

NREGA'S Mission Drift? Rigmarole of works on individual Land

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Abstract: The statutory guarantee of an open ended employment for the villagers and the comprehensive mandate and methodology all make the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) (hereafter only NREGA) sui generis. Notwithstanding the avowed objective of providing at least 100 days of work on demand, if the guarantee clause is accepted as the end-in-itself it is likely to be self-defeating truism. Mere mandays are likely to have trifling little influence on employment generation. Unless NREGA leads the Indian rural economy to labour intensive growth path through creation of durable and sustainable assets, the very programme will face overload of demands and will encounter constraints of unwarranted nature and scale. The ultimate success of NREGA is likely to hinge on the possible self-limiting nature of demand for works. While the policy has been harping on creation of durable assets, expanding the quantum of permissible works and the governing norms are affording project works on individual land of more and more groups like small and marginal farmers, the Gram Panchayats are preferring project works on individual land (Category IV in MIS database) – not less than 60-70 percent of total annual works at least in Bengal. Such a trend cannot evade few critical question like; what are the underlying motive for such inclination; what are the types of such projects being implemented; how are the beneficiaries selected; whether and what 'support services' are being provided; what are the survival rates (as in plantation) and what are the economic impacts on the livelihood of the beneficiaries concerned.

Though the debate over relative advantages of public (community) assets and private (individual level) assets remain inconclusive, it is unequivocal that public assets benefit more people, cover broader swath, serve larger social purposes and offer higher investment return. Private assets, on the other, are relatively well nurtured, maintained and contribute more to sustainable livelihood. However, the gut issue is how far individual level assets should receive eminence over public assets. Grounding on the secondary as well as primary data and information, this paper explores the nature, dimensions and outcome of NREGA works on individual land - otherwise known as IBS (individual benefit scheme) - in the select Gram Panchayats of Bengal and delves into their transient nature, political prevarication and ambivalent impact on livelihood option.

Introduction

The statutory guarantee of an open ended employment for the villagers and the comprehensive mandate and methodology all make the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) (hereafter *only* NREGA) *sui generis* or fundamentally contrasting to all erstwhile rural development strategies and interventions. Potentially and pragmatically, NREGA opens up poignant possibilities in addressing and alleviating the otherwise indomitable rural poverty in all inclusive sense.

One of the core objectives of NREGA is to provide not less than 100 days of unskilled manual work as a guaranteed employment in rural areas as per demand, resulting in creation of productive assets of prescribed quality and durability. Thus, together with the rolling out sufficient number of works, the policy emphasis has always been on creation of productive, durable and sustainable assets so that livelihood security can be entrenched. And the thrust of NREGA projects has to be on planning and implementation of such works that have potentiality to augment livelihood avenues across rural India.

NREGA Operational Guidelines prescribe a long list of works that are permissible for meeting the demand of works. Indicatively, almost all such permissible works~ except their renovation or maintenance~ require lands. All such works can be undertaken on two categories of land; i) common or community held land leading to community assets and ii) land owned by individual/rural people that would result in accruing asset at personal level.¹

The Expansive Ambit

Right from commencement, NREGA has allowed works on private land owned by select social groups. For a while the permissible works could be on land or homestead owned by households of a) Scheduled Castes (SC), b) Scheduled Tribes (ST), c) nomadic tribes, d) de-notified tribes, e) other families below the poverty line, f) women-headed households, g) physically handicapped headed households, h) beneficiaries of land reforms, i) the beneficiaries under the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY), j) and beneficiaries under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (2 of 2007). However, NREGA, since July 24, 2009, authorizes works on land including homestead owned by households of small or marginal farmers, though only after exhausting the eligible beneficiaries of the earlier categories.² The logic is somewhat reasonable. The quantum of public land is getting scarcer and the move is expected to inflate the net. Indeed, the scarcity of land has been one important reason that is acting as the stumbling barrier for opening up enough works in proportion to the public requirement/demand.³ However, the amendment (paragraph 1B of amended

¹ As per the MGNREGA Operational Guidelines 2013, assets created on common/public land are *public assets*. And assets created on land or homestead owned by individual households (as per Para 4(1) of Schedule I) are *individual assets*.

