



ASSERTING **RIGHTS** ACCESSING **ENTITLEMENTS**

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 Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh





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Introduction

Jhabua district lies in the western part of Madhya Pradesh. It is surrounded by Panchmahal and Baroda districts of Gujarat, Banswara district of Rajasthan, and Alirajpur, Dhar and Ratlam districts of Madhya Pradesh.

Through the 1990s and the first decade of this century, many Indians introspected on why some districts of the country are more backward than the rest. A resounding answer was lack of information on government benefits and programmes. In order to address that, ActionAid and Vasudha Vikas Sansthan with the support of European Commission in January 2014 started work in Meghnagar block of Jhabua. Work in Jhabua was part of the project: “Increasing access to information on the Government Schemes and Entitlements in Backward Districts in Northern India” that was 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. Vasudha Vikas Sansthan (VVS) anchored the project in Jhabua. The project extended to 25 villages of 18 panchayats in Meghnagar block.

Located 348 kilometres from Bhopal, Jhabua lies in the western part of Madhya Pradesh. The district is highly drought-prone and has more than its fair share of degraded waste lands. In 2006 the Ministry of Panchayati Raj named Jhabua one of the country's 250 most backward districts (out of a total of 640). The 111 villages in the block or the sub-district are administratively defined as Schedule Areas, which are “areas and tribes needing special protection due to historically disadvantageous conditions” according to the Indian Constitution. There are several pro-poor policies of government like laws such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), Forest Rights Act, Right to Education Act, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) for livelihood, as well as entitlements (food and nutrition and employment) for the tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh but they are not working properly especially in the Jhabua district.

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 Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh.

Challenges and Lessons Learnt

The sustainability of the alternative depends upon people's participation. The initiatives therefore need to be scaled-up and institutionalized. Social structures entrenched in the region are a major challenge. These structures are patriarchal and there is a power imbalance.

Community mobilization and support from local administration at all levels has been a significant contributor to the initiative's success. Many of the schemes that have brought about social change in the past few years was initiated by the new District Collector. The authorities make a lot of difference and can affect change.

A significant factor that makes the VVS 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 VVS 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 the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

The indigenous people of Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh, who are Bhil tribals, have traditionally treated water as a life giving resource and used it judiciously. Modern development processes treat all natural resources, including water, as commodities and have focused on extracting profit from natural resources leaving the Bhils marginalised and immiserised. This has manifested itself even more so over the last decade in the mismanagement of water resources in Jhabua district and the costs have been sought to be pushed on to the adivasis. The Bhils have organised themselves to resist this injustice.

The lack of state support for research and development of indigenous crops suitable to harsh topographies of the Bhil homelands has further weakened their economic base. Thus the Bhil adivasis have remained in the clutches of sahuikars who dominate the rural markets of the region exploiting the adivasis by offering only un-remunerative prices for produce, exorbitant prices for the agricultural inputs and usurious interest rates on loans advanced to the tribals. Consequently most of the Bhil adivasi peasants have to migrate on a seasonal and at times permanent basis to make ends

meet. Thus their labour, often their only asset is now being expended in building assets of other people in other areas.

In December 2015, Vasudha Vikas Sansthan (VVS) and ActionAid (AA) helped set up Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Panchayat (a community-based organization) for Bhil tribals in Meghnagar block of Jhabua district with an initial membership of 250. During the last 4 years the Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Panchayat has not only engaged with the administration on issues of concern, but also ensured implementation of entitlements including the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), for water conservation and water resource management in Jhabua. The tribal organisation has leveraged MGNREGA projects to improve the agriculture of the area through enhanced irrigation facilities.

The expense of taking water from streams and rivers to farms situated at a distance is relatively more than the economic capacity of an individual adivasi and so he/she is not able to avail of irrigation. The MGNREGA was kicked off in the Meghnagar block

Table 1: Projects Successfully Undertaken Under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

Schemes	Number
Kapil Dhara (Well)	57
Pond for Irrigation	10
Check Dam	9

of Jhabua district. The people organization's efforts for implementing MGNREGA were made available to develop water harvesting structure like irrigation well (Kapil Dhara well), ponds and check dams for irrigation. (See Table 1)

Jerat - A success story

It was also thought that work on MGNREGA projects would lead to an increase in cooperative endeavors among the adivasis. Jerat is a village in Meghnagar block which has successfully set up a fishing co-operative. Tenders are called for from various villages to fish in the pond that is in the vicinity. Kaalia Dodiya is currently the caretaker of the pond. He and some of his fellow-villagers will fish in the pond soon, and they are in-charge of the pond for a period of five years. The profit will be distributed equally among them.

Not only that, people of Jerat has also been managing a big pond near their village. They ensure that there is enough ground water recharge for the pond to not go dry. Summers are severe in the region and water is of utmost importance.

