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A report on the implementation of the Project: "Increasing access to information on the Government Schemes and Entitlements in Backward Districts in Northern India" in Barabanki and Pratapgarh in Uttar Pradesh





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Background

India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, is often said to be many worlds within one. Barabanki district, adjoining Lucknow district and Pratapgarh district almost 150 kilometres to the east of Lucknow city are two such worlds. Despite having unique histories and even more unique roles in contemporary politics, both Pratapgarh and Barabanki have not been able to leave the list of India's most backward districts.

In 2014 ActionAid India initiated a project to address the gap between community action for rights and entitlements and also focuses on increasing the ability of the local state to provide an effective response. This initiative was part of the project: “Increasing access to information on the Government Schemes and Entitlements in Backward Districts in Northern India” supported by the European Commission and anchored by ActionAid India in six districts across five states in India – Barabanki and Pratapgarh in Uttar Pradesh, East Champaran in Bihar, Latehar in Jharkhand, Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh and Chamba in Himachal Pradesh. In Pratapgarh and Barabanki districts of Uttar Pradesh the project was led by Samvad Samajik Sansthan (SSS).

About 13.2% of Pratapgarh's population and 22.61% of Barabanki's population is Muslim. And Uttar Pradesh has one of the largest concentrations of SCs in the country. The backwardness of these communities can be measured through many parameters - their access to healthcare, housing, employment etc. But, let us take the example of literacy. According to the 2011 national census, literacy rate among the SCs in Uttar Pradesh is 38.29% and among Muslims across the state is 42%. The literacy rate of both communities is lower than the district average of 51.90% in Pratapgarh and 61.75% in Barabanki. With such low levels of literacy and living in packed neighbourhoods, these communities have to struggle hard to make their voices heard. Since SCs and Muslims fall lowest on the social ladder, their access to information on entitlements was considered to be like a silver bullet – almost like a magical solution to their problems.

“Information is power,” said Atul Tiwari, of the Samvad Samajik Sansthan (SSS) who has worked in the area for about 15 years. “If the weakest communities are bereft of information, their suffering is twice as much,” he added.

The project aimed at:

- 1) Increasing capacity and responsiveness of local administration and Panchayat Raj Institutions in providing information and access to public services to poor and marginalized.
- 2) Increasing awareness and capacity of poor and marginalised communities to demand and access information and public services.
- 3) Ensuring community based planning, monitoring, transparency and accountability practices are established to provide information and review performance of public services and schemes with active participation of organisations of poor and marginalised.
- 4) Actively participating in advocacy effort.

The intervention is informed by the belief in the importance of:

- » Promoting the active agency of the marginalized community in accessing their own needs and finding their own solutions to their own problems.
- » Building solidarity with the poorest and ensuring that struggles for justice and rights begins from below.
- » Partnership with other civil society organisations.
- » Engaging policy-makers and implementing agencies.

Across all states and districts the intervention sought to build social practices amongst vulnerable communities around five points. One initial step was to build awareness and ensure access of public services, entitlements and rights through proper implementation of policies, schemes and laws. The attempt was also to initiate vulnerable communities into planning by developing village development plans through participatory planning processes. The community was also encouraged to review and monitor public services through processes such as social audit and public hearing. A system of knowledge management was initiated by setting up information resource centres in villages. The learnings achieved by the community through these practices was channelled towards activating panchayati raj institutions on the issues of concern to the community.

This report seeks to draw out the best practices achieved and the lessons learnt from the project implementation in Pratapgarh and Barabanki district, Uttar Pradesh.

Challenges and Lessons Learnt

Samvad Samajhik Sansthan worked in 30 villages of 20 panchayats in Kalakankar block of Pratapgarh district and 20 villages of 17 panchayats in Nandura block of Barabanki district. The project covered 20 gram panchayats and 30 revenue villages, reaching out to 5706 families in Pratapgarh district, among which 3551 families belong to Scheduled Caste (SC) communities and 2155 families belong to the Muslim community. In Barabanki 17 gram panchayat and 20 revenue villages were covered and 4743 families were reached, 3542 families belong to SCs and 1201 families belong to the Muslim community. The sustainability of the alternative depends upon people's participation. The initiatives therefore need to be scaled-up and institutionalized. Another major challenge in Pratapgarh and Barabanki is the non-involvement of local authorities.