² The inclusion of works on land of small or marginal farmers has generated debate and dithering. See Shah Mihir, 2009, 'Multiplier Accelerator Synergy in NREGA', *The Hindu*, April 30 for argument in favour and Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey, 2009, 'Dalits, the Poor and the NREGA'. *The Hindu*, August 28 for argument against.

³ Mandal, Amal, 2012. "Grassroots Governance: Gram Sabha in West Bengal" Jaipur; Rawat Publication.

Schedule ⁴) incorporating the category of small or marginal farmers has ample implications, mainly negative.

For the initial years, most of the NREGA works were carried out on common land i.e. water conservation and water harvesting; drought proofing (including afforestation & plantation); irrigation canals including minor irrigation works; renovation of traditional water bodies including desilting of tanks; land development; flood control and protection works including drainage in water logged areas; and rural connectivity to provide all weather access. Recently, there is unequivocal increase of the extent of works on individual land in many states, as in West Bengal, and such a trend throws up many avoidable traps and plunge.

While the policy has been harping on creation of durable assets, expanding the quantum of permissible works and the governing norms are affording project works on individual land of more and more groups like small and marginal farmers, the Gram Panchayats (GP) are preferring project works on individual land (Category IV in MIS database) – not less than 60-70 percent of total annual works at least in West Bengal.

Critical Questions and the Concept

Such a trend cannot evade few critical questions like; what are the underlying motive (compulsion!) for such inclination; what are the types of such projects being implemented; how are the beneficiaries selected; whether and what ‘support services’ are being provided; what are the survival rates (as in plantation) and what are the economic impacts on the livelihood of the beneficiaries concerned.

While the scale-up or pressure to expand outreach is leading to a drift ⁵ from the core mission of microfinance institutions in providing banking services to micro-enterprises and low-income families, almost similar ‘mission drift’ for NREGA is perceptible at least in West Bengal (elsewhere also) when the demand driven nature and thrust on durable asset creation is getting afflicted by arbitrary selection of workers, monetary corruption and temporary or non-viable assets.

This paper finds that the desperation of outreach and fund utilisation is leading to a situation where works on individual land (we regard it individual benefit scheme or IBS for short) are getting pointed prominence and the very selection of beneficiary and types of asset are being vitiated by perversion, politicization and pecuniary consideration. Unless such a slide is arrested, NREGA may end up as yet another beneficiary oriented programme crippled by conventional constraints and caricature.

Many works can be or are being undertaken on private/individual land, for helping one individual beneficiary such as land development, draught proofing and IAY. But those are fundamentally different from IBS. Under land development scheme, for instance, leveling or cleaning

⁴ MGNREGA Operational Guidelines,2013. Government of West Bengal, Panchayat & Rural Development Department, *Implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 in West Bengal During the Year 2008-09*. Report submitted to the State Legislative Assembly, p 28

⁵ Copestake, J, 2007, ‘Mainstreaming Microfinance: Social Performance Management or Mission Drift?’ *World Development*, Vol. 35(10), pp.1721–1738.

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(of sand due to flood) is done on land owned by individual owner. Here the owner gets the land ready for production purpose and that is not by own cost but with the help of NREGA fund. Such works create asset and bestow benefits to the land owner. However, such works differ from IBS and has lesser scope for corruption and politicization. Though the owner reaps the benefits of prepared land, the labourers to be engaged and paid will be from external sources. As the labourers are from other sources, land owners do not, generally, try to persuade GP exclusively for pecuniary benefits. Only in rare cases, the land owners try to manipulate the programme for pocketing monetary benefits and politicians seldom try to reap political gains by sponsoring the candidature of the owner.

House for the dweller under IAY is another programme that has been converged with NREGA and GPs are offering NREGA fund for this type of scheme. Under IAY the beneficiaries are getting about Rs 70000/- for constructing own house. Now the conviction is that this amount is not enough for one durable and complete house. Thus, Rs 15660/- is being offered from NREGA kitty towards wage component of the house. The amount is paid only in tranches and the offer is limited to recipient only from specified cut-off date. Unlike IBS, the fund for material component comes from other programme and only the wage bill qualifies for payment from NREGA.

