, the *panchayat* Secretary, refers to the records of the *panchayat* and says that the families of this *sansad* have had, on an average, 98 days of work.

Balimundi *sansad* of Arrah *gram panchayat* is one of the remote pockets of the Nayagram block in Paschim Midnapore district. It comprises five villages with a total population of 1,212 families; more than 90 per cent of them belonging to the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs). Table 1 depicts the data of the

Table 1: Expenses of Balimundi *sansad* under MGNREGA in 2010—11

Name of the Sansad	No. of Schemes implemented	Total Expenses (Rs in Lakh)	Man-days Generated				Average Man-days Generated	Percentage of Total Expenses in the Panchayat
			SC	ST	Others	Total		
Balimundi	20	28.14	932	10944	217	12093	98	31.43

successful implementation of the MGNREGA. Approximately 31.43 per cent of the total expenses of the *panchayat* under MGNREGA have been utilized by the *sansad*.

In December 2009, the District Magistrate (DM) of Paschim Midnapore district, Narayan Swaroop Nigam, invited Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), a national level NGO, to work in this area. It was a collaborative project under MGNREGA. The main focus of this partnership between the district administration and PRADAN has been to help the *panchayat* in the large-scale planning required under MGNREGA and to motivate the villagers to participate in it, and make its implementation successful. Another area of focus has been to find a convergence between the MGNREGA work and the livelihood needs of the people.

To begin with, the *panchayat* members studied the successful implementation of land and water-based work in Purulia district of West Bengal. During the orientation, workshops were organized at the *panchayat* and block levels, to introduce the project to the people. The district officials, especially the DM and the District Nodal Officer (DNO), helped to bring all the actors on board and organized village-level planning. The families of each village participated and came up with a plan for the village for the next five years.

PROCESSES FOR PLANNING

The successful planning at the village level has helped the *sansad* to create large-scale demand for work. With guidance from the *panchayat* staff and PRADAN, the villagers identified their resources, analyzed the

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potential of various interventions and finalized the interventions. Each family of these villages has its own plan. "The most interesting part of this planning is the active involvement of the villagers—right from concept seeding of the work to its inclusion in the annual action plan of the MGNREGA," says Devendra Singh, Secretary of Balimundi

Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS).

The planning was conducted in stages.

1. **Socio-economic survey:** A survey was conducted to assess the socio-economic situation of the families, to learn about the existing resources of the villagers and to estimate the availability of human resources in the area, in order to carry out the activities of the programme. The data also forms the baseline for this watershed area.
2. **Orientation meeting at the *panchayat* level:** A meeting was organized to involve the *panchayat* bodies in the project because these bodies are one of the major stakeholders in the programme. Besides appraising the *panchayat* members and the staff about the programme, discussions were held about the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders and the processes to be followed for planning and implementation of the project.
3. **Exposure of the *panchayat* members and villagers to successful watershed areas:** An exposure visit was then organized for the *panchayat* members and two or three opinion leaders of the village, to give them more clarity about

- the concept and to help them understand the potential of the approach.
4. **Concept seeding at the village level:** In these meetings, the programme was introduced to the villagers and they were familiarized with PRADAN. The *panchayat* members and the village opinion leaders, who had gone for the exposure visits, played an important role in helping the villagers understand the concept. A short documentary film on the Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) approach was screened at every hamlet for the villagers.
 5. **Resource mapping:** Next, the villagers identified the resources of their village on a revenue map of the village. This exercise helped create awareness among the people about the existence of the different resources and helped them look at their villages from the perspective of 'resource-resource' relationships and 'resource-people' relationships. This proved to be a valuable amazing learning experience for the villagers as well as for PRADAN, which facilitated the process.
 6. **Ownership mapping:** The villagers then mapped the ownership pattern of the various land classes, to identify the patch-wise ownership of the village.
 7. **Identifying and mapping problems:** Once the ownership map and the resource map were finalized, the villagers visited the land. PRADAN professionals facilitated the process. The problems on each kind of land were identified so that different options could be explored to make the land more productive in a sustainable way.
 8. **Generating options/ solutions:** Brainstorming sessions were conducted at the site to generate ideas to improve the land. Various options were explored, thus, increasing the probability of arriving at a better solution.
 9. **Making an activity plan:** Hamlet and village meetings were organized where the best solutions were identified, based on their probable social and economic/financial impact.

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The following process is being adopted for the implementation of activities:

1. Facilitating Self Help Groups (SHGs) to work as supervisors of the activities,
2. Giving training to the SHGs on:
 - a. Learning about individual application procedures
 - b. Giving the field layout
 - c. Monitoring implementation
 - d. Filling up job cards and learning about muster rolls
 - e. Measuring the area of work
 - f. Understanding the fund-flow procedure
3. Submitting of plans by the SHGs to the GUS for approval.
4. Decision-making by the GUS about:
 - a. Whether to approve the plan or not
 - b. How to allocate supervision of activities of the different patches to the SHGs
5. Submitting the approved plans to the GP. The activities are grouped in such a way that the total amount of a proposal does not exceed Rs 2 lakhs so that the plans can be implemented by the GP and do not have to go to the *panchayat samiti*, thereby saving time.
6. Making of an estimate of all the plans on an XL sheet by a GP engineer (trained by PRADAN).
7. Approving of the plans by the GP *pradhan* and issuing of a work order to the SHGs.

