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## The real radicalism of NREGA

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*The brutal murder of young Jharkhand activist Lalit Mehta exposes the violent opposition of vested interests deeply threatened by the radical provisions of NREGA.*

Lalit Kumar Mehta, full-time activist of Vikas Sahyog Kendra (VSK), was brutally murdered on the 14th of May 2008, on his way home through the Kandra forest. He was 36. Lalit leaves behind his 28-year-old Adivasi wife and their two babies, aged one and three.

The VSK is an Adivasi-led organisation whose activists have worked over the last 15 years in the Palamu district of Jharkhand for secure rights over natural resources and sustainable livelihoods. Palamu typifies the most backward Adivasi hinterlands of India, whose incredible wealth of natural resources is matched only by the deep distress of its people. Drought, poverty and hunger stalk a land where they can easily be overcome. This requires a people-centred, nature-nourishing approach to development, fine-tuned to the needs of each location. For the VSK, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) holds out precisely such a promise.

Young VSK activists like Lalit have been working hard to make NREGA realise its potential. At the time of his murder, Lalit was busy organising social audits of NREGA works. He was murdered just the day before a major audit was scheduled to take place. A CBI enquiry into the death, bringing his assailants to justice and compensation for Lalit's family are the least the government must do to compensate for this incalculable loss. Meanwhile, it would be instructive to try and understand why NREGA work can turn out to be so fraught with danger. The answer lies in the real radicalism of NREGA.

Mainstream discussions on the employment guarantee have been largely dismissive, left, right and centre. The political right views it as yet another meaningless palliative, a relief programme wasting its time on agriculture and rural development, while unnecessarily burdening the fiscal deficit. For it, the answer lies in getting people out of rural areas by focussing on urbanisation and industrialisation. Completely forgetting that these remedies have failed, despite having been tried for over 50 years now. Others, who occupy the centre of the debate, consider it important to address rural distress, especially in view of growing farmers' suicides but suggest that the much more effective way would be direct cash transfers. They argue that the NREGA needlessly complicates mechanisms of delivery. How much simpler it would be to just hand out doles.

As Lalit's tragic death has shown, these observers completely miss the wood for the trees, ignoring the much larger challenge NREGA poses to governance structures in India's hinterlands. For it is a programme based on a constitutional right to demand work, not dependent on the whimsical largesse of the state. At the extreme left of the political spectrum, there are those who suggest that the NREGA is one big conspiracy, a pain-killer so to speak, that seeks only to legitimise the dominant market-based policies of our time. What they fail to see is that the struggle to deepen democracy at the grass-roots must always imaginatively take advantage of spaces opened up by the state, whatever may or may not have been the compulsions or motivation for them to be created in the first place.

Lalit and his work, now much more eloquently before us, help shake off each of these anti-NREGA misconceptions. By revealing the heinous opposition of threatened vested interests, his ultimate sacrifice teaches us a great deal about the massive transformatory potential inherent in the Act. For NREGA programmes visualise a decisive break with the past. Ever since independence, rural development has largely been the monopoly of local contractors, who have emerged as major agents of exploitation of the rural poor, especially women. Almost every aspect of these programmes, including the schedule of rates that is used to measure and value work done, has been tailor-made for local contractors. These people invariably tend to be local power brokers. They implement programmes in a top-down manner, run roughshod over basic human rights, pay workers a pittance and use labour-displacing machinery.

NREGA is poised to change all that. It places a ban on contractors and their machines. It mandates payment of statutory minimum wages and provides various legal entitlements to workers. It visualises the involvement of local people in every decision — whether it be the selection of works and work-sites, the implementation of projects or their social audit. All of this is obviously incompatible with programmes where the main goal was, in effect, the maximisation of profits of the contractor. But even after the enactment of NREGA, things have been slow to change at the grass-roots. Displaying remarkable ingenuity, the old order is already finding ways to sidestep the radical provisions of the Act. Contractors deploy machines with impunity, even as forged muster rolls are filled up with fictitious names and thumb-marks of workers, to show as if the work was done by labour. This is especially the case in States like Jharkhand, which still do not have elected Gram Panchayats.

It is in this context that activists like Lalit become a major threat for local vested interests, all part of the long chain of recipients of sleaze-money siphoned out of NREGA. Jean Dreze, one of the architects of NREGA, who was with him just hours before he died, says that Lalit's work "revealed high levels of corruption involving people in high places." It is evident that these people were sufficiently threatened to feel compelled to silence Lalit's voice. Even as we struggle to come to terms with the immediate loss of a young life full of adventure and exciting possibilities, this is also a moment of deep reflection for all those who continue to believe in the huge change NREGA can bring to rural India.

The question Lalit's death should pose to us is: have we done enough to make it possible for NREGA to realise its enormous potential? Or will the forces of change represented by people like Lalit continue to hopelessly battle the powers-that-be who want business-as-usual in India's rural hinterlands, especially our Adivasi forest areas?

The problem NREGA faces can be stated in very simple terms. Its ostensible purpose is to overthrow the old contractor-raj but it has done little to offer an adequate replacement. Gram Panchayats have been designated the chief implementing agency but they have not been provided with the support structure required to execute the programme. A new bottom-up, people-centred approach to planning of works and social audit is spoken of but the social mobilisers and technical personnel required to make this a reality have not been supplied. The biggest employment programme ever undertaken in human history faces a huge crunch of quality human resources. This calls for a massive national campaign for capacity building of grass-roots workers. The Schedules of Rates remain the same that the contractor-raj used. They underpay labour, especially in earthen watershed works, making a mockery of statutory minimum wages, a legal entitlement under NREGA. They discriminate against women by underpaying or not even recognising specific work done by them.

### Development initiative

The sooner the government realises the anachronism of "new wine in old bottles" that the NREGA has become, the better. This is not an old-style famine relief kind of welfare programme. This is a development initiative, chipping in with crucial public investments for creation of durable assets, which can provide the much-needed impetus to private investment in the most backward regions of India. The thrust is on construction of earthen dams, bunds and ponds as part of a watershed development strategy. On this foundation of water security, can be built a sustainable village development plan that includes a rejuvenated agriculture and allied rural livelihoods. For such a programme to be successful needs a new professional support structure. This structure must be mainstreamed within the government system.

Wherever possible, it can also be provided by civil society. Lalit Mehta's organisation Vikas Sahyog Kendra is part of a National Consortium of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) initiated in 2007. These CSOs, working across 34 districts in 8 States of India, have committed themselves to supporting gram panchayats (GPs) to implement NREGA. They have been formally invited by GPs to help them plan, implement and social audit NREGA work. Consortium partners have worked to create awareness among people about the Act and its provisions, built a dialogue with GP leadership, filled lacunae in the planning process and ensured greater participation of rural people in the functioning of the employment guarantee. Of course, in Jharkhand the absence of GPs is itself the real weakness. But a clear mandate from the government supporting CSOs working on NREGA would provide the much-needed protection to thousands of unsung activists like Lalit Mehta, who in their undiminished optimism about India's future, continue to risk their lives to make initiatives like NREGA a success.

*(The writer is co-founder, National Consortium of Civil Society Organisations supporting Gram Panchayats in planning, implementation and social audit of NREGA works.)*