

THE HINDU

Leader Page Article

NREGA: Andhra Pradesh shows the way

8-Sep-2008

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The success of NREGA social audits in Andhra Pradesh covering 12 million people is a brilliant example of civil society action enriching mainstream politics.

A key element that unexpectedly propelled the United Progressive Alliance to power was the deep distress in India's countryside. The passage of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is an important part of the UPA fulfilling mandate-2004. But the report card on NREGA implementation has generally been poor. While many States report high expenditure, independent enquiries reveal massive leakages in money reaching the poor. Andhra Pradesh affords an extraordinary counter-example bucking this trend. What has happened in the State over the last two years is unparalleled in the history of independent India but these soul-stirring events have received surprisingly little attention.

Critical in what Andhra Pradesh has achieved is the extraordinary support of top echelons of the political and bureaucratic leadership. Cynics say that the leadership has found greener pastures to graze, leaving NREGA alone. Quite irrespective of the merits of such skepticism, it cannot be denied that this thrust towards transparency and accountability has the potential to transform rural governance not just in Andhra Pradesh but throughout India. And that is of central concern to millions of poor people who voted the UPA to power in 2004.

Political support has, of course, been a necessary but by no means sufficient condition. Two other novel features have turned the tide. One, the use of Information Technology (IT) and the other, the role of civil society. All stages of NREGA work, from registration of workers to issue of job cards, preparation of work estimates, muster rolls and payments to workers have been computerised. With strong administrative backing and robust social audit, this IT system frees information from the shackles of power and privileged access.

Take for instance, the payment of wages. A major complaint from all over India is of delays and corruption in payment of fair wages under NREGA. By contrast, labour payments in Andhra Pradesh are increasingly being made within a week of completion of the previous week's work. How does this happen? By the last (sixth) day in a week's work, the measurement sheets and muster rolls of the entire week are closed and reach the mandal (sub-block) computer centre. The next day, the muster data are fed into the computer. On day eight, the pay order is generated by the computer and the cheques are prepared. By day ten, these cheques are deposited into the post office accounts of workers. The next day cash is conveyed to the post office so that on days 12 and 13,

workers are able to access their wages from their accounts. All payments to labour are made only through these accounts; there are no payments in cash.

Since the computer system is tightly integrated end-to-end, any work registered in the system is alive, status-visible and amenable to tracking. Delays at any stage can thus be immediately identified and corrected. The system keeps track of the work from the day the work-ID is generated and starts flagging delays in the payment cycle as soon as they occur. Because the network secures all levels from the ground up to the State headquarters and data are transparently and immediately available on the website, a delay at any stage is instantly noticed by the monitoring system. The free availability of this information on the website also facilitates public scrutiny, thus engendering greater transparency and better social audit.

Of course, we must recognise that the IT system is a support. Only the presence of a vigilant public can make it count. And it is here that Andhra Pradesh provides us a remarkable example of civil society action enriching mainstream politics. Social activists in India have historically played a watchdog role, raising questions reflecting the concerns of the most vulnerable sections. This has generally brought them into conflict with state agencies. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) led by Aruna Roy, one of the architects of NREGA, introduced the concept of social audit into development practice nearly two decades ago. But even in Rajasthan, where MKSS started its work, mainstreaming social audits has remained a distant dream. There has been violent resistance from the vested interests threatened with exposure and state support has been uncertain at best.

New high

By contrast, in Andhra Pradesh, instead of mutual ambivalence or hostility, the MKSS and the government are supporting each other to overcome the threshold of systemic defiance to such a radical initiative for transparency and accountability. An MKSS activist is working full-time within the government as Consultant and Specialist, NREGA social audit. Remarkably, this has not required the MKSS to dilute its position. Rather, in many ways, it has helped carry the process to a new high. The credit for this must, of course, go to the State government that has set up a separate unit exclusively for social audit, which enjoys great freedom of action. The work of this remarkable unit of dedicated people has culminated in the truly historic rules recently passed by the Andhra Pradesh Cabinet that will go a long way in institutionalising social audit. These rules draw upon experience in the State over the last two years.

The social audit process in Andhra Pradesh begins with filing of applications for NREGA records under the Right to Information Act by district resource persons (DRPs) designated by the government. This is done at least a fortnight before the social audit commences. The rules passed by the Andhra Pradesh Cabinet stipulate that “concerned officials shall provide the information requested for without fail within seven days of the receipt of the application.” In every village, DRPs also identify a few energetic literate youth who usually belong to the families of NREGA workers themselves. After being

trained in social audit processes, these youth form teams, which go from door-to-door authenticating muster rolls, check out worksites, record written statements of workers and conduct a series of meetings in each village.

The social audit process culminates in a massive public meeting at the mandal headquarters attended by people from every village, their elected representatives, the media, the NREGA functionaries concerned, and senior government officers. At this meeting, village-wise social audit findings are read out, workers testify and the officials concerned respond to the issues raised by giving an explanation about their actions under complaint. Officials are also required to specify the nature of remedial action they will take in what time period. Senior officials affix responsibility and a number of corrective or disciplinary actions are taken during the meeting itself. Social audit rules specify that an “action taken report shall be filed by the Program Officer within a month of the social audit being conducted and the same shall be communicated to the Gram Sabha.” In addition, there is a rigorous follow-up where social audit teams go back to their villages every 15 days after the mandal public meeting to ensure that the decisions taken are actually enforced.

One full round of this process has now been completed in over 35,000 habitations. This is nearly half of rural Andhra Pradesh. Around 30,000 trained village youth are conducting this social audit that has already covered more than 12 million people. Nearly Rs.1.25 crore of misappropriated funds have been recovered. On many occasions, errant officials have “voluntarily” returned money to workers at the mandal public meeting itself. The palpable impact on rural governance of such a spectacle, which invariably continues uninterrupted for 10-12 hours, is easy to imagine. Action has been initiated against thousands of officials and a number of criminal cases have been instituted. Forty lakh NREGA records have been publicly scrutinised under the RTI. Independent studies reveal that awareness about the detailed provisions of NREGA has risen dramatically among workers.

Despite these achievements, several weaknesses remain. The most important have to do with the quality of assets created. The government has not paid adequate attention to strengthening the process of people’s planning and implementation of works. The immense potential of NREGA for transforming rural livelihoods thus remains completely unrealised. Social audit is, after all, mainly a post-facto exercise. More important is what is done prior to works being started. It must also be said that even social audit so far remains a process mainly driven top-down by the government. It is not clear why civil society groups within Andhra Pradesh have not come forth to take advantage of the amazing opportunities opened up by a supportive State government. After all, this is what has been missing in States such as Jharkhand and Rajasthan, leading to violent attacks on NREGA activists.

The new rules approved by the Andhra Pradesh Cabinet promise full support to “any independent initiative of wage seekers to carry out additional social audits.” This is a historic step in the direction of institutionalising social audit that civil society must take forward. Even more mystifying is the unwillingness or inability of the Congress party to

showcase its great work in Andhra Pradesh and push other States to move in this direction.

(The writers are co-founders of the National Consortium of Civil Society Organisations on NREGA.)