

# Miracle of water: irrigation enriches UP villages

On either side of the narrow road from Shamli to Bhaiswal, the rich brown alluvial soil of the Ganga-Yamuna *doab* radiates a lustre that is the envy of any farmer. Sugarcane saplings are taking root in freshly ploughed fields; the remaining expanse is a vast golden-brown sheet of wheat and hay- ripe and ready for the harvest.

Shamli, in Muzaffarnagar district, is in the heart of western UP's sugarcane belt and it is one of the best-irrigated tehsil or taluka in the country. Bhaiswal is a prosperous village eight km from Shamli. Less than two hundred years back, this was a semi- arid land; totally dependent on monsoons for the crop, plagued by famines.

It all changed in 1823.



That year, 60 km north of Shamli, The Engineering Corp or the Army of Engineers under the East India Company set up their first office in Saharanpur. Surveys conducted by the Corps traced remnants of old alignments of a canal dating back to the reign of Emperor Muhammad Shah.

The waterway was redesigned by Colonel Robert Smith; and in less than five years from the commencement of work; in 1930, it was commissioned to irrigate vast tracts of land east of the river Yamuna. Thus, the name: Eastern Yamuna canal or EYC.

This is how Bhaiswal is referred to in the *Gazetteer of Muzaffarnagar* district. The entries describing the course of the canal date back to the turn of the nineteenth century:

*“At the 57th mile there is a bridge and a fall near the village of Banehra. Two miles further south at Yarpur, there is another bridge and a fall, from which point canal runs to Mastgarh-bridge in the 62nd mile. 2 miles lower there is a bridge at Madalpur; and another at Bhainswal in the 65th mile, where there is a fall and a regulator.”*

The East India Company had twin interests in spreading waterways on the either side of Yamuna -- the EYC and the other being the Western Yamuna Canal, which irrigates large parts of Haryana. The primary aim was to bring in political stability in and around Delhi. The economic emancipation of the masses probably was a subsidiary goal. "Most of the labour for the construction came from the east- the purabiyas- our fathers would tell us. Go to Ramgarh, you will find the entire community still living there. Just four km from here, on the Shamli road," says Chaudhery Balak Ram.

### **Ramgarh ke vasio**

This Ramgarh undisputedly got its name from the classis dacoit movie *Sholay*.

"The village was earlier referred to as purabiya. It was re-christianed by a bus conductor. He would say 'Ramgarh vasio' in a lighter vein while ferrying daily passengers to Shamli", recalls a villager.

Ramgarh today is hamlet of 250 odd household right next to the Eastern Yamuna Canal. Nearly all its population migrated from Pratapgarh district in central UP; and belongs to the backward Lonia community.

"No welfare scheme worth the name has reached us. Our hutment is divided between the two panchayat- Bhiswal and Gorni. Being rank outsiders, we are nobody's priority"; says a villager.

Most of the residents are landless labourer; a few own 2 to 3 bighas of land. Though a government primary school runs here for the last six years, only one girl so far has reached the senior secondary level. All eyes are now on Naresh, appearing for his third year BA examination. If successful, he would be the first graduate from the village. Only one person so far has got a government job, that too under the handicapt quota.

Ramgarh perhaps is the oldest living example of labour migration to western Uttar Pradesh. Interestingly, the community over a century and a half has been able to retain its dialect and other cultural attributes.

"If one traverses along the Yamuna canal- both the eastern and western- on either side there are hutments of labour migrated circa 1820's. These communities are what we call closed groups. They have even maintained their genetic integrity by marrying within the community," says Dr Sudhir Panwar of Lucknow University.

Fifty years after their forefathers migrated to build the irrigation system bringing about a paradigm shift in the socio, economic and political dynamics of the region for the better, Ramgarh today remains an island of poverty and deprivation.

Later this month, Santosh Yadav, the Collector of Muzaffarnagar, is scheduled to visiting Ramgarh -- the first visit of its kind by the top administrative officer of the district.

It's a visit "Ramgarh ke vasio", their fathers and forefathers have been waiting for almost two centuries now.

*(CNN-IBN's Sumit Pande is doing a series of reports on small/marginal farmers and denotified tribes. The series is funded by Inclusive Media for Change, or im4change, of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.)*