Poor villagers fight back, land a fair deal

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

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BHERA (SANGUR): Spread across 9 acres, the lush green patch of land is, just another rural field. It has come to be known after a prolonged struggle for their constitutional right to till panchayati land.

Today, Bhera 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. As per the Punjab Panchayati Raj Act, Dalits are entitled to one-third share in the village's panchayati land. Only Dalits can till the land.

But here too, like in other villages, landlords would find their "pawans" from amongst the Dalits at the auction and the landings would be left in the lurch.

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

Two years back, the Kramkari Pehlu Mandari Union gave a call to take control of their land. "The idea of reclaiming the land was boycotted in the beginning," says Babul Singh, a leader of the "struggle" and now a student at Punjab 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 Singh was surprising, unreserved," says Babul adding. "Perhaps because they were the most being treated unfairly from farmers for entering their fields."

In 2008, the landlords fielded "pawans" — 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 failed to elect the 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 2.3 lakhs in 2007. The scene shifted to the RDPO office.

For six months there was no cultivation. The Dalits didn't let anybody else craft the deal. D. Lakhw, a young AITC officer and SDM, Bhera, at that time helped them use various constitutional provisions. They got the land, for Rs 1.05 lakhs. In November.

The next challenge was to arrange the money. Each household contributed, but not evenly. The amount was collected. The rest of the money was raised on a 2% per cent interest.

A committee was formed and a distributed land among around 75 families — making for one-third of the entire landless Dalit population of the village. The land was divided pro rata to the need of each family.

Early this year, the under-55 families were dependent on landlords for fodder; for fodder was again too. Today, 85 families share this land. Among them in Deviyan, who chorese the change "ama khet" has brought. She had once lost hope of rearing cattle, now she owns two calves and a male buffalo in her courtyard. Earlier she had leased out 100 yards for Rs 2,000 to grow fodder. It was very expensive, she says. But at "ama khet", she just has to pay Rs 400 from sowling 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 neighbour's animal can also access the fodder. The money earned will be used to raise common property like tests and machinery, which will be rented out to the next season's demand.

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 upset the relationship between farmers and landlords. 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? What the Constitution provides?