The Impact of the MGNREGA–CFT Programme: Steps towards Transformation

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Campaigning for the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise and initiating village-level meetings, the Sarguja Gramin Vikas Sansthan, through MGNREGS and a series of effective interventions, has been successful in transforming barren, eroded lands to flourishing fields yielding different crops and fruit all year round

'Gully plug' is a small structure in a watershed. When, however, made in hundreds in a series, these gully-plugs aptly illustrate two proverbs in Hindi: *Dekhan ko chhoto lage par ghaav karat gambhir* (It looks tiny but is capable of inflicting deep wounds) and *Jo kaam sui kar sakti hai vah talwaar nahi kar sakti* (A needle can do things that a sword cannot). Most certainly, one cannot understand the value of a 'gully plug' without visiting the field sites. The impact of these small, low-budget watershed structures prompts one to take a closer look.

In the foothills of Koti village (the area falls under the Tamor Pingla Forest Reserve), there is a 16 ha (40 acres) plot of land, which has been eroding incessantly over the years. The erosion has been so serious that it has led to the formation of big gullies in the area. The soil from these gullies and nearby regions flowed from these gullies into Banki river. The situation was so bad that 40 acres of land in the region saw no agricultural activity and the land lay barren. The villagers, understandably, were distressed and saw no way out of this problem, which has been a major cause of concern for many years.

In 2014, the Department of Rural Development, along with a team from Sarguja Gramin Vikas Sansthan (SGVS), began a campaign for Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) and initiated village-level meetings. In these meetings, the villagers brought up the issue of soil erosion and asked for it to be looked at as a priority. They requested the MGNREGA planning team to visit the site, investigate and provide technical guidance to find a solution to the problem.

The team planned a series of interventions in the form of gully plugs, field-bunding, land-levelling and plantation. Seeing the inclination of the villagers to solve the problem, the planning team, the Engineer and the Programme Officer made estimates and sent them for sanction to the district administration. The plans were cleared without delay, and the administration sanctioned the estimates for constructing 18 gully plugs and land-levelling 30 acres of land. The Gramin Rozgar Sewak (GRS) informed the villagers about the sanction, and the villagers took charge of the work in a united manner. Almost 200 to 250 labourers worked for 25 days to complete the work.

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The result of the intervention was that soil erosion was checked and the land was almost levelled, which led to the successful rejuvenation of the entire area. The cost of one gully plug is around Rs 3,000 to 5000, and it harvests around 500 to 1,000 litres or even more, of rain water. The major success of this intervention is that not only are the farmers cultivating 25 acres of land for the first time but there is also an increase in the total cultivable land of the village. Converting unused, barren land into cultivable land is one of the positive interventions of MGNREGA.

BACKGROUND

SGVS is a grass-roots organization based on Gandhian thought and principles, and was founded in 1991 by Shri Pratap Narayan Singh, alias Pratap Bhai. He was a colleague of the Late Shri Prem Bhai of Banwasi Seva Ashram Govindpur, Sonebhadra district in Uttar Pradesh, India. Pratap Bhai has a Diploma in Civil Engineering and is a Science Graduate (BSc) in Mathematics. He worked at the Banwasi Sewa Ashram, from 1976 to 1989. The problems of hunger, poverty, drought and malnutrition among the primitive tribes of the area drew the attention of Pratap Bhai towards Sarguja district. In 1989, Pratap Bhai came to Sarguja and established SGVS in the tribal village Rajkheta in Wadrafnagar block, surrounded by dense forests. Pratap Bhai worked with the organization from 1989 to the beginning of 2009.

Pratap Bhai has been hailed by many as the 'Waterman of Chhattisgarh' and SGVS was recommended for the 'National Water Award' by the District Collector of Sarguja in 2014. SGVS has set up three model watershed-based projects in its 19 years of engagement, with the financial support of the Canadian High Commission, Action for Food Production (AFPRO), New Delhi, and Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART), New Delhi.

THE CLUSTER FACILITATION TEAM PROJECT

The Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) Project of SGVS has been operating in 87 *panchayats* (119 revenue villages with 26,802 registered MGNREGS job cards) in Wadrafnagar block, Balrampur district, Chhattisgarh, since August 2014. The CFT Project was launched by the Ministry of Rural Development, (MoRD) as a 'pilot', to draw lessons on how to fill the gaps within MGNREGS.

When SGVS started working through MGNREGS in the area, it faced many challenges, including the lack of job opportunities as per the needs and free-time of job seekers, the timely payment of wages, the low priority accorded to individual works, the lack of priority works for the management of natural resources, etc.

