

From a Naxal bastion, an NREGA success story

From land pattas to social audit: Gadchiroli Collector to get medal from PM today for taking NREGA to villages

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WHEN Gadchiroli Collector Atul Patne and his predecessor Niranjankumar Sudhanshu accept a special medal from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh tomorrow in New Delhi for their NREGA performance, they will rebut a widely held belief that good government work can't be done in Naxal-affected areas, a belief that's often used as an alibi for inaction.

Gadchiroli, which became the biggest hotspot in the Red Corridor in 2009 with three police ambushes killing 55 po-

licemen, is among the 24 districts in the country and only the second in Maharashtra to win the honour along with Aurangabad. This tribal district - 78 percent of its land covered with thick forest - is the first in Maharashtra to successfully implement NREGA's social audit through 61 NGOs.

Sudhanshu evolved a model of a "Gramrojgarsevak" who would get 0.5 per cent of total work amount of the village plus Rs 400 per month to encourage him to get more demand for work from the village. It was later adopted across the state. And unlike in other districts, people here don't come with demand for work due to fear of Naxals. So

the administration takes the work to them.

During his tenure, vigilance committees, which ensure transparency, were set up in all gram panchayats (GPs).

Under Patne, Gadchiroli became the first district in the state to issue smart cards to beneficiaries. Patne, who worked overtime to give a record 5,000 land pattas in one day on Republic Day as promised by district Guardian Minister R R Patil, started issuing receipts for the work and payment received "so the beneficiary has a record in black and white." This was another first by Gadchiroli.

Patne also innovatively gave

employment guarantee to those given land pattas for work to improve their own fields. Interestingly, some of the best work done in the district is in areas dominated by Naxals. For example, in Etapalli tahsil, Naxals had tried to set up Janatana Sarkar (people's government) in 2008.

The police got nearly 50 Naxal cadres from 11 villages to surrender to foil the bid. Except for the hardcore Kotmi village, which doesn't have a gram panchayat for the last 10 years allegedly due to a Naxal diktat, the administration has been able to take NREGS to almost all villages.

Parsalgondi, the first village next to the BRO-built bridge

on Bandia river, stands testimony to the turning of the tide. In 2006, BRO lost its daredevil engineer N Ganesan to Naxal violence after Ganesan refused to stop bridge work. The bridge not only connected the 60-odd villages - which remained cut off for at least five months during the rains - to Etapalli but also helped clear the way for more government work.

Villagers say Naxals aren't opposed to work that benefits villagers. "They generally oppose road and bridge work because they feel that helps the police," they say. Of late, however, villagers have been getting Naxals to agree to bridge work. BRO has just com-



A village in a Naxal bastion.

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pleted another bridge about 12 km beyond the one over Bandia. And work is on for a

village reservoir at Jivangat where 50 people have been working for the past 15 days