

# MGNREGA and Livelihoods—the Story of an Orchard

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*Developing a mango orchard in a hitherto barren tract of land with the landless households of Jharia Kocha in Gopalpura proves to be not only a revenue generating model but also a rights-based initiative.*

With monetary coverage available under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and institutional and technical support from Pradan, more than 144 landless households of Jharia Kocha in Gopalpura *panchayat* have established a sprawling mango orchard over 20 hectares of erstwhile barren land. In early 2008, the landless SC/ST households, which were accustomed to migrating every summer in search of labour succeeded in securing tenure over a single contiguous plot of barren land. This was achieved by affecting a lease arrangement with the 66 landowner families of the same village.

The plot had received little attention from the landowners because they held substantial stretches of fertile and more productive lands elsewhere. The landless SC/ST households, on their part, were either engaged as agricultural labourers or domestic help in the homes of these landowners. On occasions, they would be hired, for measly amounts, in house building or shed construction activities, or to harvest the fish produce from the village water body (*pukur*). The landowners exercised exclusive rights even over the water of the *pukur*. The landless households, being resource-poor and having limited avenues for earning money save the alternative to migrate, were known to regularly approach the landowners for loans to celebrate occasions, fulfill social obligations or even to meet their subsistence needs for food and clothing.

The landless SC/STs candidly admit that at first they considered Pradan's suggestion of establishing a mango orchard on barren lands as impractical, rather, impossible. The soil depth here was minimal and vegetative cover completely absent. The only saving grace was the nearby presence of a village water body (*pukur*). Pradan organized an exposure trip for the SC/ST households to another project location in Bandhudi in Purulia district, where a similar effort had yielded magnificent results. The farmers, then, began to take Pradan's suggestion a little more seriously.

The 12 SHGs formed in the village as part of the Swarna Jayanti Grameen Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) became the entry point for Pradan to facilitate discussions

on the prospect of establishing the orchard, with the support of NREGS. The SHG members quickly identified the owners to whom the contiguous plot of barren land belonged. They then approached the landowners and discussed the possibilities of acquiring the land by way of a lease agreement, and further developing it into an orchard, the produce of which could be shared in an agreed ratio. The prospect seemed inviting to the landowners, who had not been able to benefit from the barren land so far. Perceiving no threat, they readily agreed to the plan.

The matter was brought up before the Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS), constituted as under rule 73 of the West Bengal Panchayat (Gram Panchayat Administration) Rules 2004. The GUS, which acts as an executive body of the *gram samsad*, includes the *panchayat* sarpanch, as an ex-officio member, and the individual who secured the second highest votes in the *panchayat* elections. The GUS also includes a retired school teacher, a retired government official and a member each from other village-level bodies such as the forest protection committee, water users' committee and the anganwadi centre. Besides these nominated members, ten other members or 1% of the total members of the *gram samsad*, whichever is higher, are elected from the remaining members of the *samsad*. The GUS makes for a highly empowered body, which acts as a sanctioning authority for the finalization/implementation of NREGS plans.

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the mango orchard to the GUS of Gopalpura *panchayat*, it won the body's ready approval. Without any delay, the proposal was forwarded by the GUS to the *gram panchayat* for the purpose of planning and making the estimate. At this stage, Pradan played the vital role of facilitating the process of decision-making and approval. Pradan assisted the *nirman sahayak*, or works engineer

appointed under NREGS, to prepare a thorough estimate for the mango orchard. Simultaneously, a binding lease agreement was finalized between the 144 landless households of Jharia Kocha, the landowners and the *panchayat*. The lease, sans any fee, was finalized for a period of 25 years; it was decided that the returns from the orchard would be shared between the landowners, the landless households (organized as the 12 SHGs) and the *panchayat* in a fixed ratio of 2:1:1.

Pradan also stepped up its efforts to make the SHG members more aware of the provisions of NREGS. The landless households were familiarized with the procedures for opening bank accounts and availing of job cards. Likewise, specialized training programmes on technical aspects were carried out for supervisors, paymasters and other resource persons, who were selected through a village-level meeting convened by the GUS. All these efforts at the grass roots led to the plans being sanctioned first by the *panchayat* and then by the Block Development Officer (BDO), in an ideal bottom-up manner. Consequently, work was grounded with the work orders being handed to the 12 SHGs of Jharia Kocha.

By February 2010, Rs 39 lakhs had been dispensed under NREGS for the purpose of procuring the saplings, pitting and planting. A total of 48,148 employment days were generated in the process. Today, works such as fencing and cattle trenching are in progress around the orchard. All payments are made by cheque after an inspection visit by the *panchayat sarpanch* and the *nirman sahayak*.

With assistance from NREGS, community members have additionally adopted the 30 x 40 (thirty by forty) model of water conservation, as evolved by Pradan. A contiguous plot was squared with field bunds that measure 30 ft (along the slope) and 40 ft (against the slope). Pits measuring about 7 ft in width, 5 ft in length and 3 ft in depth were dug in the lowermost corner of these plots. All the rainwater that falls in the 30 x 40 plots collects in these pits, which helps in enhancing the local availability of water for watering the saplings, thus reducing the labour involved in carrying the water all the way from the nearby *pukur*. The pits also enhance the soil and moisture regime over a sustained period of time. The farmers acknowledge that the 30 x 40 model has greatly reduced the mortality of mango saplings. It is also responsible for the lush grass cover that spans the length and breadth of the plot. Today, the mango

saplings stand a good five to six feet tall and the farmers collect the excess fodder grass to stall feed their animals.