They have dug five farm wells under Kapil Dhara scheme.

The result shows in Vagu Dodiya's family. Vagu is the president of the Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Panchayat in Jerat village. He is also an active panchyat member from the village. He shares his six acres of land with his six brothers. Before steps were taken to recharge ground water, they used to grow 15 quintal of corn

per year. Now, each brother claims to grow about 10 quintal each. "I have enough after feeding my family, to sell," Vagu said.

This shows that economic mobility has brought about social change. Marriages in the Bhil community in Jerat do not spend exorbitant amounts any more.

Vagu, along with seven others, went on an exposure visit to Hiware Bazaar to learn about a model village. Hiware Bazar is a village in the drought-prone Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. In the early 1990s the local panchayat using funds from available government schemes to launch a series of conservational initiatives and other measures to improve the socio-economic conditions in the village. In 1994, the Maharashtra government brought Hiware Bazar under the Adarsh Gaon Yojana. Hiware Bazaar is as dry as Jerat. But, by creating watersheds and a huge catchment area, the villages at Howare Bazar have ensured that they grow three crops in a year, making agriculture profitable.

When Vagu and the other members of the team who went on the exposure trip to Hiware Bazar returned, they started collecting money and bought saplings. They planted trees on the brown hills surrounding their village. "Water and trees go hand in hand," he said. Vagu and his friends began implementing what they had learnt from their visit to Hiware Bazar in in Jerat village, Meghnagar block, Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh. They dug rain-harvesting structures in the watershed formed by the dry hills near their village.

As a result of their efforts the ground water table in the entire region increased, and not just in their village. Water pipes from the various ponds they have dug up now reaches their agricultural fields. ■



Vagu Dodiya's president of the Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Panchayat



Ponds and Check dam construction near Jerat village



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BEST PRACTICE II Creating Village Development Plans

Vasudha Vikas Sansthan (VVS) and ActionAid (AA) conducted a baseline survey to understand the situation with the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), Forest Rights Act (FRA), Right To Information (RTI) Act, Right To Education (RTE), Public Distribution Services (PDS) and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Meghnagar block of Jhabua district.

The focus was to make plans at the village community level and at a personal level. Because when members of the community sat down to make plans they found that different demographics had different problems and different priorities. For instance, women wanted steps to be taken against alcoholism, dowry, for the provision of water availability and anganwadis as their priority, and men wanted roads constructed and lampposts erected.

In order to ensure that the development plan is really responsive to local needs and people's priorities, detailed situation analysis needed to be done covering different aspects, themes and sectors related to local level development.

The VVS team started with capacity building of gram sabha (village council) members with special focus on women and youth on inclusive development and planning process through trainings. During the training themes discussed included the possibility of strengthening transparency in decision-making through sharing of information with gram sabhas and the scope for bottom-up participatory planning to help align public resource allocation with locally felt needs and priorities, mediated by democratic decision making.

The process of formulation of village development plans (VDPs) was facilitated in 25 villages in 18 panchayats with the support of youth volunteers by the VVS Team. Meetings were conducted in 25 villages to prepare a new plan for the current year. The participation of sarpanch (head of village council), and members of panchayati raj institutions (PRI) was ensured during the meetings. The community-based organisations and community leaders mobilised the marginalized communities to collectively reflect on their situation and define their needs and how best to meet them by using participatory rural appraisal tools.

Table 2: Details of village development plan for community

Particulars	Plan Proposed	Plan Sanctioned
Pond	8	6
Community well	18	11
CC Road	40	25
Anganwadi Centre	6	4
Play ground for Children	10	3

Each plan included basic data on the gram panchayat wise geographical area, social structure, statistical details on panchayat, village map, information on education, health, migration cycle, agriculture, crop cycle and natural resources; and these exercises were also informed by the baseline survey. Detailed village development plans were prepared through these exercises, which helped in the analysis of the village's problems and formulating an action plan as suggested by the villagers. Once the map and the situational analysis are finalized, they were presented to the

Gram Sabha, which either accepted the proposal or not. (See Table 2)

The tribal and non-tribal community from Jhabua constantly migrates to Gujarat and Rajasthan for employment. Entitlements required for migratory communities are significantly different from those required for non-migratory communities. For instance, the state needs to pitch in and care for elderly people and children who are left behind when the able-bodied migrate. ■





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BEST PRACTICE III Conducting Social Audit and Public Hearing

In both 2015 and 2016, Vasudha Vikas Sansthan (VVS) and ActionAid (AA) conducted 18 social audits and 18 public hearings on a whole range of issues like education, mid day meal and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Across Madhya Pradesh, public hearings are conducted every week.

Panchayat budgets were tallied in front of everyone in the village. They sought to look at how much money was allocated to a particular job, how much was spent and how much was saved.

