

18 JUNE, HT, CHANDIGARH
2010

Poor villagers fight back, land a fair deal

NEW HOPE Landless Dalit labourers assert right to panchayati land in Sangrur village, form panel to manage affairs

Vishav Bharti
vishavbharti@gmail.com

BENRA (SANGRUR): Spread across 9 acres, the lush green patch of land is not just another rural field. It has come to them after a protracted struggle for their constitutional right to till panchayati land.

Today, Benra village has set an example of collective labour for the landless.

It was two years back when the landless Dalits reclaimed this patch of village panchayati land from the landlords. As per the Punjab Panchayati Raj Act, Dalits are entitled to one-third share in the village's pan-

chayati land. Only Dalits can till the land.

But here, too, like any other village, landlords would field their "pawns" from amongst the Dalits at the auction and the landless would be left in the lurch.

Also, Dalit women in villages of the cotton belt often complained that landlords insulted them when they would enter their fields to collect fodder.

Two years back, the Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union gave a call to take control of their share. "The idea of reclaiming the land was beyond imagination," tells Bahal Singh, a leader of this "struggle" and

now a student at Punjabi University in Patiala.

It has been so for decades, the village elders reminded them. How can it be changed now? "But the response from the women was surprising, unmatched," says Bahal, adding, "Perhaps because they were the ones facing maximum humiliation from farmers for entering their fields."

In 2008, the landlords fielded "pawns" — most of them attached labourers — once again. But the Dalit women were not ready to let them win so easily this time.

The landlords' candidate was taken hostage and the Dalits

fielded their own candidate (the land can be leased out to only an individual).

There was another hurdle. The reserved price for auction was quite high — the land had been leased out for Rs 2.74 lakh in 2007. The scene shifted to the BDPO office.

For six months there was no cultivation. The Dalits didn't let anybody else crack the deal. D. Lakra, a young IAS officer and SDM, Dhuri, at that time helped them use various constitutional provisions. They got the land for Rs 1.05 lakh in November.

The next challenge was to arrange the money. Each house-

hold contributed, but not even half the amount was collected. The rest of the money was loaned on 2 per cent interest.

A committee was formed and it distributed land among around 70 families — making for one-third of the entire landless Dalit population of the village. The land was divided as per the requirement of each family.

Earlier, the same families were dependent on landlords for fodder, so fodder was sown too.

Today, 85 families share this land. Among them is Desso Kaur, who cherishes the change "apna khet" has brought. She

had once lost hope of rearing cattle, now she owns two calves and a milch buffalo in her courtyard. Earlier she had leased 100 yards for Rs 2,000 to grow fodder. "It was very expensive," she says. But at "apna khet", she just has to pay Rs 400 from sowing to raising the fodder. "They do the entire work, we have to just reap the fodder," she proudly tells.

This season, the village committee is preparing for another leap: sowing paddy on 3 acres. The money earned will be used to raise common property like tents and crockery or machinery, which will be rented out for nominal prices to Dalits.

From the next season, a plan to start vegetable cultivation is also ready.

Even if somebody falls ill or faces a financial problem, the committee extends help.

However, Sukhjeet Singh, sarpanch of the village, is uncomfortable with all these changes. "The adamant attitude of Dalits has spoilt the relationship between farmers and labourers. If they will not care for us, how can we allow them to enter our fields and who will lend them money?" he warns.

But haven't they only demanded their right to what the Constitution provides?