Community mobilization and support from local administration at all levels has been a significant contributor to the initiative's success. A significant factor that makes the SSS effective in dealing with issues related with poor governance is its strategy to working together on a commonly constituted agenda with the other civil society organizations and the communities.

This common objective approach and agenda has been established. The SSS initiative shows that the involvement of community in planning process, review and monitoring of the schemes and making government accountable can bring the change. ■





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BEST PRACTICE I Ensuring Implementation of Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act

Mass media covers news about large scale corruption, irregularities, false entry in muster rolls and delayed payments to the labourers in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) work in the state. However, the Uttar Pradesh State Government has taken various steps to check corruption and ensure effective implementation of the MGNREGA including the introduction of a toll free number, framing grievance redressal rules and setting up a system for on line filling of complaints.

Challenges remain as allegations are made that the grievance redressal system has not helped complainants get justice. Increasing frustrations with the operation of MGNREGA work, long delay in payments, the unchecked power of contractors, denial of wages have forced targeted beneficiaries to avoid working on MGNREGA projects.

The MGNREGA mandates the guaranteeing of 100 days of employment in a financial year to any rural household whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual work. The basic objective of the Act is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by

providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment. This work guarantee also serves other objectives: generating productive assets, protecting the environment, empowering rural women, reducing rural urban migration and fostering social equity, among others. To achieve the objectives of the Act, the Uttar Pradesh State Government has implemented a number of programmes for providing employment to people and developing rural infrastructure including the construction of check dams and leveling land.

As employment was a main concern for people in both districts, the intervention began working on ensuring that the entitlements under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act reached the most deprived sections of society. Between 2015 and 2016 the project team met with 20 gram panchayat representatives in Pratapgarh and 17 gram panchayat representatives in Barabanki to better understand the problems faced regarding MGNREGA.

Samvad Samajhik Sansthan (SSS) and ActionAid India (AAI) encouraged the formation of Grameen Mazdoor Sangathan (GMS), a community-based organisation

for the Dalit and Muslim community in Pratapgarh and Barabanki districts. GMS grew to an organization with 650 members, and during the last four years it has engaged with the administration and helped ensure more effective implementation of MGNREGA in Pratapgarh and Barabanki districts.

Activists of GMS spread general awareness at the block level with elected representatives and also organized general awareness campaigns at village level. Capacities building of the gram rojgar sevaks were also undertaken. Wall writing on govt buildings

about the programme was also carried out to generate awareness among the communities.

As a result in Pratapgarh 78% community members got employment under NREGA in the year 2015-2016 in our project area. According to the villagers in Bhaddiv, this was one of the main constraints in MNREGA. They also mentioned that the minimum wage (Rs 172 per day) was too less for them to work within and the pay did not reach them on time either. ■

Table 1: Details of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Pratapgarh

No of registered job card	No of Active Job card	Total work day
9335	7326	119172





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BEST PRACTICE II Creating Village Development Plans

One of the first steps that the project took was to conduct baseline surveys in the villages. Armed with chart papers and coloured pens, volunteers marched into the villages. Until now, the plans for villages was being chalked out by panchayat heads or village pradhans (heads). Mostly from upper castes and economically forward backgrounds, these pradhans proposed village plans to suit their needs. Or to ensure their vote banks were safe.

But, the key was to involve the villagers in the task and reverse the pyramid. Through the project villagers were encouraged to physically traverse the landscape and mapping out the village on paper. "This was the first step in understanding our problems," said Meena Devi of Bhuddiv village.

They undertook three areas of work

- » social mapping - which included identifying where different social communities of the village lived. Here they also demarcated on the basis of demographics.
- » resource mapping - which included putting on paper where various personal and community

resources such as land, ponds, hand pumps, roads, electricity poles etc were located in the village.

- » wellbeing analysis - going a step further, the volunteers began assessing who among the villagers were economically better-off, who owned land, was located closer to a water source and enjoyed better connectivity through roads etc.

After these were charted out on paper, villagers got a bird's eye view of the areas they needed to focus on. "We knew which part of the village needed more roads, which part needed a water pump, where should the electricity lines be...", said Devi. "Most importantly, we wanted those who are Below Poverty Line to enjoy the benefits they are entitled to."

No matter how many plans the people came out with, if they were not taken up by the authorities for implementation they would remain useless pieces of paper. Therefore, introducing it to the Panchayat was a very important cog in the wheel.