IBS projects, for this paper, are those which are executed on the individual land and where both material components and labour wage payment go to the individual beneficiaries. The work is on the land (including homestead) of the beneficiary where the implementing agencies supply the scheme benefits like sampling/ingredients and other necessary apparatus (like fencing, fertilizer) procured from the supplier with predetermined rates (through tendering). In West Bengal IBS includes such works like plantation of papaya, betel nut, guava, lemon, banana sampling, vermi compost pit etc. Most schemes have preordained or model estimates for both labour and material components and the estimates (more so the material cost) are adhered to by the implementing agencies.

Advent & Entrenchment of Works on Private Land

When one glances at the recent aggregate data of NREGA works, the overwhelming burst of IBS projects comes as one striking and poignant development. For instance, among the total ongoing works in West Bengal, only 32% works happened to be on IBS during 2018-19. But the corresponding share jumped to 60% of total works in both 2019-20 and 2020-21 (till July 2016). In Cooch Behar district similarly, the proportion soared from mere 9% in 2018-19 to as high as 82% in both 2019-20 and 2020-21. Still more surprisingly, the share of category IV works leaped from nowhere in 2018-19 to 63% in Salbari II GP and well over 88% in Pardubi GP during 2015-17 (Table I)

Table 1
Progress of IBS Projects in West Bengal (in No.)

Year	IBS Projects		Total Works	
	Completed	In Progress	Completed	In Progress
West Bengal				
2018-19	29455	214617	183000	638769
2019-20	129905	786808	314070	1311664
2020-21	106933	694288	203238	1164630
Cooch Behar District				
2018-19	182	1384	3367	13978

2019-20	8219	71591	14442	86907
2020-21	2758	69479	3967	84757
Salbari II GP				
2018-19	0	0	30	79
2019-20	0	237	43	369
2020-21	0	237	0	369
Pardubi GP				
2018-19	0	0	53	101
2019-20	0	1297	84	1426
2020-21	165	1150	173	1333

In progress works include also suspended ones. 2020-21 figures up to July 2016

Seen from another angle, let us consider the works being undertaken by select GPs and let the exposition be confined to only two sample GPs in district Cooch Behar~ though it should be emphasized that the phenomenon noted below is very common across most GPs in West Bengal.

In 2018-19, Salbari II GP (Tufanganj Block II) took up rural connectivity as the single largest programme- 54% of total works.⁶ Next significant was draught proofing (10%), land development (15%), flood control (13%) and sanitation (4%). The entire focus took a toss in the next year when 63% of total works were singularly on category IV, 18% on land development, 7% on rural connectivity and 5% on draught proofing. The official data, however, show no perceptible changes in 2020-21, perhaps indicating that new important projects were yet to be conceived or accomplished.

Pardubi GP (Mathabhangha Block II) put emphasis on rural connectivity (30%), land development (5%), flood control (7%) and other works (50%) during 2018-19. But next year about 90% works were singularly on individual lands and the next important was on draught proofing accounting for just 6% of total works. In 2020-21, the similar trend continued~ category IV accounted for 86% and draught proofing just 11% of total works.

Obviously, such inordinately high share of works on individual land and eclipse of other types is one recent phenomenon and this certainly demands closer scrutiny, particularly the nature of works/benefits, reasons accounting for the impetus and impact of such change of spotlight.

Given the phenomenal preponderance, it is instructive to peek at what is the nature of works on individual land. During 2019-20, Pardubi GP took up 3 types of works; vermi compost pit (202 beneficiary), papaya plantation (1128 beneficiary) and IAY house (4 beneficiary). In the subsequent year, the GP favoured guava and lemon plantation (4199 beneficiary), beetle nut orchard (2992

⁶ And this was the usual case till recently: half of total expenditure in Bihar was expended on rural connectivity alone (Dutta Puja, Murgai Rinku, Ravallion Martin, Dominique van de Walle, 2014, *Right To Work? Assessing India's Employment Guarantee Scheme in Bihar*, Washington: The World Bank).

