Building a new future

Tribal farmers leave construction jobs for farming

Wasted water from a construction project was the trigger for a move into farming for three landless Indian workers.

Ranchi District of Jharkhand state in northeast India is home to many tribal peoples who are renowned for their community solidarity and campaigning influence concerning their home district. A controversial dam that would have displaced many people and destroyed 25,000 acres of rich arable land and dense forest was stopped by their protests and solidarity.

But jobs are scarce, and 35-year-old Sanjay Nag was supporting his family of six on a monthly salary of INR5000 (approx. US$80) from his job as a construction worker building a bridge across the local Karo River.

The river was diverted to allow the bridge's foundations to be built, and this gave the local Syngenta Foundation India (SFI) team an idea. Seeing the diverted water left to seep across neighboring land, they suggested to Nag that he harness the water for irrigation, and take up watermelon cultivation.

With access to credit provided by agri-entrepreneur Sashi Bhushan Singh through a scheme with IDBI Bank and SFI, Nag rented ten acres for INR10,000 (approx. US$160) per year. He invested INR90,000 (approx. US$1400) in cultivation over five months. With advice on growing and help making deals with local vendors, Nag was able to turn this investment into income of INR4,50,000 (approx. US$7,000) over the same period.

Nag's success has been the inspiration for many others. Through two local NGOs that regularly partner with SFI - PRADAN and Torpa Mahila Sangh – more than 350 farmers have visited his farm.

Recently, and with help from the SFI team, Nag has teamed up with two others new to farming to grow peas on 25 acres. They harvested a bumper crop of 45 tonnes, which earned them a total of INR1,275,000 (approx. US$19,500).

Agriculture has helped these new farmers turn their lives around, and now the bridge they helped to build carries their produce to market.