

# Telia: Telling the Tale of MGNREGA

## SUBIMAL MANDAL

*Standing out for its vibrant vegetable and SRI cultivation, Telia village is an example of how with the right guidance and awareness, MGNREGA can be used for creating assets, which will then go a long way in ensuring food security, greater health and betterment of the community*

Pao Hembram is happy now that her two daughters are regularly going to school and doing well. The elder one is in Class VI and the younger in Class IV. Until three years ago, however, the condition was different; Pao, along with her husband Sanatan Hembram, would migrate to the East Midnapore region for the *kharif* and *boro* paddy transplanting and harvesting, leaving their two little daughters with their old parents. The children would frequently miss going to school.

In 2011, Pao excavated a *happa* (farm pond) in her land through MGNREGA and from that year onwards, she has been cultivating vegetables on her land, using the water from the pond. She has also tried growing fish in the *happa*. She happily announces that now her family not only sells vegetables but also consumes fish and vegetables in their diet. She says she plans to use the money earned from the vegetables for her children's education and to repay her loans.

Pao Hembram is from Telia, a small village in Jhargram sub division of West Midnapore district in West Bengal. Telia has two hamlets—Babudihi in the west and Telia in the east. There are a total of 69 households in the two hamlets inhabited by the Santhal community.

## ISSUES IN VILLAGE TELIA

PRADAN first came to Telia in 2011; during discussions, the PRADAN team members were told that people found it difficult to make ends meet. Migration was quite rampant, especially during the *kharif* as well as during the *boro* paddy cultivation. During the season, the whole village would migrate to East Midnapore; the children and older people were left behind to fend for themselves.

This seasonal migration had a huge impact on the children and the elderly, who would often face scarcity of food. The children would drop out of school to look for food. People also found the management of livestock a liability when they migrated. There was distress selling of animals just before migration and re-purchasing of livestock on return, leading to huge losses. The family would earn approximately Rs 8–10,000 from the migration.

Eventually, some farmers learned how to cultivate *boro* paddy and adopted it in their village. However, *boro* paddy needed irrigation and only those farmers, who were in the vicinity of the canal (which runs through the village) could cultivate the crop.

*Kharif* paddy was totally rain-fed and people would generally broadcast the seeds. This would fetch rice, barely enough to last for three to four months. Women would also go out to collect *sal* leaves, *tendu* leaves and *babui* grass (used for making rope) from the forest to earn some money.

### WORKING WITH MGNREGA

Having seen PRADAN's work in MGNREGS, as well as in land and water development in Purulia and Bankura, the district magistrate of Paschim Midnapore, Narayan Sawroop Nigam, approached PRADAN in 2009 to work in the area. An agreement was signed between the district administration and PRADAN for collaboration under MGNREGS.

The main thrust of the partnership between PRADAN and the district administration was to support the *panchayat* in the large-

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scale planning required under MGNREGA and to facilitate the community to participate in the planning process so as to bring about a convergence between MGNREGA and the livelihood needs of the community and the area.

A concept-seeding meeting was held in the village, which was attended by the *panchayat*

members and other people who had visited Purulia for an exposure visit of the MGNREGA work. They played an important role in helping the villagers understand the concept of how MGNREGA could be linked with creating assets for generating livelihoods. This was followed by the screening of a short documentary film on the Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) approach, which created a platform for further discussion. Soon after the meeting, the SHG members fixed the date for the resource mapping.

In the next meeting, the SHG members were ready with the copy of a revenue map of the village. The SHG members marked the different resources in their village; this was then followed up by ownership mapping, wherein the community members mapped the ownership of the land and other irrigation structures in the village.

In the subsequent interactions, the villagers discussed the issues and problems that they faced in each type of the land, the cropping pattern, the irrigation issues, etc. The PRADAN team, along with the villagers, walked through the land, to understand the topography of the village. The villagers identified the problems on each kind of land, which helped in exploring the different options that could be worked upon using MGNREGA.

The discussion and the transect walk through the village revealed that a large area of uplands was lying barren and could be converted into a cashew orchard, suitable for the area. *Happa* creation, land-levelling and field-bunding in the midlands were required to make the land cultivable, and small *happas* were needed in the lowlands for ensuring life-saving irrigation. The villagers marked the uplands, midlands, lowlands, canals, water flow, etc., on the resource map and planned 32 water harvesting structures in the midlands and the lowlands.

Land-levelling was planned with 35 families of the midlands and a cashew orchard plantation was planned in 10 ha of uplands. Based on the planning, the villagers once again met to chalk out an activity plan implementation for MGNREGA in their village. The action plan made by the villagers, with the help of PRADAN, was then submitted to the district authorities for approval.

### SHGs TAKING THE LEAD

All this while the two SHGs—the Jiar Jharna SHG and the Saru Jharna SHG, promoted by PRADAN—had been taking a lead and PRADAN had been engaged to building the capacity of the members. The SHG members were given training and they became the supervisors, who would oversee the work of implementation of MGNREGA in their village.

The work order was received within 15 days from the *panchayat* office and the SHGs initiated the work. Initially, PRADAN trained and hand-held the SHG members to make their work plans, prepare measurement sheets, record the data, prepare muster-rolls, etc. With time, the members became confident enough to make their activity plans and submit them to the *gram panchayat* and take the work order. Women are now measuring the

work, preparing muster-rolls and filling up the work demand sheet—all without PRADAN's support!

The women shoulder their responsibility with ease and regularly interact with the *panchayati raj* institution (PRI) members and other officials and discuss the progress of the works. Because the district administration was keen to implement MGNREGA successfully, the SHG members were supported by the *pradhan* of the *panchayat* as well as the *nirman sahayak* in this.