They found that the MNREGA work was almost non-existent. This is because migratory communities find better payment in neighbouring states where they migrate to, and not so much in their own villages. The going rates for daily wages in Gujarat and Rajasthan are about Rs 300 per day, whereas MNREGA pays only Rs 172 per day. This meant that MNREGA related work taken up was negligible. VVS endeavoured to change that at the community's behest.

Since the public hearing on MNREGA in 2015, pay-

ments were given immediately to the community. And job cards were made available.

One of the most significant impacts of social audit was witnessed in Mandli village, where people did not get ration promised to them. They began to get quantities promised to them after the public hearing was conducted. And most importantly, the PDS shop owner was suspended.

The instance of Khal Khandvi panchayat is worth noting. In November 2016, there was a social audit conducted there, when they found that Rs 12 lakhs were siphoned off for particular development projects. However, none of those projects existed at all. The people took it upon themselves to prosecute the husband of the ex-sarpanch who was the de facto representative when the projects were sanctioned. He was jailed.

The government of Madhya Pradesh has begun to hold free weekend classes for undergraduate students who go out and do social audit in many villages of the state. ■





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BEST PRACTICE IV Setting Up Information Resource Centres

During the last 4 years, support and guidance was extended to people who were not able to access their entitlements because they did not know about their eligibility and application process or faced problems. Vasudha Vikas Sansthan (VVS) set up Information Resource Centres (IRC) in all the 18 Gram Panchayats they work with. All the centres (non ICT based) are run by village volunteers. These centres acts as interface between local villagers with the block administration, provides information and facilitation of application process related to various entitlements.

This is also done with a view to understand and document the hurdles faced by poor and vulnerable people in accessing the public programs that were meant for them so that informed interface and advocacy can happen with relevant levels of the government for reform in program delivery. Utilising the existing building in panchayat, VVS set up the Information Resource Centre in the Panchayat Bhawan. Application forms for all government schemes were stocked up, also information and education communication (IEC) materials were kept in the IRCs. One volunteer sat through one whole day every

week to answer queries of villagers on government programmes.

In most villages of the project locations panchayats and panchayat information centre have strong links. In many cases information resource centres have played a key role in getting the entitlements to the communities and building the capacity of the elected



Information Resource Centre in Jhaladabar Panchayat

Table 3: Details of cases supported by Information Resource Centers for access to public schemes

Schemes	Applications Made	People Benefitted
Pension	597	457
Housing	666	452

representatives related to entitlements. Mukhiya's and members of ward panchayats are aware about the preparation of village development plan and the information resource centres. Many sarpanches and members of the ward panchayats seem to be influenced by the functioning of the panchayat information centres and sought advice from the information resource centre. The IRCs seems to have developed as a strong civic association interfacing with the institutions of decentralized governance.

The IRCs played a catalytic role as change agent by enabling panchayati raj institution's (PRI) to link with governmental programmes and schemes, by facilitating access to other institutional frames and development actors. As a result, IRC's have provided a rich reservoir of cases, models and innovations

on issues like how PRI's promote better utilization of resources, what hinders/promotes, women's participation in Gram Sabhas and in Gram Panchayats, etc. These Centres become especially important in panchayats where the Sarpanch or the Mukhiya is not assertive enough or is prone to corruption.

The intensive work in the project locations, through Panchayat Resource Centres, helped provide depth to the programme. It helped consolidate the delivery of inputs including information support, capacity building and local micro planning in the selected panchayats and thereby provided visibility to programmatic interventions. All the 18 centres are functional and hold regular committee meetings to review the activities. (See Table 3) ■





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BEST PRACTICE V Activating Panchayats

Jamla Bai Bhura, was elected to head the Godwada Panchayat in 2015. His Panchayat consists of three villages Gadwada, Navapada and Khedi. Gadwada panchayat is an excellent example of panchayat services which has responded to the need of the community through timely information and systems in Meghnagar block of the Jhabua district.

Because of the Information Resource Centre, data was available for up to 20-25 days in a month. Earlier the community had to trek arduous terrain to reach the panchayat and were not sure of getting the relevant information says Jamla Bai Bhura.

People look at him as one of them as he belongs to a Bhil tribe. He also mobilized and empowered traditional tribal chiefs on social issues as well as developmental issues and initiates the process of forming a group of tribal chiefs. He says that the panchayati raj institutions (PRI) in tribal areas have to work well with the traditional tribal chiefs on social issues as well as developmental issues. He renovated the panchayat building and lent it to the Tadvi community to hold meetings. This ensures that the community is better represented in the processes of governance.

