

The Marks of New Wheels

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Utilizing the provisions under MGNREGA to generate wages and, more important, create assets such as farm ponds that will support their agriculture, the villagers of Hirbandh and adjoining areas have been able to fight abject poverty, make informed choices and take charge of their own activities.

Some time back, I had the good fortune of reading a treatise by the eminent economist Akbar Ali Khan of Bangladesh. The book, *The Economics of Selflessness*, is a gleaming example of how a complex subject such as economics becomes a plaything in the hands of an accomplished intellectual and how the subject loses its elusiveness and retains its relevance. Khan has demystified the intricate theories of the subject with a studied nonchalance and has made it accessible to the commoner. Like a master chef, he processed, combined and manipulated the seemingly convoluted concepts and served up a simple yet tasty meal. The secret of his flair probably lies in yet another achievement of his—he was a longstanding trainer in a renowned training institution in Bangladesh. Well, let that matter rest, let us get back to the narrative in hand.

The book from beginning to end is an exposition of the different thoughts and ideas in development economics. Each of these thought-streams have been titled interestingly: 'Economics of Selflessness', 'Economics of Mulla Nasiruddin', 'Economics of open manholes' and so on. In 'Economics of open manholes', he unfolds a precise indicator of development. It is possible to assess how developed or not a nation is just by looking at its manholes. The extent of development of a country is directly proportional to the number of covered manholes, the more the lids, the more the progress. The more the lids have been stolen, the lesser the progress. I played with the idea in my mind and have to admit that it turned out to be true in most cases. I was struck by the logic and admired the creativity of the writer. Who could have ever imagined that something as commonplace as the lid of a manhole could be a proxy indicator of development!

I remembered the book recently during a routine meeting on NREGA that I was conducting with my supervisors. Out of pure curiosity, I had asked the young supervisors as to what NREGA workers did with the money they earned. One of them gave me a response that was quite unlike the rest. He said, when you are sitting at a tea stall, having tea, and happen to notice the colour of the tyres of bicycles passing by, should they be jet black then you can be rest assured that the cycle belongs to a NREGA worker. Everyone in the village knows that a new tyre

retains its blackness for the first few days, and then it gradually loses its sheen and fades. That the colour of the wheels of bicycles could be a proxy for the effectiveness of NREGA was something that had not occurred to me even in my wildest thoughts. Nor had I read about it in any document on poverty and development. This is when I was reminded of the open manhole theory of Akbar Ali Khan.

My questions brought forth 16 more ways in which the NREGA workers spend their money. That is something I would like to share at some other point of time. Today I want to share with you the saga of Hirbandh.

HIRBANDH

Hirbandh borders Purulia in the south of Bankura. The Purulia border is just 8 km from the Hirbandh block office. The rolling terrain

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of the Chhotanagpur plateau culminates here in Hirbandh. The hills and mountains lie across the block from end to end like lines on a ruled paper. It is difficult to find large stretches of plain land. Within 200 to 300 ft another steep hill starts. The countless undulations have resulted in the formation of two rivers—Shilavati and Kumari—surrounding the block, and the Mukutmanipur lake. Every drop of rain that falls runs off soon to these rivers, taking with it the precious soil of Hirbandh, the mother earth. The soil is carried by these rivers to the plains downstream. The plains become fertile and produce gold. The people of Hirbandh weep—for water and for crops. They quietly wipe their tears, bid good bye to their little ones and board a bus to the plains of Hooghly, Bardhaman and Midnapore to work in the fields of the big farmers. I have heard somewhere that it takes about 200 years for an inch of soil to form from the weathering of stones by rainwater; and it takes no time to wash away.

Here are some facts about Hirbandh. The total area of the block is 215 sq km. The population, as per the 2001 census, is 72,502 and female literacy is 38.5%. The population of the SC community is 17,807 and the ST is 20,691. The SCs, STs and OBCs comprise 75% of the population. In the rural BPL survey in 2006, the number of families that got 33 points (as per the evaluation criteria) or below was 8,064. The total number of families in the block is 14,899, and the percentage of BPL families is 54%.

A few years ago, a human development report was prepared for Bankura district, and in that report, Hirbandh was ranked the last out of 22 blocks in the district. More facts: of the 121 revenue villages in the block, 51 revenue villages are tribal dominated and fall under the Tribal Development Plan villages.

Another 36 have been named as backward villages. This is Hirbandh.

