

More Is Not Enough

The NREGS is creating much-needed livelihoods and community assets, but rampant corruption has diluted its objectives. Increased awareness and strict monitoring is needed to make it effective



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BHUPINDER SINGH

Sebastian PT

THIRTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD TALAKESHWARI Devi, an illiterate resident of Dailly village in Bihar's Nalanda district, is unaware that her village, which comes under the Harnaut assembly constituency, is represented by none other than Bihar's Chief Minister Nitish Kumar.

But she sure is aware of the "rozgar yojana", or the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the United Progressive Alliance government's flagship social security measure that is aimed, in part, at stemming distress migration from villages.

For Devi's family of seven, which gets just about 2 kg of rice or wheat every day for sweating it out on a 'bigha' (about 0.3 acres) of land during the farming season, work under the NREGS during the off-season has come as a welcome relief from certain starvation.

But even that, this relief from hunger, comes at a price for Devi and others of her ilk. Rampant corruption in the administra-

tion of the scheme has meant that Devi, and other NREGS job-card holders, have to constantly make do with less than the prescribed minimum wages under the Central government scheme, of Rs 82 a day.

"My husband and I worked for about five days under the yojana, but the mukhiya (the village chief) did not pay us regularly. Even when he paid us, it was only around Rs 20 a day. So, we stopped going to work there," Devi, her husband Takur by her side, says matter-of-factly. The job cards that they show, interestingly, have no entries for the number of days that they have worked.

The story is the same a few kilometres away, in Kichni village. Nandan Bhim, his

wife and daughter are digging trenches for water conservation under the NREGS. The daily wages they get is again much below the prescribed minimum of Rs 82.

Around 120 km away, in Mannipur village in Vaishali district, 58-year-old Jainarayan Mahto wants to enrol for work under the scheme, but the mukhiya has marked him 'ineligible for work' on his job card for reasons best known to him.

Travel through Bihar's mostly backward villages, and the story gets repeated ad nauseam, be it in Dailly or Maidikala in Nalanda district or Mannipur in Vaishali Lok Sabha constituency, which is represented by Union Rural Development Minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh.

No Trickle Down

Villagers in Bihar are either clueless about their rights, spelt out clearly in the NREG Act of 2005, or are completely helpless to do anything about it. Hardly anyone knows, for instance, that the basic objective of the NREGS is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by guaranteeing 100 days of employment in a financial year to any rural

household whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual work.

They also are not aware that in case the state government fails to provide the said number of days of work, then they should be compensated by way of an unemployment allowance. Although job cards have been distributed to many villagers, many families have not been offered work under the scheme for over a year now.

In fact, since the Act empowers the panchayats to play a pivotal role in the selection and implementation of the works under the scheme, villagers complain that "corruption has also become decentralised." But they still feel more comfortable interacting with an 'elected mukhiya' who can be held accountable than a government official.

and fast between the two groups.

But there is little in terms of grassroots efficacy. The NREGS comes with its own set of safeguards and transparency guidelines. Muster-rolls are a must at NREGS job sites, labourers have to be given job cards, and wages should not be less than the prescribed minimum and so on—yet all these are flagrantly violated. "About 70% of the NREGS funds are siphoned off. This is done by faking muster-rolls and inflating the number of days worked," says CPI (ML) leader Dhirender Jha.

But the labourers, who badly need the jobs, are fearful of their mukhiyas. So, whether it is the site of a water tank in Afzalpur Debhati panchayat near Hajipur or the minor irrigation work near NH30A

The NREGS norm in Bihar is Rs 82 a day, but villagers like Takur and Talakeshwari Devi (far left) sometimes get just Rs 20; the rest is pocketed by the political-bureaucracy nexus. Union minister Raghuvansh Prasad says bank accounts will fix it, but when?

Though Bihar's case is particularly tragic, it may be noted that a draft performance audit of the scheme by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India found that, across states, the loopholes in the scheme have been exploited by all and sundry. But in Bihar's case, there is a difference as there is a 'competition of sorts' between the two political alignments in the state—the National Democratic Alliance government, led by Nitish Kumar in the state, and the Opposition Rashtriya Janata Dal, which is part of the UPA coalition at the Centre—to widen the scope of the scheme.

While Raghuvansh Prasad Singh of the RJD initially announced the implementation of the scheme in select backward districts of the country only, not to be left behind, Nitish Kumar quickly announced that the scheme would be extended to all the districts in the state with its own funds. It was only much later that Centre decided to extend the scheme to almost all districts. Allegations of mismanagement fly thick

at Kichni village in Harnaut, when quizzed, they would all say they are getting Rs 82 per day.