As per 'dole-hole' critique, the very programme is mere wastage of scarce public resources as most of the projects are not more than playing with mud, construction of earthen road and digging up wells/ditches and their productive value is redundant or futile.

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beneficiary), bay leaf plant (550 beneficiary) and banana plantation (320 beneficiary) (Table 2). However, the GP undertook beetle nut plantation also at community land; in one colony and community centre. Moreover, Zilla Parishad also took up roadside plantation during 2020-21.

Table 2
Nature and Progress of IBS Projects in Select Gram Panchayats

Works*	2019-20				2020-21			
	Pardubi GP		Salbari GP		Pardubi GP		Salbari GP	
	Work No	Beneficiary No	Work No	Beneficiary No	Work No	Beneficiary No	Work No	Beneficiary No
Beetle Nut					40	2992		
Vermi	18	202	142	422			142	322
Papaya	1128	1128			3	241		
Guava+ Lemon					57	4199		
Banana			5	50	18	320		
Bay Leaf					18	550		
Litchi			66	390			66	660
IAY house	4	4	17	17				
Banana+ Lemon			73	730			65	810

*Except IAY all others are either plantation/orchard or raising tissue culture of plants. For vermi it is the construction of compost pit.

Work no includes total number of works as per Annual Action Plan. One work/FTO usually includes many beneficiaries (somewhere 200 even).

Larger number of beneficiaries (730) in Salbari II GP during 2019-20 happened to be from raising tissue culture of banana and lemon plants. Then came vermi (422) and litchi plantation (390). Interestingly and unlike Pradubi, Salbari II GP continued to favour the same plantation projects, though with varying number of beneficiaries.

The trend over the years reveals: i) one singular plantation was the major project in each year, ii) the plantation favoured in a year was somewhat discarded next year (for whatever reason) and iii) the total number of beneficiaries trends to be shooting up since 2019-20.

IBS and Political Patronage

One village level survey has been undertaken in select Gram Panchayats in West Bengal.⁷ Before delving into the nitty-gritty of IBS project few socio-economic features of the respondents may briefly be worth mentioning.

⁷ As part of one on-going research project sponsored by Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi

20% respondents belonged to below 30 and 38% below 40 years- thus majority was in younger age group. Majority hailed from SC (76%) and 12 % from Muslim community. Such overwhelming presence of SC does not exclusively attest programme coverage to the lower social rung. In fact the district as well as GPs do have huge (over 56%) of SC population. Regarding occupation, one-half was engaged in cultivation, 36% in laboring –both agriculture and others- and 4% each was involved in business and self employment venture.

What is more surprising, particularly in a politically vibrant state like West Bengal, is the fact that the awareness level of respondents was abysmally low. Most- particularly males- did not have inkling about their right to have employment for at least 100 day on demand, right to receive wage within 15 days of completion of work. They reportedly received the information about the work form the Supervisor (Mate) and party leaders. Such a low level of awareness tends to buttress the regressing or suppressing agency role of Panchayats and the strangulating grip of party leaders over the statutory right of the rural people.

While none of the recipients individually and formally demanded work, majority received works in the form of IBS projects. Horticultural projects like lemon, beetle nut, guava plantation were made available to many respondents. Altogether, 10% received only single IBS project. Put reversely, majority could get hold of two or more projects. However, the predominance of IBS varied across sample GPs.

As noted earlier, no respondents personally applied or demanded works or submitted work application beforehand and thereafter received the work. Instead, they were offered the works and then they submitted the application. The ward level GP member/party leader/Supervisor informed them about the impending works and asked them to furnish application accordingly. Why were they shortlisted? Cross tabulation of responses reveals that all those receiving works were either supporters/sympathizers of the ward level GP member- few were even relatives, either near or distant. However, political affinity with the GP members is not necessarily coterminous with the ruling party at the GP. In some GPs, there were few wards where the ruling party (at GP) members could not win panchayat elections 2013. It merits mention that in those wards held by GP level non-ruling party members (mainly BJP, CPM), the quantum of works is certainly less than other wards, what may tersely be regarded as ‘political rationing’.