THE LORE OF ELLORA

Just as the central and state governments are engaged with the issue of alleviating human suffering, there are many NGOs working towards the same goal. Pradan is one of them. Pradan worked in the Gopalpur gram panchayat (GP). The GP has been known for its enterprising ways. In 2007, the GP received the President's award for exemplary work on soil and water conservation. Pradan started its work here with the promotion of women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Gradually, it started supporting many programmes of the GP. Pradan had already demonstrated excellent work on soil and water conservation in Purulia and in Saltora block of Bankura with its own funds. The 5% model and the 30 x 40 model of in-situ soil-moisture conservation are notable among these. The then BDO of Hirbandh sent functionaries and office bearers of Gopalpur GP to visit these locations, which in turn highly enthused them. After the visit, they realized that they had substantive amounts of money available to them under NREGA but their soil and moisture conservation ideas were limited to the time-tested pond-renovation. They had no idea how to improve crop productivity with rain water. Pradan had the knowledge but did not have access to adequate funds.

We started our work as per the 2006 Annual Report of Pradan, which talked about its ideas on soil and moisture conservation. In January 2007, small farm ponds as per the 5% model were dug in Ellora village and arjun plantations on the uplands along with the

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30 x 40 model of in-situ moisture harvesting were created. These emerged as a result of a combination of the financial resources of the GP and the knowhow of the NGO. This story appeared in their next Annual Report as 'Ellora Shows the Way'.

REPLICATION STARTS

West Bengal held its panchayat polls in 2008. Conducting elections is a mammoth and important task in a democracy. During the polls, as the Code of Conduct sets in, not much developmental work happens. The block staff also gets embroiled in the task of conducting the polls.

The expenditure statement of Molian GP under NREGA for the first five months of the financial year 2008–2009 reached the block office at the end of August. The amount spent was Rs 3,91,000. No new payments, they were all payments for complete works. No new works had been initiated either.

Elections to the GP do get a wee bit chaotic. From morning to evening the *panchayat* office remains crowded with the villagers thronging in with complaints and demands. There is a shortage of everything suddenly—mini kits, blankets, other relief material and jobs. The pitch gets shriller by the day. This obviously was not the best time to introduce new developmental ideas, yet the Molian GP kept exploring new options under NREGA. The idea occurred to them to try out the farm ponds that had proved successful in Ellora. The Ellora farm ponds were brimming with water. Subsequent to paddy, the farmers could grow mustard quite easily.

The staff was convinced. But the community did not readily believe the idea. Who would provide funds for developing private land? What needed to be done for getting such works? A simple application on a plain piece of paper, we declared. Yet the reservations continued. Will such a small farm pond hold enough water for my winter crops? A small number of farmers came forward with their applications, primarily those farmers who had some land to spare. They were the ones who could afford a little risk. Work started. The expense per pond varied from Rs 13,000 to Rs 22,000, as per size. We made estimates for 17–18 ponds at a time, amounting to less than Rs 2.5 lakhs. Even if a couple of ponds were less, it did not matter, the block could make the payments. We could sanction as many schemes as we wanted; we had an open hand. (Estimates less than Rs 2.5 lakhs could be sanctioned at the level of the block, otherwise it would have to go to the district for sanction.)

We selected supervisors from each village, and made the SHGs the paymasters. Work started in Molian *panchayat* in mid-November. In a period of about one-and-a-half months, work started in all the villages. The villagers observed that the GP allowed them to dig farm ponds at will; their trust in the GP grew. Applications started pouring in. The number of works-in-progress multiplied. Keeping pace, the number of supervisors and paymasters also increased.

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The GP took another wise step. Members of the opposition party were also roped in as supervisors. Those who are aware of the seemingly irreparable political fault-lines in West Bengal will appreciate the significance of this step.





Baharamuri has understood that out of all the ideas for wage employment generation, the one of farm ponds is the best. The GP, which spend about Rs 41 lakhs in 2008–09, has already made plans for spending Rs 1 crore the next year.

applicants also. More and more applications started coming in from around the GP. Work started on all applications. At this point of time, there were about 80 supervisors being paid skilled labour wages under NREGA. They met every Wednesday for a review and planning of their work. Watching the meeting, one can never make out who owed loyalty to which political dispensation. As a result of this upsurge of works, the expenditure statement of Molian *panchayat*, which had no new planned works on August 31, showed an expense of Rs 42 lakhs on March 31, 2009. Due to cash flow problems, payments of about Rs 17 lakhs were pending. Three hundred and forty farm ponds had been constructed. And work was in progress on 125 ponds. About 500 families had earned a total of 18,883 days of wage labour. More than 200 families had earned more than 100 days of wages in less than 4 months. The

workers gleefully went about replacing their bicycle tyres, and also the hay roofs of their huts with tin sheets.