PRADAN also sensitized and provided training to PRI members and the *nirman sahayaks*. Systems were set up for regular and timely checking of measurements and monitoring of work by the *nirman sahayaks* and the wage list was prepared by the *panchayat* and the community members, which smoothened the work of MGNREGA. The *pradhan* and other elected members in the village were regularly involved in the process and followed the progress of the work. The bank also ensured timely payments.

### WORK UNDER MGNREGA

From 2011 onwards, the villagers of Telia constructed the *happa* in their *baidh* (medium) lands through MGNREGA. *Happas* are small water harvesting structures excavated mainly to store rain water for irrigation. In total, 12 *happas* were excavated in Telia, of which four were excavated in 2011 and eight in 2012. Land-levelling work was initiated in 2013 in the village and the work was completed with 11 beneficiaries. An orchard was promoted in Telia in 2011, with eight beneficiaries in 2.3 ha of land under MGNREGA. In 2013, the community members have yet again given the work order for orchard promotion in another 2.5 ha of land.

Financial Year	Labour Days Generated	Funds Utilized (Rs)
2011–12	1,420	4,60,300
2012–13	3,300	5,98,800
2013–14	1,800	3,17,253
2014–15	1,100	3,80,000

### CONVERGING WITH LIVELIHOODS

Despite MGNREGA work moving smoothly and people getting wages, the people of Telia were unaware of different agricultural practices and were handicapped because of their inferior skill sets. This was also one of the reasons, apart from the land and water conditions, for the low productivity in the region. PRADAN initially started intervening in the promotion of SRI techniques in paddy to enhance food security. The farmers, however, had been transplanting seedlings for years and were convinced that the method adopted by the big farmers in East Midnapore, on whose land they worked, was good enough. Being very skeptical, only three farmers in the village adopted SRI as a package of practice.

In 2011, Laxman, Raghunath and Surendra Hembram adopted SRI for the first time and they got a yield that was one-and-a-half times more than their usual yield. The increased yield led to a huge shift in the mindset of the farmers, who realized that by cultivating paddy through the SRI method, their food sufficiency for the whole year could be met. Today, the entire village has adopted SRI techniques and have improved their paddy yield in *kharif* as well as in summer. Now, the farmers not only have a higher paddy yield but also can use the *happas* to save their paddy in drought conditions.

The farmers have also started cultivating vegetables in scale, to increase their cash income

in *kharif* as well as in the early *rabi* season with the water available in the *happas*. Vegetables such as radish, cauliflower and brinjal are now commonly grown in the village. As many as 31 families were involved in vegetable production in 2012. Of these, four families earned above Rs 30,000 and seven families earned between Rs 25 and 30,000 whereas the others earned between Rs 15 and 25,000.

Back in 2011, with PRADAN's facilitation, one beneficiary earned Rs 3,000 and another earned Rs 2,200 from vegetable cultivation from just two decimals of land. PRADAN conducted several exposure visits in this field for the villagers and arranged agriculture motivation training, *krishi melas* and individual interactions with the beneficiary.

For families that could barely cultivate enough to sustain themselves for three to four months, this was an opportunity to develop a new interest; they could now place more emphasis on learning the new methods of cultivating vegetables. Timely transplanting, the use of certified seeds, the timely practice of inter-culture, regular weed management and the use of preventive measures of pest control are now followed by all the farmers to ensure maximum cash earnings. As they gradually began to get cash income through vegetable production, the farmers began to get attached to the activity.

Salma Mandi of Saru Jharna Swa Sahayak Dal, who has been using SRI techniques and

enjoying an improved paddy crop for the last three years, says she does not have to worry about the food in her house anymore. She did land-levelling in her land through MGNREGA. Last year, in 2013, she earned Rs 10–12,000 by selling brinjals in the local *haat* that she had planted in the rainy season. This year, she is continuing vegetable cultivation with brinjal and radish. She is now eager to cultivate tomato and for that she has asked for assistance from PRADAN. She is inspired by other villagers and is eager to learn from them. She says that earlier her elder son used to spend time roaming around the village and while away time with other boys; nowadays, the family is always busy with various agricultural and MGNREGA works. Her younger son is studying in college. She is happy that now they can support their son, who wants to study further.

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Another *didi*, Sakuntala Hembram had done land-levelling in her land and had cultivated brinjal, tomato, radish and potatoes, earning Rs 45,000. She did not have a *happa*; so she irrigated her land from another farmer's *happa*. She now plans to use this money for purchasing an irrigation pump and for replacing her thatched roof with an asbestos one. She is very happy with the positive changes in their life. Her risk-taking ability has increased and now she looks forward to round-the-year vegetables.

Telia is now known as the vegetable village in the area. In 2013, each family in the village earned an average of Rs 30–40,000 from vegetable cultivation and had food security throughout the year. Mainly, they produce an indigenous variety of brinjal on a large scale, cowpea, bitter gourd, radish, etc. They sell their



*A family in Telia irrigates their paddy field from the Happa developed under MGNREGA funds*

produce in the local markets such as Baligeria and Bahgra in Odisha and Kharika markets. The people of the village are thinking of a bigger market base as their production increases. In 2012, the total production of brinjal in Telia was 48 tonnes and, in 2013, it increased to 52 tonnes. Now they are looking for round-the-year vegetable cultivation. Raghunath Hembram said, "Growing vegetables requires constant vigil and management; otherwise we will be in loss."

The people are not only earning well but are also working on improving their standard of

living. Many families have now repaired their houses, replaced their thatched roofs with asbestos sheets and are happy to send their children to school. MGNREGA has given a new lease of life to the poor tribal families of Telia. This change in the village would not have been possible without the right intention of the district administration and the PRIs, which implemented the programme successfully. This has also helped PRADAN, whose efforts went into building the capacity of the people and developing their knowledge and skills.