Thus, the political proximity with the GP members/ruling party played decisive role in getting hold of NREGA works, especially IBS projects. The availability of works is contingent upon the political colour or leaning and not exclusively on the economic or occupational nature of the respondents, one clear debasement of the demand driven paradigm. This is why many received more than one IBS project, ignoring in the process the claim of many others.

The common thread is that there is a close group of people/family who are politically aligned with the elected member/ruling party. And they come as the first choice in distribution of patronage.

And such a phenomenon is not quite revealing~ other survey results testify the trend,⁸ going on since the advent of the 'political panchayats'!

The Nitty-gritty of the Impetus

Comprising not less than 80 percent of total man-days at GP level across West Bengal during 2019-20, IBS related works have seen unprecedented surge in the state. One accounting factor for such huge impetus is that such works are relatively convenient for the GPs and politically rewarding for the village level politicians.

In normal cases GPs prefer IBS related works. And this is convenient for many reasons. These require lesser extent of paper works (except wage payment documents), accrue more man-days and afford utilization of funds rather easily. And perhaps more importantly, these works conform to the stipulation that at least 60 percent of total works should be agriculture related (all IBS works befall under agriculture category).

GPs select in its general meeting~ held at least once in every month~ the IBS project out of the approved list. Such official list is forwarded by the state council to DPO and APO. GPs habitually select one scheme (out of many) for its geographical areas—in fact one scheme that is common or popular in the Block concerned and the selection is generally without considering the technical suitability to the given soil conditions. They do it based on the approved list of permissible projects sanctioned by the Block concerned.

The demand driven nature of the programme is ignored or violated with impunity, so to say. The common thread is; the general meetings of the GP finalise the types and number of IBS works in the areas, distribute the quota among the wards~ not always proportionately or as per requirement but as per the bargaining power or political influence of the members. After preliminary approval of such projects, applications are sought—in fact collected~ from the equal number of job card holders~ commensurating with the total number of projects available. It is not that people seek such scheme works and GP members/officials sort those as per application date or priority. Scanning of GP documents will authenticate that the total number of projects and applicant number is always the same. The deliberate ploy is to prove in black and white that no applicant has been denied the scheme works.

The application for IBS is controlled, literally. The political leaders act as the gatekeeper collecting or depositing the required number of application. Seen reversely, it is not quite possible for the ordinary villagers to have the information about the sanctioned number of IBS. The nature of IBS suitable or required in the area is neither discussed, resolved at Gram Sansad meetings.⁹ The arbitrary

⁸ For corroboration see Das Upasak, 2015, 'Does Political Connections and Affiliation Affect Allocation of Benefits in the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme: Evidence from West Bengal', *World Development*, Vol. 67, pp. 202-217; Majumdar, Manabi, 2009. 'Democracy in Praxis: Two Non-Left Gram Panchayats in West Bengal'. *Economic & Political Weekly*, February 28, pp. 82-93 ; Chaterjee, Partha, 2009. 'The Coming Crisis in West Bengal', *Economic & Political Weekly*, February 28, pp. 42-45.

⁹ The very selection of project works is generally devoid of choice and aspiration of the village community. See for details Ranaware, Krushna, Upasak Das, Ashwini Kulkarni and Sudha Narayanan, 2015, 'MGNREGA Works and Their Impacts', *Economic & Political Weekly*,

selection of the scheme and number of beneficiaries is defended citing the administrative approval from district and block.

After selection of the beneficiaries, comes the role of Supervisors (mate). Their role, simply put, is no less ritualistic. Supervisors are handpicked by the ward level GP member(s), they do not have the autonomous role to play. For the Supervisors IBS works are all about making easy money without having to undertake strenuous as well as huge paper works like attendance sheet and measurement book. They are only to report about the preparatory works and nurturing works being undertaken by the individual beneficiaries. However, regarding the important role of verification of land holding documents and other eligibility conditions, no serious attention is paid by anyone. When creation of man-days and garnering easy money are the main motive or obsession, strict verification of objective criteria is neither observed or easily possible or permissible.