The area also had challenges: the management of rainwater (the average annual rainfall of the area is about 1,200 mm), the lack of interventions for making agriculture sustainable and profitable, of convergence programmes, of awareness about MGNREGS among the rural communities, etc.

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MGNREGS, meanwhile, faced an unpredictable future during the financial year 2014–15, which led to massive disappointment in the community and the bureaucracy. The CFT Programme was launched amidst a host of problems and challenges but SGVS took this as an opportunity and worked for the betterment of its clients.

INTENSIVE PARTICIPATORY PLANNING EXERCISE

SGVS believes in making the rural poor capable through the management of rainwater. The block has an average rainfall of 1,200 mm, which needs to be stored and harvested. The earlier trend of selection and sanction of MGNREGS works did not reflect this need of the people. Rainwater harvesting, irrigation and agricultural development-related works were taken up by the department but without taking into account the needs of the people in a manner that would help them. The IPPE-I concept of MoRD gave hope to the clients as well as the CSOs-CFTs. It presented, to the villagers, an opportunity to make their 'Village Development Plan' as per their needs.

The organization ran IPPE in a campaign mode through organizing public meetings at various levels, launching massive awareness-generation activities, providing intensive training to stakeholders, showing movies, displaying posters and pamphlets, introducing wall-writing, etc. The organization trained three persons from each *panchayat*, to ensure awareness about how to prepare Village Development Plans. These trained persons created a positive environment for the planning exercise in villages; people came out of their homes for the purpose and took part in *gram sabha* meetings actively.

Villagers demanded the agricultural asset-building related works they needed in the *gram sabha* meetings. A trained team of barefoot engineers made a visit to the proposed sites, took measurements and noted other necessary details for estimate preparation. The planning team identified the plot numbers of each proposed work, with the active participation of the community. It became a plot-to-plot planning exercise, ensuring transparency in the work.

SGVS planned to converge various schemes and departments such as the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), NRLM, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY), forestry, Agriculture-KVK (Krishi Vigyan Kendra), fisheries, etc. Accordingly, the community became sensitized and placed their demands in the gram sabha.

The above figures show people's needs, listed through the community-driven planning process. The planning process comprises the total agricultural development of a family, with a chain of activities such as small farm pond construction (MGNREGS), horticultural plantation on the bunds of the pond and in a separate land (convergence with the

Table 1: Types of Work Demanded by the Community

Type of Agricultural and Irrigation Works Demanded by the Community	No. of Works	Total Amount (Rs in Lakhs)	Ratio of Nature of Works	Ratio of Amount
Pond, earthen dam, small farm pond (5% model), farm bunding, land levelling, stop dam, gully plugging, boulder checks, gabion structure, staggered contour trenches, contour trenches, continuous contour trenches, road-side plantation, irrigation canals, renovation of rainwater harvesting structures, deepening of structures, social forestry, individual forestation, horticultural plantation in individual lands, nadep tank, goat-shed, cow-shed, pig-shed, poultry- shed, etc.	3,538	3130.24	74.57%	74%
Type of Non-agriculture Related Works Demanded by the Community	**No. of Works**	**Total Amount (Rs in Lakhs)**	**Ratio of Nature of Works**	**Ratio of Amount**
Toilet construction, aanganwadi building, panchayat bhawan, Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra building, PDS building, mitti-muroom road construction, culvert construction, etc.	1,206	1100.37	25.42%	26%

Horticulture department), paddy, wheat, vegetables, millets, etc., the cultivation around the pond through SRI (convergence with the Agriculture Department), for the promotion of organic farming, support to the farmers in animal shed and nadep tank construction, fish farming in the constructed farm pond (convergence of the Fisheries Department). The planning process was meant to enhance the family income through sustainable agricultural development.

STRATEGY OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CFT PROJECT

The strategy for implementation of the CFT Project was very clearly determined by SGVS. Massive awareness was generated among the rural communities, and frequent meetings and interactions were organized with the labourers, ensuring people's participation in the planning and execution. The process ensured capacity building of the stakeholders, easy access of MGNREGS-related information to the villagers and the smooth measurement, valuation and the payment process. This helped in increasing individual assets related to irrigation and agriculture, identifying major causes that defame MGNREGS and correcting them, encouraging digital monitoring practices, etc. Documentation of MGNREGS and the dissemination of best practices, a regular review of the progress, etc., were the prime strategies of the organization.

