

## Spirit of the Collective

As the name 150 TDA suggests, this sprawling village came into being after Thal Development Authority started reclamation of the desert with the laying out of the Thal Canal in 1956. Like other villages of similar designations, 150 TDA also dates back to the middle 1960s. When allotments were made and landless farmers came to live here, they found themselves in the midst of rolling sand dunes. All the farming that was possible back then was an acre or two around a diesel-powered tube well.

The first few years were hard as they struggled to set themselves up as small farmers, at the same time struggling to level out the dunes. Simultaneously there was another chore they had to tend to. The Irrigation Department delineated the alignment of the branch channels that were to irrigate the fields of 150 TDA – and that was all it did. It was the farmers who were required to dig the channels by themselves, or simply do without. And so, even as they struggled to keep their small plots of agriculture from dying, they worked long, hard hours digging the channels. By the end of 1965, the network of branch channels was complete.

If the farmers of 150 TDA had thought life was now set to take a turn for the better, they were mistaken. For one, the soil being virgin had long been thirsty and the unlined channel soaked up more than half the water it carried. Then, because the leveling of the sand dunes had not been done mechanically with dozers but by bullock and the most basic wooden implements, it turned out that the take off from the canal was lower while the tail-end of the branch channel marginally higher.

Consequently, farmers at the upper end had more water which progressively diminished as it went farther along. The unfortunate man at the tail of the channel got nothing. As they struggled to get their farms and a basic life-supporting income in order on a minimal supply of water, tensions rode high. Small misunderstandings led to arguments and sometimes fisticuffs flew. The major cause of ill-will was the ever recurring breach in the sand banks of the channel. This invariably led to accusations of the break having been created on purpose in order to take undue advantage of another farmer's share. The farmers of 150 TDA were soon familiar faces in the district courts where junior functionaries knew them as a contentious bunch.

But life gets along, people improvise and adjust. And so the tail-end farmer resorted to a unique trick: he sold his share of water (which he in any case never received) to upper-end farmers for a hundred rupees per hour. Instead, the use of the diesel-powered tube well became fairly common practice in this so-called canal-irrigated farming village, especially near the tail of the channel. Indeed, if truth be told, water losses in the unlined channels were so heavy that it was not only the tail-end farmer who resorted to the tube well. As they brought more and more of their holdings under the plow, even upper-end farmers needed to augment irrigation with a tube well.

Since the year 2000 fuel oil prices began to rise sharply making it increasingly difficult for the farmers to keep their bread buttered. As one farmer pointed out, cotton sold for Rs

900 per fifty kilograms back in 2000 when diesel could be had for a mere fourteen rupees per liter. By 2007 the price of cotton had risen by only two to three hundred rupees or thirty percent. The price of diesel on the other hand had gone up to forty rupees per liter registering a rise of two hundred percent. The squeeze was on and the farmers of 150 TDA saw no way out of it.

In 2005 they came in contact with SAP-PK through SAP's local partner in Layyah. Soon, the result of this linkage was the establishment of Kissan Itihad Committee which, in turn, led to the brick-lining of 1980 feet (604 meters) of one branch channel irrigating the fields of 150 TDA. Things were looking up, but only for one section of the village. There was one thing that had however altered altogether and that was the ability of the entire community to sit together and discuss their common problems. Iqbal, a member of the committee, is convinced that the change happened so quickly only because of the NGO's intervention and emphasis on strength in unity.

In 2007 Kissan Itihad Committee submitted an extension of their previous scheme. This time it was brick-lining of an additional 2450 feet (747 meters) of irrigation channel. Work began on the first day of February with the farmers providing manual labor and exactly three months later the new brick-lined channel was ready to deliver. That was in good time to irrigate the year's cotton crop.

A digression needs be made here in the narration. The survey showed that a length of some one hundred meters of the channel was out of kilter. In the forty odd years since it was first laid out, holdings had changed hands and with each change, the channel was adjusted to one or the other side. And so, little by little and scarcely noticeably, the channel ended up skewed by a full seventeen meters (fifty-five feet).

Now, if the channel was re-aligned properly, there were some farmers who stood to lose a ribbon of their land while others gained. There were moreover two farmers whose diesel tube wells sat square in the way of the correct alignment. Under normal circumstances, this would have spelled the end of the project in a flurry of accusations and arguments and perhaps even a trip or two to the district courts and the police station. But in 2007 nothing of the sort happened in 150 TDA.

Members of the Peasant and Workers Group got together; the matter was discussed in detail over a couple of days. The holdings through which the channel passed were measured out and adjustments were made so that the properties of farmers affected by the re-alignment were not altered. Then there was also the case of the two who had their tube wells athwart of the upcoming channel. They had spent large sums of money installing the equipment and it was only logical for them to demand some monetary compensation. Head were put together once again and the PWG from its own resources came up with Rs 20,000 for one and Rs 14,000 for the other farmer to relocate their machinery.

Both Iqbal and his colleague Qasim point out that they had not imagined things would proceed with so much amicability and in the spirit of communalism. Throughout the three months of negotiations there was never a raised voice. This is that unquantifiable benefit

of NGO intervention that sets up community organizations and brings together entire villages.

Now, the Irrigation Department estimates that water takes five minutes to flow down a length of about two hundred meters of unlined channel. But 150 TDA farmers knew that in reality it took twice that time. Similarly, it took an hour and a half to irrigate one acre of land. But with the lining, proper leveling of the channel and total preclusion of water loss to seepage, flow increased to three minutes for two hundred meters while irrigation time dropped to one hour per acre from the previous hour and a half. Now, even the farmer at the tail end got his share and he no longer needed to sell his water to others in order to pay for the diesel for his tube well.

While the cotton fared better than previous years, SAP-PK linked up Kissan Itihad Committee with Livestock and Dairy Board in Lahore. In order to boost the meat output, this government organization runs an excellent scheme: farmers are encouraged to buy a minimum of ten calves and rear them for three months over which time the Board pays each owner Rs 1400 for each animal as maintenance. At the end of this period the fattened calves are expected to be sold off for a profit. The cycle can then be repeated.

When the channel was completed, it irrigated an additional one hundred and fifty acres. Some of this came under fodder and the livestock scheme caught on in a big way in 150 TDA. But these were poor farmers and not all of them could spare cash enough to purchase ten young animals. Once again the community spirit came into play: families got together to form mini-collectives to reach the requisite number of ten animals. This practice is now widely prevalent in the village and every house has a yearling or two, or even three, tethered in the courtyard. The returns from the sales have been good.

Would this have been possible before the branch channel was brick-lined? Iqbal answers with an emphatic No. The cost of raising fodder by diesel-powered tube well being as exorbitant as it is, the scheme would have at best broken even and at worst been an outright loss.

The first cotton crop to be watered by the completed scheme has long been in, but the farmers are not yet counting that profit. They have done other interesting sums though. The unlined channel watered one acre in an hour and half while the new one does the same in one hour. The total irrigated acreage being one hundred and fifty, the time saved in each turn of watering is thus seventy-five hours (0.5 hours x 150 acres). Now, at two hundred rupees per hour, running the tube well for the number of saved hours would mean  $75 \times 200 = 15,000$ . That is then the saving per turn of watering. There being three turns per month, the saving comes to Rs 45,000 or over half a million rupees in a calendar year. In other words, the new channel will have redeemed its cost by May 2008.

Then the farmers of 150 TDA can sit back and start tallying their profits from the improved harvest made possible by better irrigation.