Verification of works is finally vetted by the *Nirman Sahayak* (of GP). But he rarely does it by personally validating the actual works in the field. Instead, the common practice is to collect the written receipt from the beneficiaries with the declaration that such and such work has been completed and such materials have been received by him/her. Such receipt is intended to save the GP officials from adverse inspection reports or legal proceedings, if any

For supplying the material component, the suppliers are shortlisted through tendering-supposedly with tacit complicity where few bucks are not entirely aberrant. There are evidences when acrimony over tendering erupted in GPs. And in few Blocks central tendering had been resorted to. Yet the central tendering is not without many hiccups. When the selected suppliers go to GP for works, the officials and politicians gang up and milk commission, without which the works including the billing cannot be expected. In a way, the suppliers prefer GP level tendering because there will be then only one hand to grease.

After short listing the type of project and the suppliers, the next task is to select beneficiaries. This is done by the elected GP members from their respective constituencies (somewhere in active association with the dominant party leader). GP officials do not generally intervene with such selection - their only insistence is that the recipient must have valid job card. When the GP officials allow autonomy in beneficiary selection, the GP members also cooperate with the officials in preparing the documents etc. Unlike other developmental works like road construction, not much preparatory works are required for IBS. GP members select the Supervisors who in turn inform the beneficiaries about the project and tentative date of starting of the project.

Based on the preparatory works and completion reports of the Supervisors, GP officials finalise the report on IBS and upload in MIS. One distinct advantage to the officials here is that the *Gram Rojgar Sevak* (GRS) or *Nirman Sahayak* is not to prepare in advance such documents like projects sites, number of man-days, material components and above all physical measurement and verification. Field investigation attests that the officials find themselves in a fix when non-IBS works do not match with

March 28, pp.53-61; Roy Jitendra & Bedi Arjun, *Infrastructure Development and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme: Evidence from Bankura, West Bengal*, (source <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2078202>)

the records- less output, no sign of pond/bundh as and when physical verification is undertaken (certainly rarely). But in case of IBS they can wash hands with the impregnable logic that the project did exist but over the months/years the plantation, for example, has been damaged for whatever reasons and it is almost impossible to keep trace of thousands of works as to whether or how long such plantation really survived.

Problems Plaguing IBS Projects

The general concurrence is that not less than 60 percent of IBS works is simple wastage of fund. Not sarcastically perhaps, IBS works are being locally described as the “Gartha Programme” (ditch digging scheme), where one half excavated trench will suffice for getting the plant related materials and days of labour wage (as in the model estimates).¹⁰

On individual land beneficiaries themselves should carry out regular maintenance i) of plantation, ii) pond, land development, water conservation and water harvesting structures on every year iii) and works with material component - such as, NADEP composting pit, Vermi composting pit, poultry shelter, goat shelter- after completion as per schedule. However, the question of maintenance can come only when the materials are made available and the plants survive. In many case vermi was not supplied at all,¹¹ sampling was of inferior quality and in majority cases the plants simply died.

One fundamental as well as recurring problem of most development programmes happens to be targeting, that is reaching out to or serving the neediest and deserving people. When benefits come without economic cost and the administrative capacity for proper targeting is limited or circumscribed, the programme benefits are often hijacked by the wealthy, dominant or politically connected ones.

Though NREGA is open ended in the sense that any rural people can apply for and avail the work opportunity, yet the advent of IBS seems to have affected U-turn, in the sense that the few select beneficiaries are being subjectively shortlisted and selected for the scheme works. The net has really been widened with the inclusion of marginal farmers and the situation has been worsened with the absence of serious monitoring.

NREGA works on private land encounters the serious problem of accountability. Officials are rather stretched to keep records, documentary evidence and continuous supervision over asset creation. It may be easy to claim or get well, land leveling even when similar facility has already been availed. In public works there is standard documentation procedure and the officials can be held accountable for misuse of provision. But the scope for corruption is far greater in works involving private land.

For GP members IBS implies one win-win situation. It is now common knowledge that selection of beneficiary under rural development schemes has always been porous or politically motivated (as in West Bengal ¹²). Similar situation is emerging in IBS. Like IRDP, IAY where the

¹⁰ From the GP level documents, it transpires that sometimes the wage payment may be less than the model estimates but the not the material expenditure.