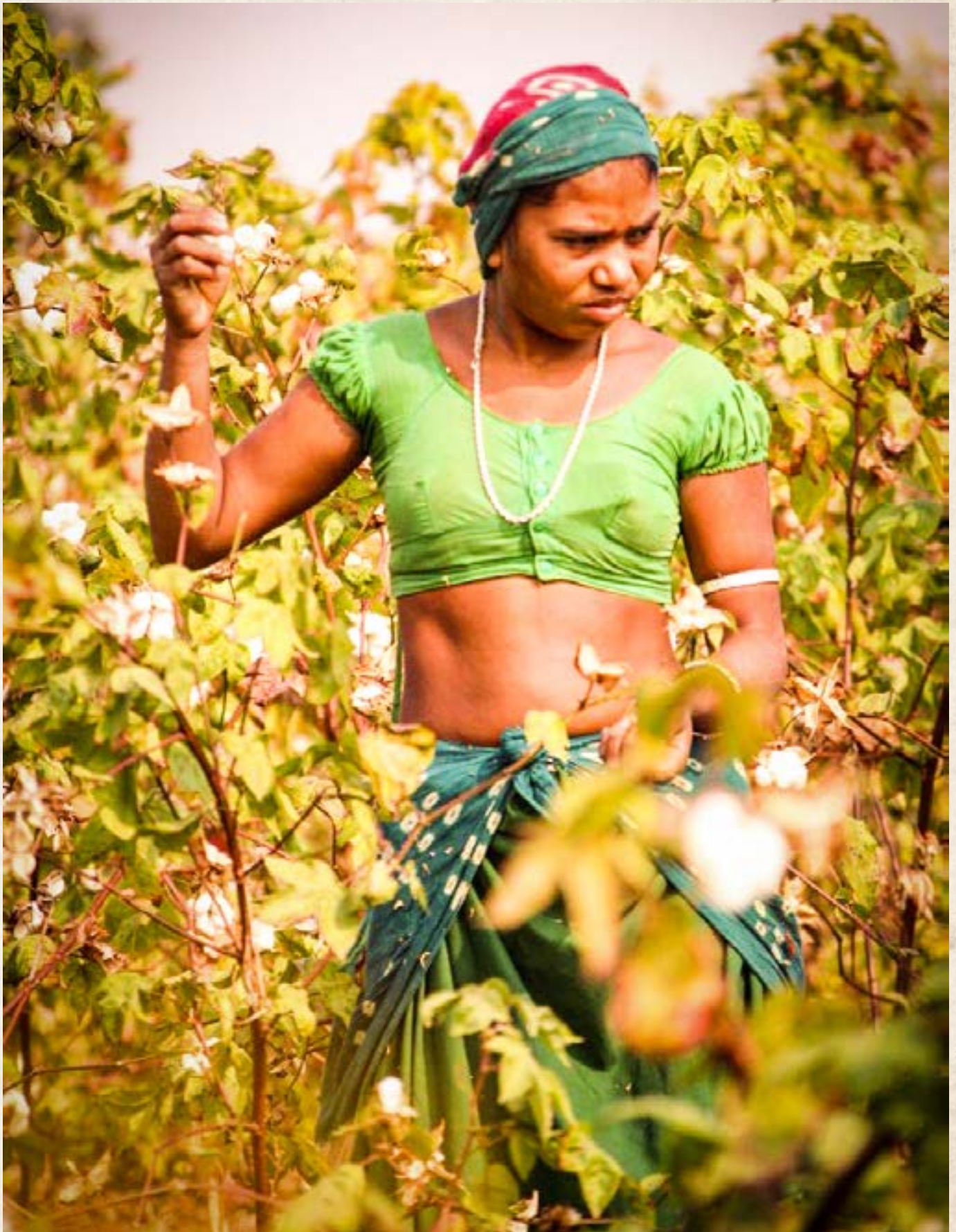
Between 2015 and 2017, seven trainings and capacity-building workshops have been organized by Vasudha Vikas Sansthan (VVS) and ActionAid (AA) on participatory planning and on various entitlements. This was carried out through a combination of methods - awareness campaigns, wall writing, Kala Jatha and one-day camps. As he was involved in these activities he came out an inspirational leader. He has been building awareness on various entitlements in his panchayat and has been encouraging other people to be independent and secure leadership skills.

In his panchayat a register that requires the migrants to fill in details about how is migrating, where to and till when in properly maintained. This helps in reducing trafficking and exploitation of migrants. Also, this register helps in ensuring benefits to the migrants once they return home.

In his panchayat the information regarding government schemes and programmes is displayed in the panchayat wall. This ensures transparency and accountability.

After three years of perseverance, he managed to ensure that his panchayat became an open defecation free panchayat. All the families (322 households) have toilets. All the 33 eligible beneficiaries of

old age pension are getting pension amount. All the 85 eligible beneficiaries have benefitted from rural housing scheme, a total of nine irrigation wells were constructed for ensuring irrigation facilities. ■



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