FACILITATION IN EXECUTION OF THE MGNREGA

SGVS, with the help of the block administration and the existing manpower of MGNREGS, made the Village Development Plan based on the 'watershed' (ridge-to-valley approach of watershed) for 119 villages of 87 *panchayats* of Wadrafnagar block. According to the concept of watershed, SGVS, with the help of the block administration, started working at the ridge area of each village. The staggered contour trench, contour pal, continuous contour trenches, boulder check, gully plugging, gabion structure, farm bunding, plantation and land-levelling activities were majorly taken under the ridge area treatment. The implementation of the proposed activities by the *gram sabha* drew the attention and interest of the people in MGNREGA. As MGNREGA began working on the ground, the villagers gave their active support and became involved in its implementation. The following Table shows the people's involvement in MGNREGA.

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INNOVATION IN MGNREGA

During the entire process, innovations were introduced to ease procedures and systems in MGNREGA. The first initiative was with the Village Development Plan, which was based on the ridge-to-valley approach of watershed and the convergence of the departmental schemes. More than 70 per cent of the work was in irrigation agriculture, and 80 per cent of the work planned was labour-oriented. The people participated in the planning and were involved in the execution. The needs of the

Table 2: Works Sanctioned under MGNREGA

No.	Type of Work Sanctioned under MGNREGA	No. of Works	Sanctioned Amount (Rs in Lakhs)	No. of Works Completed
1.	Boulder check construction	725	282.251	670
2.	Contour trench construction	25 (ha)	25.028	18
3.	Well construction	16	31.287	02
4.	Farm bunding	1,078(acres)	354.543	912
5.	Small farm pond construction	1,105	1087.482	732
6.	Land-levelling of FRA beneficiaries	29	11.550	23
7.	Pond construction	60	457.670	27
8.	Gabion construction	73	59.550	62
9.	Gully plug construction	145	73.613	145
10.	Plantation	205	504.227	205
11.	Individual toilet construction	816	97.922	585
12.	Earthen dam construction	10	136.879	02
13.	Pond deepening work	2	6.187	02
	Total	**4,289**	**3128.189**	**3,385**

villagers were assessed through discussions with labour groups and SHGs.

Site verification was made mandatory during estimate preparation, and the estimates were also made realistic and simple. Valuation and payments were made easier, and wage payments were done on a per day basis at the *panchayat* level through the Aadhar-enabled payments system and biometric bank accounts of the labourers.

Training was imparted to the CRPs, barefoot engineers, mates, other youths, active women and the *panchayat* on use of smart phones and operation of the MGNREGS website so that they could access information, as and when required. A Digital Monitoring System was created, using WhatsApp and Telegram mobile applications for easier, smooth and prompt monitoring. All stakeholders were added to the Cluster-level and block-level groups on the WhatsApp and Telegram apps.

Another major intervention was the linking of beneficiaries to a chain of activities related to MGNREGA and Convergence. The SRI intervention was done at a massive level, especially with the beneficiaries of the small-farm pond construction.

Tracking of labour budgets and person-days was done village-wise at the end of the month, as was the employment audit of each village. Tracking the muster roll, valuation, MIS entry, FTO processing and wage employment was done daily.

ACHIEVEMENTS/OUTCOMES OF MGNREGA

Although a detailed situational analysis is required to quote the exact outcomes, some achievements and outcomes so far have been:

1. Increase in the number of families registered under MGNREGA
2. Increase in work demand
3. Increase in individual irrigation and agricultural assets of rural farmers
4. Improvement in the water table
5. Increase in irrigated land area
6. Increase in agricultural area due to treatment works
7. Assured continuous employment in each village
8. No migration due to lack of employment
9. Increase in gross family income
10. Satisfactory approved person-days achievement (Table 3)
11. Satisfactory employment to all categories of registered households (Table 4)
12. About 12,302 women were employed under MGNREGS; they generated 2,49,185 person-days.

CASE STUDY: TRILOKI CHANGES HIS FORTUNES

Triloki Patel is a resident of Maheva village, Balrampur district, in Chhattisgarh. He belongs to a backward class and his family has been living in the village for the past 80 years.

Table 3: Person-days Achievement Status

Approved Person-days Target and Achievement Status (Month-wise)			
November 2015		December 2015	January 2016
Target	Achievement	Target	Target
4,97,830	6,21,927	6,00,406	7,67,933

Table 4: Employment to All Categories of Registered Households

Households registered under MGNREGS				Households employed till November 2015							Households completed 100 days of Employment			
SC	ST	Oth	Total	SC	%	ST	%	Oth	%	Total	SC	ST	Oth	Total
2,087	15,101	9,841	27,029	1,203	58	9,311	62	5,098	52	15,612	68	780	285	1,133

Triloki is a humble man and is open to doing something new. Currently, Triloki's family has seven members, including two sons and three daughters. His elder daughter got married two years ago and the rest of his children are studying. Triloki is supporting his second daughter to do a course in BBA, she is now in the third semester of the last year of the course.