But after persistent probing, when the mukhiya is ear-shot away, they confess the mukhiya has retained all their job-cards with him. So, while the labourers would, in reality, be paid only Rs 60 per day of work, the mukhiya would enter Rs 82 on the muster-rolls, and most likely pocket the difference. It may be noted that mukhiya is the end-point of the political-bureaucratic corruption nexus.

That apart, while the actual work would be done, say, in six days, nothings stops from the work being shown as 24 days. Not just that, many mukhiyas are being investigated on charges of making fictitious job-cards to siphon off the money. In fact, in some cases, labourers are being made to believe that the balance amount of wage was being deposited in a bank account. It's a different thing that the accounts are yet to be opened.

In some cases, NREGS work is being done through machines, not manually, as stipulated in the Act. For instance, in a backward hamlet in Maidikala village, about 20 kms from Islampur town, the inhabitants complained that work was being carried out by machines. In short, job-card holders had little or no role in the effort.

In Bihar, corruption seems to be accepted as inevitable by many of the poor when they try to avail of government schemes. For instance, to get a grant under the Indira Aawaas Yojana, which was about Rs 25,000 for every family below the poverty line until recently, commission has to be paid to the *mukhiya*, villagers say. "The *mukhiya* has to pay off other officials as well. I got only Rs 18,000, and the rest went as commission," says 45-year-old Sauki Paswan in Islampur, on the outskirts of Nalanda district. Therefore, even for getting work (under NREGS), commission will be taken," he reasons.

There is also discrimination on the basis of caste or gender in the allocation of job cards, says Parameshwar Mahto in Manipur village. Many among the poorest do not get BPL cards, he alleges. "Besides, the panchayat gives no importance to our pleas," he laments.

Is The Scheme Dead?

Despite the rampant corruption, the NREGS has come as a godsend to a large number of poor families that have to battle hunger on a daily basis. For Harinarayan Paswan, 55, of Afzalpur Debgati panchayat near Hajipur town, the water tank work provides him with a regular source of income. Though the wages he gets is Rs 10-15 less than the minimum guaranteed wage, he doesn't complain. The work helps him take care of his eight children. Plus, he is also assured of work during the off-season. Otherwise, Paswan and many other unorganised labourers would have been dependent entirely on agriculture to stave off poverty.

Another plus point with the scheme is that, even in a backward state like Bihar, it is leading to the creation of community assets. Micro-irrigation works, drought proofing, water conservation and water harvesting, land development, flood control and so on, in their little ways, helping the lot of the poor villager.

Proper awareness and an institutional monitoring mechanism is the need of the hour. "Transfer of wages through the opening of bank accounts can solve the problem to a very large extent. States such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Jharkhand have already taken positive steps in this



Under the Indira Aawaas Yojana, BPL families were entitled to a grant of Rs 25,000. However, says Sauki Paswan of Islampur village in Bihar: "The *mukhiya* has to pay off other officials as well. I got only Rs 18,000, the rest went as commission"

direction through proper utilisation of post offices and the banking system," Raghuvansh Prasad Singh says.

He has launched a pilot project providing a biometric ATM machine in his constituency, but the project has not taken off due to a lack of awareness and coordination between the different agencies involved. "Biometric cash transactions can be an ideal solution, but there are many logistics problems that have to be tackled first," Singh says.

"For the success of the scheme, five things are crucial—awareness, people's participation, vibrant gram sabhas, transparency, strict monitoring and social auditing, and accountability," Singh says. "The District Collector should be held accountable, with 2% of monitoring done at the Secretariat level, 10% monitoring at the district level and 100% at the block level," he points out. However, this does not mean that the role of the panchayats have to be minimised, he stresses.

The NREGS has other positive spin-offs too. "Though there is corruption, the fact is that there is an increased job opportunity scenario due to NREGS. This has resulted

in a sizeable reduction in migration, especially in the areas from Muzaffarpur to Kishanganj," says Arun Kumar, who runs an NGO, Bhoomika. Besides, there has been a general increase in wages as a consequence of the NREGS, he points out. However, women's empowerment (as in the case of Kerala, where over 90% of NREGS workers are women) is far from being satisfactory. In fact, during our visit, we found not a single woman labourer in any of the job sites in Vaishali district.

The NREGS has started a quiet revolution in the hinterlands by providing fresh job opportunities to the poorest of the poor. While the flaws need to be rectified through better awareness and stricter monitoring, the positive is that the scheme has the potential to alleviate poverty, create community assets, stem migration and provide direct employment (at higher wages) to millions of villagers.

When Devi of Dailly village was told that the minimum wage was Rs 82 and not the Rs 20 she was given, she gasps, blurring, "With that kind of money, we can feed our children well and also take good care of them." Is anybody listening? ■