8. Making four copies of the sanction orders.
 - a. The original copy goes to the selected SHG (addressed to the president of the SHG).
 - b. One copy goes to the GP office.
 - c. One copy is for PRADAN.
 - d. One copy is for the GUS.
9. Implementing the work and maintaining registers of work progress by the SHGs.
10. Organizing a weekly meeting of all the supervisors (SHGs) under a GP, the GP engineer and the *panchayat pradhan*. In the meeting:
 - a. Work progress reports are reviewed.
 - b. Muster rolls are verified.
 - c. *Nirman sahayaks* do the final verifications.
 - d. Blank muster rolls required for the following week's work are handed over to the supervisors.
 - e. Indents are generated for the coming week.
 - f. Plans are drawn for the following day's field verification by the GP engineer.
11. Making of field visits by the *nirman sahayaks/gram rozgar sahayaks* for verification.
12. Releasing of payments the following day to individual bank accounts.

The families of Balimundi sansad have witnessed a change in their expenses as well as their assets portfolio. In Baksa village, a sprawling mango orchard of 13 ha has replaced what was just fallow land a year ago.

spawning mango orchard of 13 ha has replaced what was just fallow land a year ago. All 63 owners of this patch are tribals. Sukhlal Singh and his two brothers are now proud owners of around 275 mango plants in their patch. Surya Singh has 148 plants in his patch. An irrigation infrastructure is in place and

the farmers are confident of their plants surviving the dry spells. All 63 owners meet fortnightly to discuss the management of their orchard. They take care of their orchard intensively. At present, the survival rate of this orchard is 91 per cent. The villagers are very happy with the growth of the plants. More interestingly, they have ploughed their mango orchards for intercropping on their own.

Dudhiasol village has a similar story where an 8 ha cashew orchard has been developed by 32 tribal families of that village.

Gura Dhal of Purba Baksa village is not worried even though there has been no rain for the last 15 days. Asked if he was worried about the dry spell, he said, "I have enough water in my tank now. I have already irrigated the land twice, and will be able to irrigate it twice more. By that time it will rain."

The scenario was just the opposite earlier when it was a common phenomenon for the paddy crop to be destroyed because of scarcity of water.

CONVERGING NREGA WITH LIVELIHOODS

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Small water harvesting structures (WHS), which were excavated under the MGNREGA, have led to these success stories. Almost all

the farmers with these small WHSs have been able to save their paddy even in the drought conditions that prevailed in the earlier year. Some of the farmers have chosen fish rearing whereas some have opted for vegetable cultivation and have earned as high as Rs 15,000–20,000. These tanks have not only been a source of income for the people, but have also helped to recharge the ground water. Till date, in this *sansad*, 24 WHSs have been created.

ENHANCING KNOWLEDGE

The creation of assets, coupled with enhanced knowledge in agriculture has become a boon for the farmers of this *sansad*. The farmers are not only able to save their paddy from drought but also to increase its production. Jawaharlal Singh of Balimundi was surprised when he was asked to transplant one seedling instead of the seven or eight as per the traditional method. He followed the practice against the wishes of his family. They named him a villain especially because for the first 15 days the paddy land looked completely fallow. The scenario, however, began changing then. Within a month, he saw the tillers and, to his surprise, he found that the whole land was covered with an average number of tillers ranging from 40–45. The farmers of Balimundi experienced a miraculous shift in their paddy production when they adopted this new process of paddy cultivation called the System of Rice Intensification (SRI). Their yield almost doubled. About 40 families have adopted this practice in this *sansad*.

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PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN SHG MEMBERS AND PANCHAYAT SUPPORT

Women members actively participate in MGNREGA work and supervise the entire work. Eight SHGs of this *sansad* received training and continued support, to perform their role as supervisors. By design, women were given more space to exercise their choices. As a result, their interaction with the *panchayat* and government officials has increased. They now shoulder their responsibilities with ease. Women members of the SHGs in Balimundi *sansad* often accompany visitors to explain their work confidently.

“Initially we were quite nervous about taking on the responsibility of such a large volume of work. However, with active support from the *panchayat* and the PRADAN staff, we are now able to perform our roles satisfactorily. In future also, we are ready to take up more such work,” say Latika Singh and Ahalya Singh of Maa Lakhshmi SHG of Baksa village.

The *panchayat* members as well as the staff have come forward to implement the programmes successfully. Systems have been set up for a weekly review, regular monitoring of the work and regular payments. The *panchayat pradhan* and the secretary have taken a lead role in the overall supervision of the work. They have ensured smooth implementation of the schemes. “We are proud that we have been able to make labour payments within 15 days in all the schemes,” says Dhirendranath Singh, *pradhan* of Arrah *panchayat*.

LOOKING AHEAD

The increased earnings from MGNREGA, coupled with the convergence in livelihoods, have ushered in a new ray of hope for these tribal people of the remote villages of Balimundi *sansad*. They have begun dreaming of a better future. Seeing the result,

the *panchayat* is also confident about bringing more areas under similar interventions. Brimming with confidence after utilizing Rs 97 lakhs last year, the Arrah *panchayat* is looking forward to spending around Rs 2 crores for similar interventions under MGNREGA in this financial year.