His passion for his children's studies and future, in spite of his bare minimum resources and very marginal income from agriculture, is commendable. Triloki, himself, is a very hardworking and diligent person. On the 1.98 ha of ancestral land that he owns, he mainly produces rice and cultivates wheat in the part of the land that is nearer the water channel (*nala*). He also cultivates maize on his homestead land.

He has so far been dependent on rain for the irrigation of his land. Agriculture was his only source of income. When asked what attempts he had made to make it systematic and more resourceful, he informed us that he had had put in an application for a well on his land and but he had not yet been successful in getting it sanctioned.

"My family is dependent upon me and my children are still studying; I, therefore, am in constant tension. I decided to invest my savings in digging a tube-well, which cost me Rs 70,000. After digging for 375 feet, I was totally disillusioned when I came to know that there was no water underneath and I was told to try somewhere else. I did not have the resources to try again. I was very disturbed. It was close to my elder daughter's wedding. If it rained well, I would get an income of Rs 50-60,000 from the paddy cultivation, otherwise, I would face huge losses, because the maize and the wheat production were very limited."

The extreme circumstances led him to look for wages in MGNREGA. He had heard about MGNREGA and the IPPE scheme through a campaign by SGVS, and became motivated. He says, "I heard slogans during the campaign: *Gram sabha mein aana hai, apna kaam batana hai, apna budget banana hai* (Come to the gram sabha, tell your plan, make your own budget) and *Khet ka pani khet mein, gaon ka pani gaon mein* (The field water remains in the field and the village water remains in the village). I went to the *gram sabha* meeting, where I heard about the scheme in detail and understood how I could be helped. I learned that vulnerable and needy families were to bring their plans of development to the next *gram sabha* meeting, in which these would be prioritized and approved. I decided to present my problem at the next *gram sabha* meeting and hoped for a solution."

"I also presented to the *gram sabha* a plan for a farm pond, a nadep tank, an animal-shed and a fruit tree plantation. All got approved. A few months later, Gram Rojgar Sewak (GRS)

told me that the farm pond that I had asked for had been sanctioned. The sanction was for a 25 x 25 x 3 ft farm pond at an estimated cost of Rs 2.07 lakhs. After the sanction, the work on my farm pond started immediately. My wife and I worked along with the other labourers for eight weeks and completed the work on 8th July 2015 at a cost of Rs 1.82 lakhs."

He said that he was elated when he got the wages for his work within 15 days of completion of the first week of work. "I thought it was by chance that I have received the money on time, but it was not so. The system is so strong that all the labourers were paid within 15 days. My wife and I earned Rs 15,000 for labour work."

He says further, "Earlier MGNREGA was known for late payments; however, now with timely payments, labourers have become hopeful and are more enthusiastic to work under MGNREGA."

Triloki's farm pond is now ready as per the estimated sanctions and it is flush with rain water. He thinks he should have made a bigger farm pond. He knows that with his profits from agriculture, he will increase the size of his farm pond.

Under convergence with MGNREGA, the Agriculture department organized training on the SRI technique, in which Triloki participated actively. He also learned about organic farming and prepared *jivamrit* and *handikhad*. Before the arrival of the monsoon, Triloki had already selected the land for SRI, prepared it, prepared the bed for the nursery, selected the seeds, and treated the seed using the organic technique.

Once the monsoon arrived, Triloki prepared the nursery with the treated hybrid seed, which was ready in 19–21 days. During the plantation time, however, the rains failed; however, Triloki was relaxed because he had adequate water to irrigate his crop from his newly-made farm pond. At the time of weeding, SGVS provided him with a weeder machine as well as instructions on how to use it. After seeing the impact of SRI, he says he is going to cultivate SRI paddy in more land the following year.

Triloki approached the Horticulture department, to plant fruit trees on his land. He got free saplings of mango, lemon, guava and other fruit trees. He planted the mango trees on the bund of his farm pond and the rest of the saplings in his homestead land. He planted the tree on the farm bund so that the trees would prevent the soil from erosion and because the trees would be watered by the seepage from the pond, which would help them to grow. He has also sown sesame seeds and planted grass on the farm bund at the beginning of the monsoon to prevent it from eroding. He is a happy man now. Because of his farm pond, he has a good yield and also has fruit trees for extra income.