REPLICATION IN MOSHIARA

The political dynamics in Moshiara *panchayat* flipped after elections because the ruling party was routed and a new dispensation took over. But that did not change the NREGA dynamics because the programme had been careful to include everyone. About 120 farm ponds were dug here. The *panchayat* had also taken up other works such as road construction, large pond renovation, etc. By March 31, 2009, the expenditure stood at Rs 48 lakhs. Gopalpur GP had shown the path for digging farm ponds. The success of Ellora encouraged many more villages to take up the activity of digging farm ponds. The GP spent Rs 1 crore 1 lakh under NREGA by the end

Achievements in 2008–09

<i>Gram Panchayat</i>	Amount Spent	Labour Component	% Labour Component	No of Families Benefited
Gopalpur	10,100,000	7,100,000	70	1,189
Hirbandh	6,216,000	4,200,000	69	2,535
Moshiara	4,844,000	3,000,000	61	445
Molian	4,211,000	3,950,000	94	514
Baharamuri	4,197,000	3,500,000	83	1,459

No. of families that got wages for more than 100 days in 2008–09

<i>Gram Panchayat</i>	No of Families
Gopalpur	437
Hirbandh	285
Moshiara	217
Molian	49
Baharamuri	14

Advantages of farm pond works

1. Possible to work, based on a model estimate. If there is computer facility, the time taken to prepare estimates for farm ponds worth Rs 2.5 lakhs is 15 minutes.
2. A big works project, in this case, is actually a summation of a large number of small discrete units. Thus, it is possible to make payments in small doses. One can make payments for the farm ponds that are complete.
3. The landowners have a stake in ensuring that the works get completed soon because these are private assets that are getting created.
4. If works happen at quick pace, a family of two can easily get wages for 100 days or more in just about 2 months.
5. Measurement is easy because of clear dimensions. The dimensions and the volume of earth to be excavated are clear right from beginning.
6. Muster rolls are easy to prepare and there is also no complexity in payment.

Disadvantages

1. Because these are small discrete works on individual private plots, works will start at the same time in a large number of plots. Keeping pace with the work for the supervisors is an extremely difficult.
2. Establishing the ownership of a plot is a complex process.
3. Earth work is hard work. Many labourers do not prefer such hard work. They would rather do soft works such as spreading morrum on roads.
4. Vested interests spread stories that small farm ponds do not hold water.
5. The estimates and payments are for totally new farm ponds. The workers might touch up old farm ponds and ask for full wages. This phenomenon has to be closely watched against.

of the financial year. This was the highest in Hirbandh block that year. The total number of wage days generated was 90,421 and 437 families received more than 100 days of labour.

The stories of Hirbandh and Baharamuri are slightly different. These GPs had mainly taken up pond renovation and road construction works under NREGA. They started farm pond digging related works only after February 2009. In about 1½ months, Hirbandh managed to spend about Rs 12 lakhs. Baharamuri has understood that out of all the ideas for wage employment generation, the one of farm ponds is the best. The GP, which spent about Rs 41 lakhs in 2008–09, has already made plans for spending Rs 1 crore the next year.

WHAT WE COULD NOT DO

A very large number of works on a very large number of plots started off together in the past 4–5 months. We have not been able to put tight monitoring systems in place. We have not been able to carry out social audits. Moreover, we have not been able to reach out to a large number of potential workers out there, who do not trust us to provide them with 100 days wages.

Let me conclude with a small anecdote. Lutia is a small village in Moshiara GP. There are 30 very poor tribal families in that village. The number of job cards total 29. Till the end of January, we could not provide them with any work. On February 15, we started farm pond digging works in the village. By March 31, one of the families had already got 70 days of wages. Three of the families worked only on their own lands and they got 7 days each. Rest of the families on an average got 30 to 40 days of wages each. The village averaged 34 days. The total water harvesting capacity we created was 100,000 cubic feet, which is roughly equivalent to the water required for cultivating mustard on 200 bighas of land! As I write, the total water harvesting capacity created in Hirbandh block is about 10 million cubic feet!

How much of mustard can be grown with all that water? Maybe we will leave that to the experts to calculate. But my friends... are you able to see new wheels and their marks on the road?

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