The next task was to prioritise the problems they faced, as it was impossible to tackle all the problems

at once. Another survey was conducted among villagers to find out what were the issues they wanted dealt with first.

The process of formulation of village development plans (VDPs) was facilitated in 30 villages in 20 panchayats in Pratapgarh and 20 villages in 17 panchayats in Barabanki. (See Table 1) In all villages members of Grameen Mazdoor Sangathan actively took part in participatory planning processes, participatory processes of monitoring and engagement with panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) to strengthen development planning for village and panchayats. The planning and participatory monitoring by community members contributed greatly to the quality of plans, the community access to public services and efficiency of programme delivery by the system.

Building linkages with various departments including the rural development, drinking water and sanitation, public health and engineering, irrigation and forests, helped convergence between village level plans and annual district plans. SSS and AAA provided hand-holding support to the communities in submitting these gram sabha resolutions to the district officials and obtaining technical, financial and administrative sanctions to implement the plans.

Grameen Mazdoor Sangathan - success story

One of the major concerns of the project was to ensure that the people felt empowered enough to carry out the objective of the project themselves. To that end, the eighteen women and eight men of the Bhaddiv village came together to form the Grameen Mazdoor Sangathan in 2014.

Under a massive banyan tree, everyone from the scheduled caste (SC) community of Bhuddu sat to discuss and evaluate the progress of GMS in the past four years. Since many women still follow the purdah system, they had their head fully covered in the presence of men. Some women though, had only covered their heads with the corners of their sarees.

However, minutes after the discussion began, the stereotype of a purdah-clad docile woman was shattered

by ones present there. Meena Devi is the President of GMS while Guddi Devi is her Secretary.

Meena, a feisty woman who feels strongly about her rights doesn't miss an opportunity to raise questions. Speaking over the many male voices, she asked, "My kids were thrashed by their teacher in school yesterday, why will kids go to school if they keep hitting them there?"

In no time, four women came together and resolved to confront the sole primary school teacher in their village the following day. "We will tell them that he can be strict, scold them, teach them but do not be physically violent," said Guddi. "Else, we will have to take action against him."

This was not the first time that the women of the village got together to set practices right in their village. The primary school in their village has 105 kids. According to the Right to Education Act, which makes education a fundamental right of a child, the students are entitled to milk in their schools. "School here was not giving milk at all. All the women got together and staged an intervention, after which they starting giving milk to the students" said Guddi. "This was only possible because we were informed that the kids were entitled to it."

Their next target is the Principal of the school. The women say he comes to the school only once a month as he lives in Gorakhpur which is 450 km away from the village. "He should follow the rule and move base to the village," said Guddi.

GMS prides itself on giving training and support to all the SC community in the village. Since they began work in the village, all the families entitled to low cost grains from the government have been getting them regularly. Earlier, Fair Price Shops in the villages give less than their due or not give them enough grains at all, so they could hoard the goods to resell in black market.

The women say they have devised a plan to fight these battles. They pooled in money and traveled to the block office at Kalakankar to raise their concerns at the Block Development Officers. This has proven to be an effective tool for them. ■

Table 1: Details of village Development Plans

Work Sanctioned related to infrastructure	Pratapgarh	Barabanki
Interlocking Road	46	21
Bandha Construction	43	26
Pond Construction	15	55
Kharanja Construction	83	23
Well Construction	61	34



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BEST PRACTICE III Conducting Social Audit and Public Hearing

Corruption in the government is enabled by secrecy and lack of transparency. In order to engage with corruption the Right To Information (RTI) Act was passed in 2005. Close on its heels came the tools of public hearing. Unless government work was analysed and budgets discussed in greater detail at the village level openly, secrecy would prevail. Official records obtained using RTI are read out at the public hearing to identify and rectify irregularities. This process of reviewing official records and determining whether state reported expenditures reflect the actual monies spent on the ground is referred to as a social audit.

"Humara paisa, humara hisaab". Our money is accountable to us. This was the slogan with which the villagers marched on to conduct social audit in their villages.

First the villagers began collecting the documents about government work through panchayats. Those documents that were denied to them were acquired after filing RTI applications.

Further, once the documents were with them they went around physically checking the work completed and progress achieved. In case there was a discrepancy

in the work mentioned on paper and actual work completed, they brought it to the attention of the PRIs.

