



NREGA: Where are the Panchayats?

Sadly, NREGA, the greatest democratic experiment undertaken to reduce rural poverty, has become the stick to beat the Panchayati Raj system – the other greatest experiment of democratic decentralisation. In fact, both could make each other powerful and effective if the implementation of NREGA had been styled in a genuinely democratic and decentralised manner. Although the Act itself asserts that panchayats would be the main implementing agencies and assigns a host of functions to panchayats and gram sabhas, no effective step was taken to see that panchayats are equipped to handle NREGS in the best possible way. To say the least, in almost all states, with the exception of Kerala, sarpanches and gram panchayat members – many of them still illiterate – were not even familiarised with the essential provisions of this highly complex legislation.

There is no disputing the fact that the rural employment scheme has raised the average earning of many poor villagers, helped women and Scheduled Castes and Tribes, created community assets and enhanced productivity across the nation. The success stories are abundant. Who can deny the credit that honestly goes to panchayats for this? But we should be more concerned with the basic issue whether all this has really empowered the local government institutions. Development and democracy are not mutually exclusive. The truth remains that greater the degree of democratisation in a country, the more empowered are the people at the grassroots and more successful and yielding the projects run for the poor and needy. Since this was not the aim of the designers

of the rural employment guarantee scheme, which is claimed to be 'of the people, by the people and for the people', the panchayats have been sidelined in the actual process of implementation. Or, where panchayats have been involved, it is for name's sake. What is worse, panchayats have no control over the whole process. The gram sabhas still remain sleeping lions. Thus, the ambitious Panchayati Raj project has been forced to play the second fiddle to the bureaucracy, which is running the show.

And yet, when it comes to fix the blame for failures, it is the panchayats that are singled out. We do admit that our panchayats are not towers of idealism. There are cases of corruption and fraud. Not all sarpanches are public-spirited. Certainly, part of the blame lies with the prevailing ethos. Panchayat representatives cannot be expected to remain immune from the growing culture of bribes, cuts and commissions. But the remedy lies in greater decentralisation and real empowerment of the people – not in undermining the role of grassroots democratic institutions or reducing them to puppets of the government machinery. To be loyal to truth, the NREGA regime has made the Collector Raj and BDO Raj more powerful and turned the already devalued PRIs into irrelevant institutions, who are there only for being blamed for non-performance. In such a scenario, what is the future of local democracy in India? It is high time that all stake holders in the Panchayati Raj system put their minds together and re-invent NREGA and other welfare schemes as a real component in the rebuilding of rural India through powerful and effective local governments.

ANDHRA PRADESH

AP tops in implementation of NREGS: Andhra Pradesh has topped the list of states in the implementation of NREGS. The conclusion emerged out of an independent study on the implementation of NREGS, conducted by the National Consortium of Civil Society Organisations. "The main finding of the study is that the programme is being implemented in the state in an effective manner by employing information technology tools and techniques and through a robust social audit.

All stages of the programme — from registration of workers to issue of job cards, preparation of work estimates and muster rolls and payment to workers — have been fully computerised. "This has ensured prompt payment to workers through an online system, thus

avoiding any leaks," the study, co-authored by Mihir Shah and Pramathesh Ambasta, says. "Since the computerised system is integrated end-to-end, any work registered is alive and its status visible and amenable to tracking. Delays at any stage could thus be identified and corrected immediately. The free availability of information on the website also facilitates public scrutiny, thus engendering greater transparency and better social audit," the study report emphasises.

BIHAR

Gram sabhas to approve diesel subsidy: Gram sabhas have been authorised to approve the subsidy of Rs 15 per litre on diesel to farmers. The subsidy will be available to farmers all over the state except for the flooded areas