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Manual Labour and Growth

In their response to my critique of their article on Direct Cash Transfers, Kapur, Mukhopadhyay and Subramanian (EPW, 22 November 2008; henceforth KMS), state "The thought that durable infrastructure can be built largely by manual labour would be amusing, if it were not irresponsible" (p 87). Statements such as these are sadly commonplace, sometimes even among proponents of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

Decades of work on programmes such as watershed development have credibly demonstrated the massive potential of earthen engineering that relies mainly on manual labour.

This labour, customarily described as unskilled, entails work of the finest meticulousness, science and creativity, of which there has been a long tradition in our country. Numerous studies have shown how watershed programmes, when well-conceived and implemented in a people-centred manner, have transformed rural livelihoods and generated internal rates of return comparable to any other development initiative.

My argument is that the true potential of NREGA (as enunciated in its own official guidelines) would be best realised if it were to be seen as making a decisive break with India's long history of relief programmes, set in the tradition of state charity. For this to happen, however, requires major reforms in NREGA implementation. Such reforms, reflecting the interests of India's poorest people, are required in all public sector programmes for rural development in India.

In their response, KMS reiterate their cynicism about the very possibility of such reforms. This is in line with mainstream political thinking in India, which shows little engagement with the nitty-gritty of this vitally important issue concerning the lives of India's most disadvantaged people, who cannot possibly rely on the private sector (whether corporate or NGO) for their survival.

The Right which favours reforms is only concerned about the corporate sector. And the Left refuses to subject the public sector to urgently required accountability.

This has meant that the rural poor are forced to cope with the same corrupt and insensitive bureaucracy that has ruled their lives since independence. Let me reiterate what I say in my critique of KMS: "We certainly see Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIS) as critical to the success of programmes like the NREGS, even to the future of Indian democracy itself" (EPW, 23 August 2008, p 78). But romantic appeals to PRIS as the answer to all ills without providing them requisite resources, human and financial, will only end up becoming a fig-leaf for the abdication by the state of its responsibility towards its poorest constituents.

Mihir Shah
BAGLI, DEWAS DISTRICT, MADHYA PRADESH

Improving Air Quality in Asia's Cities

Last month the Better Air Quality in Asia (BAQ) biennial conference was held in Bangkok. It highlighted one of the most pressing issues for the mega cities of Asia – the need to improve air quality while urbanisation increases apace and along with it energy consumption and vehicle growth. Air quality in Asia is certainly improving but is still far above World Health Organisation limits. Particulate matter (dust) is the main pollutant of concern while ozone is increasingly becoming a problem.

While the BAQ conference was taking place, one particular Asian capital faced some very severe air pollution problems – Delhi with its winter "fog", which came early this year. One of the first things that strikes visitors to India is the low-lying soup that hangs over its capital, as the early morning moisture mingles with fumes and dust to form a cloud that lasts all day. As a result, Delhi has been ranked as one of the worst polluted cities by the World Bank.

This fog often delays flights at the Indira Gandhi International Airport because of the poor visibility, which at the peak of winter falls to just 50 metres. Hospitals are also recording an increase in patients with respiratory problems, with doctors prescribing oxygen nebulisers for young

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children suffering “bad air” asthma attacks. We even find professional Delhites leaving the city to spare their children from pollution-related illnesses.

India’s fast expanding economy and growing prosperity have led to an increase in the number of cars that clog Delhi’s roads. Delhi is now estimated to have 5.5 million cars, an increase of over 57% in eight years. This steep rise in car use has rolled back the gains achieved by introducing compressed natural gas (CNG) vehicles, particularly among buses and motorised rickshaws. The problem also faces cities like Kolkata and Dhaka, where similar gains from CNG have been made, only to be negated by the huge growth in car ownership.

The Central Pollution Control Board of Delhi has suggested two explanations for what it calls “the smoke phenomenon”. While it maintains that levels of sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide have fallen

considerably over the past eight years (though the latter is still above the prescribed level), it argues that adverse meteorological conditions mean pollution is not dispersed and collects at lower levels. Secondly it suggests that a rise in particulate matter has been registered, put down largely to construction work for the Commonwealth Games and Delhi Metro.

We in London have faced similar problems. It is over half a century since the Clean Air Act of 1956 cleared London skies of smog. Faced with major air pollution – and in particular, the Great Smog of 1952, which killed some 4,000 people in London – the government of the day applied mandatory Smokeless Zones to British cities. Within just three years, the use of coal disappeared from our larger cities and Londoners breathed more easily. So effective legislation can make a big difference.

Asian cities have two central challenges to be considered. First, how can cities realise their economic and social development goals while at the same time minimising

the use of fossil fuels, directly associated with air pollution? And if fossil fuels are used in the future, how can their combustion be carried out in the most clean and efficient manner? Moreover, we need the right mix of technology and demand management in reducing air pollution.

Advances have been made in technologies like fuel economy, energy efficiency and the use of cleaner (low sulphur) fuels in the last 20 years, which allow for considerable reductions in air pollution levels. But there is a danger that reductions achieved through these cleaner technologies will be offset by the rapid growth in the number of emission sources, as we have already noted is the case in some south Asian cities. Cleaner technologies will need to be combined with non-technological, demand-management approaches of which the most obvious is investment in public transport.

Murad Qureshi A M

Deputy Chair of Environment Committee
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LONDON

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EPW welcomes original research papers in any of the social sciences.

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