One of the greatest achievements of the project in Pratapgarh is that the state government is now consulting the group on social audit in three other districts - Kaushambi, Allahabad and Barabanki.

The Uttar Pradesh government has set up a District Resource Group which will be represented by two people from each block who will in turn train Block Resource Groups. The Block Resource Groups are tasked with training the Village Task Force. This model will ensure that VDPs are made for all villages and social audit and public hearings are conducted efficiently.

The following steps were undertaken to conduct public hearings:

- » Collection of panchayat records from the Block Office.
- » Documentation
- » Physical verification

- » Information to the Gram Sabha Members and selection of the meeting venue
- » Public Hearing and securing guidance and answers to queries raised.

Many issues were raised during the social audit process and solutions provided:

- 1) Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) wages were pending for 5 months. In order to address this, it was suggested that Rs.2.3 Cr. be paid to MGNREGA labourers by the Government.
- 2) 105 MGNREGA workers were encouraged to submit work demand application in writing.

- 3) No facilities were available at worksite. It was suggested that budget for facilities at work site be added to the estimate.
- 4) Community was motivated to take up responsibility of security of sign boards at work site
- 5) MGNREGA workers has less approach to Block Officials. MNREGA labourers were suggested to make a gherao of the block officials regarding MNREGA work demand. BDO directed the respective village secretary to provide work to them. ■





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BEST PRACTICE IV Setting Up Information Resource Centres

Uttar Pradesh is India's most populous state. The numbers of people per block far outnumber those in other states. It is difficult for the panchayats to disseminate information to all concerned and the fear is that the most vulnerable are furthest from the government structures and they would be left out of the chain.

Therefore, the Information Resource Centre (IRC) set up at the panchayats help in bridging the information gap. For instance, women from far-flung villages had to trek to the block office to fill out their old age and widow pension forms. Now, with IRCs in the panchayats, the commute is much shorter. More than anything, their commute is fruitful.

"In many cases, old women would reach the block office only to find that the required document was unavailable on a given day," said Mohammad Adnan Farooqui. "They would have had to go again," he added.

According to village level volunteers, panchayat offices earlier stored logs and fodder. Now, Panchayat Bhawans have begun to function as a result of IRCs, said Farooqui.

In 14 out of the 20 panchayats in the project area the community has committed to take on the responsibility of the IRCs. ■

Table 1: Achievements of Information Resource Centres

District	No. of cases supported by IRCs for access to public schemes	
	Application Made	People Benefitted
Pratapgarh	2,906	2,180
Baranbanki	1,962	1,522





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BEST PRACTICE V Activating Panchayats

“Caste system is so endemic in these regions that being elected the pradhan doesn't exempt one from their status as a Dalit. There are six Dalits who are Pradhans in Pratapgarh right now,” says Atul of the Samvad Samajik Sansthan (SSS). “Holding the post of a Pradhan has become cosmetic. A Dalit is elected because it is a reserved seat, but the elected Pradhan is not respected.

This then undermines the office of the Panchayati Raj Institutions as local strongmen run parallel governments.

The second problem that the project faced while activating Panchayats is the divide between the Muslim and the Dalit communities.

A lot of awareness raising activities had to with vulnerable communities to see how focus on vulnerable communities could be achieved by working with panchayat raj institutions.

Between 2015 and 2017, 14 trainings and capacity building workshops were organized by Samvad Samajik Sansthan (SSS) and ActionAid India (AAI) on participatory planning and on various entitlements.

This was carried out through a combination of methods - awareness campaigns, wall writing, *Kala Jatha* and one-day camps. As 86 elected representatives involved in these activities they came out as leaders within the community. In their turn the elected representatives spread awareness on various entitlements in their panchayat and have been encouraging others to access government schemes and entitlements.

All of last year, the elected representatives supported the communities in developing their Village Development Plans. One of the main concerns of the people was that of employment. Therefore, the elected representatives supported on ensuring the entitlements under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in their panchayats.

MNREGA was implemented well in those panchayats that they also began formulating plans to pave link roads in the villages, dig wells, construct ponds etc. A significant change they brought about in their villages was to create employment around projects that were suited to the weather. For instance, link roads were paved in the villages earlier that used to be washed out during monsoons.

In their panchayat the information regarding government schemes and programmes are displayed in the panchayat wall. This ensures transparency and accountability. ■




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