With the confidence of having successfully tapped the resources of NREGS, the SHGs approached the National Horticulture Mission (NHM) in 2009 for assistance. The SHGs had a deep bore well constructed in the orchard. In order to optimize the utilization of ground water, a drip irrigation network was simultaneously established. Earlier, the orchard owners had to lift water from the nearby *pukur*. A diesel pump set had to be hired for this purpose. The villagers say that they were rather fortunate during the initial months because the fish produce had already been harvested and the landowners had no need for the surplus water, which was then conveniently diverted to the orchard. But this was not a reliable arrangement, as the right of the landowners over the water of the *pukur* for fisheries was final, and would never be compromised to keep the saplings of the leasers alive if ever faced by a shortage for their own purposes. With access to ground water now and the drip irrigation facility in place, there is no dilemma as far as water is concerned, or even the possibility of a conflict over the water from the *pukur*.

**TABLE 1: FUNDS LEVERAGED ACTIVITY-WISE**

No.	Name of Programme	Nature of Activity	Funds Leveraged (Rs)
		Procuring plants, pitting and planting	
1.	NREGS	Inter-culture and watering	39 lakhs
		Fencing and cattle trenching	
2	NHM	Submersible pump	14 lakhs
		Drip irrigation network	
<b>Total</b>			<b>53 lakhs</b>

There are around 9,686 saplings of Amrapali mangoes in the orchard. Amrapali—a cross between Dashehri and Neelam—is a dwarf variety that promises to yield 10 to 15 tonnes per hectare per year. It is a late-bearing variety, owing to which the produce reaches the market when the reducing supply of other varieties results in a price hike.

Even while the SHGs eagerly await their first crop, the many ways in which the entire effort has yielded social and political benefits alongside economic prospects is evident. Undoubtedly, security over tenure established in this way—that is, through a binding lease arrangement—is a decisive step in reversing the processes of land alienation that are commonly known to characterize the poorer *dalit*- and tribal-dominated parts of India. The security over tenure created for the 144 landless households has increased social cohesion greatly. The 12 SHGs that have collaborated to establish the mango orchard successfully interact ever so often, that the possibility of forming a federating body no longer seems distant. Tenurial agreements and the resultant sense of ownership has created an appropriate ‘investment climate’ for the one-time deprived; in other words, it has incentivized the adoption of productivity-enhancing technologies and innovations. This is manifest in the eager adoption of the 30 x 40 model, the deep bore well and the drip irrigation network through the provisions of the NREGS and NHM.

The landowner farmers admit that they had consented to the lease agreement believing that all efforts on the part of the landless poor

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households would eventually come to naught. Some *dalits* still feel that it was nothing more than a tacit move to ensnare the *dalits* further in debt. The landowners had hardly expected to see their plot of barren land transformed to a verdant oasis in less than two years. There was sufficient annoyance when alternatives created on the mango orchard began to thwart the availability of labour for their own agriculture in the lowlands. To

make things worse, the *dalit* households, soon after, began to demand wages commensurate with the rates being offered under NREGS, with equal wages for both men and women for the same kind of work. When the landowners turned a deaf ear to the just demands of the *dalit* labourers, the Krishak Sabha intervened. The Krishak Sabha, organized by the Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPI–M) to represent the interests of the small and marginal farmers at the village level, plays an important role in such matters. It not only mobilizes small and marginal farmers to strike work in such circumstances but also cushions their interests by identifying alternative employment for them. In the event of a strike, the Sabha interacts vigorously with the SHGs, the NGOs active in the area, and most of all the *panchayat* to generate the required alternatives for its members. Alternative employment, created in this way, enhances the bargaining power of the small and marginal farmers. The labourers in Jharia Kocha now command at least 30% higher wages, at about Rs 60 per day’s work, than what they received prior to the commencement of NREGS works. Also, the wages are far more equal than before. In this way, the unlimited resources of NREGS and

the enhanced possibility of accessing such resources have acted as an impetus for rights-based struggles at other levels as well.

Of late, the GUS has played a role in trying to pacify landowner farmers by reminding them of the many ways they stand to benefit from the orchard in the future. However, there has been a fresh furore over the fact that some of the landless households had undertaken cultivation of vegetables on small patches within the orchard without sharing the vegetable produce in the same ratio set for mangoes. The *dalit* households had either retained the produce for household consumption, or sold small quantities in the market. They felt free to do so because the present lease agreement does not lay down any sharing ratio for vegetables, grown in this manner. The landowner farmers have not taken too well to this practice; the matter is likely to be sorted out in the upcoming meetings.

Regardless of the agreements and disagreements, however, the present effort

stands as a remarkable revenue generating model as much as a rights-based initiative. It has provided the basis to enhance the bargaining power of the landless wage earners through the efforts of the Krishak Sabha and has also energized the GUS by transforming it into a platform where plans are finalized, issues are resolved and the status quo is challenged by the SHGs. Nowadays, SHG members are willing to approach the *panchayat sarpanch* directly for clarifications, and this can very clearly be traced to the confidence that stems from secure tenure and the resultant sense of ownership.

These achievements at Jharia Kocha reinforce the fact that when an appropriate tenurial arrangement is combined with proper technical and institutional support, it becomes a sure means of enhancing participation of marginalized sections, in programmes such as NREGS. In addition, it ensures an idealistic bottom-up implementation of the NREGS, and saves resources from being cornered by the landed gentry alone.