

SUCCESS STORY

How NREGA helped Panihari village

SUPRIYA SINGH

Residents of Panihari village are now a happy lot. They are celebrating freedom from floods for the first time in living memory. Agricultural wages have increased across the district in the past one year. They say their lives have improved because of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA).

Utilising the employment opportunity that came their way through NREGA, residents of Panihari in Sirsa district (Haryana) finished constructing a 2-km embankment on the Ghaggar river in February this year. A 3-km irrigation pipeline was also laid in the village. This was done to irrigate panchayat land. Besides, two *johads* (traditional water harvesting structures) and a number of tanks have also been dug by the villagers.

"Life was hell with the Ghaggar flooding our homes and fields every monsoon. The need to restrict the river was there for long. But we lacked consensus. Rich landowners don't suffer because they have an embankment on their side of the river. Only small time farmers and the landless have suffered," says Mandan Lal Panihari, a 38-year-old resident of Panihari. The embankment's height was raised on one side of the Ghaggar by the irrigation department in the late 1990s. "Wealthy landowners

consented to give part of their land for the embankment. This aggravated the problems for people staying on the opposite bank," says Rajendra Kumar, a resident. In 1999, however, the villagers had sought a stay on the government's plan to raise the height of the embankment on the other side, where the new embankment has come up now, fearing loss of their land.

But, with NREGA in focus, the villagers took it upon themselves to build the embankment. Compensation issues were settled mutually. The panchayat allowed concessions to landowners who were losing a part of their land. They were allowed a share from the panchayat land and in a few cases, people shared their land with the affected groups, say villagers. "The panchayat has been proactive in taking the lead to inform people about NREGA. Job cards have been duly issued and payments made. Sometimes the panchayat paid wages out of its own coffers to people in need," says Mashi Ram, 40, one of the village's below-poverty-line cardholders.

Agricultural wages stood at a meager Rs. 56 per day before increased wages were introduced in the area in February 2006. With the programme on its feet, the minimum wages were settled at Rs. 96. Rich landlords, unhappy with the development, tried to

stall the proceedings and presented a petition to the deputy commissioner, demanding a reduction in wages. "They threatened the villagers with dire consequences and warned that there would be no work when the government programme got over," say sarpanch Sona Ram. "But we were firm and they backed out. NREGA functioned smoothly with the full cooperation of the panchayat and the district administration," says Maya Devi, a resident. Consequently, local labour flourished.

Of the total fund allocation of Rs. 30 crore for 2006-07 to the district, Rs. 22 crore has been utilised so far. A majority of the works under NREGA in Sirsa falls under rural connectivity or roads (22 percent); followed by land development (21 percent), water conservation (18 percent) and micro irrigation (17 percent). Almost 67 percent of the works are still under operation, since the programme could take off only in July-August 2006. But the level of achievement is commendable nevertheless, say the officials.

The district administration plans to ask for Rs. 50 crore for the current financial year. And chances of their demand being turned down appear remote. (Edited excerpts. Courtesy: *Down to Earth*, 28 March 2008)

Sarpanch suspended: The sarpanch of Amberi Gram Panchayat in Jagatsinghpur district, Bikram Mohanty, was suspended on charges of misappropriating pension amounts of five dead persons. With the help of false thumb impressions and signatures, he had managed to get the amount granted from the officials.

PUNJAB

Assembly passes amendment bill: The Assembly, on 12 March, passed the Punjab Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Bill, 2008. The bill provides for election of sarpanches by panchayat members among themselves. Earlier, sarpanches were elected directly by voters. The new provision will reduce the number of elected panchayat representatives by 14,445. Describing it as murder of grassroots democracy, Congress members staged a walkout from the Assembly. However, the bill was passed in their absence. Justifying the amendment, the

government stated that chairpersons of other panchayat bodies such as zilla parishads and block samitis were elected by members from amongst themselves. The same formula had been applied in the case of sarpanches. The step was taken to reduce avoidable rivalry and conflicts in the gram panchayats.

HC notice on indirect election of sarpanches: The Punjab and Haryana High Court has issued notice to the Punjab government on a writ petition filed by sarpanches and panches against the ordinance issued by it on 16 February 2008 introducing indirect election of sarpanches in the state. The panchayat office bearers, who belong to the opposition Congress, have challenged the ordinance on different grounds i.e. the malafide of the government, the ordinance being against the basic spirit and objects of the 73rd Constitution Amendment and violation of democratic norms, etc. They have also demanded that panchayat elections should be deferred until the issue is decided by the court.