¹¹ There are many RTI applications and even court cases alleging large scale corruptions.

¹² See for details, Mallick, Ross, 1993. *Development Policy of a Communist Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.; William, Glyn, 1999. 'Panchayati Raj and

selection had arbitrarily been done and with parting a portion of the scheme amount to the dispensers, NREGA is drifting to just another beneficiary oriented scheme. The GP members are subjectively handpicking the beneficiaries with two distinct objectives: to offer some monetary benefits to their supporters or those in their good-book and not often as per requirement of the people.¹³ In the process vote bank politics is petrifying. Moreover, through selection of beneficiary, the dispensers are pocketing few bucks from most of the recipients, otherwise could not have been possible without IBS like works.

The countervailing insistence may be that NREGA works are not just other kind of beneficiary oriented one. Here the recipients must have job card, must demand works or project and everything should conform to the guidelines so prescribed. At operational level such stipulations are thrown in the wind, literally.

Valid job card is not the singular deterrent for programme misuse. The field level information repeatedly reveal that in every ward of GP there are many job card holders who are not serious contenders for NREGA works. They have applied and received the card either intentionally or guided by misconception. Anyway, few job cards are not frequently used. Also there are more job cards in a village than the total number of households (as per Census enumeration). All in all, there is a fair quantum of job cards which are locally regarded as 'reserve'¹⁴ and these are used when required.

Besides those 'reserve' job cards, another strategy is to collect job cards from the genuine card holders with the tacit agreement that the use of their cards will fetch some monetary benefits, say ½ of total wage bill of IBS works. The political leaders collect (or retain) those cards. Card holders readily agree with such proposal for the simple reason that at least some benefits will accrue to them without any labour and parley. The spoil is distributed only after the disbursement of wage bill.

The works in NREGS continues the legacy of the old employment schemes, say food for work schemes. Works are ad-hoc with limited types of physical infrastructure activities. Beneficiary involvement is missing as works on individual lands are decided elsewhere and dumped on gullible poor. Works are isolated as officials pursue their whims. Works detailing is based on experience of rural development officials or their intuition, rather than technical knowledge. Single intervention or investment is deemed to qualify an "asset" and isolated infrastructure creation has not impacted increased productivity.

Changing Micro Politics in West Bengal', in Rogaly, Harriss & Bose, eds. *Sonar Bangla: Agricultural Growth and Agrarian Change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, New Delhi: Sage Pub.; Bhattacharya, Moitree, 2002. *Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: Democratic Decentralisation or Democratic Centralisation*. New Delhi: Manak Pub.; Corbridge, Stuard, Williams, Venor & Srivastava, 2003. 'Making Social Science Matter. How the Rural Poor See the State in Bihar, Jharkhand & West Bengal'. *Economic & Political Weekly*, June 14 & 21, 2377-2389 & 2561-2569

¹³ Das Upasak, 2015, 'Does Political Connections and Affiliation Affect Allocation of Benefits in the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme: Evidence from West Bengal', *World Development*, Vol. 67, pp. 202-217

¹⁴ Additional/fake job card is one pan-Indian phenomenon. 'Five Lakh Fake Job Card-Holders in State,' *The Hindu*, 1 August, 2010: 10 Lakh Bogus MNREGA Job Cards Deleted in Karnataka," *Business Line*, 17, January, 2012.

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People do not know or are not told of the options available to them in the list of permissible NREGS activities in individual land. They receive what is given or thrust on them. The Act enshrines that works must be decided by Gram Sabha but such stipulations are observed only in breaches. Even where the Gram Sabha meets and proposes some works, the village assembly remains helpless as the works taken up is decided by departments as per the availability of the scheme and fund.

Horticulture is gaining almost exclusive attention in individual land related activities. But only few with assured water supply can take it up. Dry land horticulture is ignored even though they are best suited considering the soil type and location of lands owned by the poor people (as in Purulia district). Also one should not be overwhelmed with providing irrigated horticulture on the entire land as it is important to the poor to have some fodder and food crops. This is because among the factors of production costs, it places a value on physical labour, the only strength and competitive capability of the poor people owning such small patches of land.

Over the years IBS has emerged as the singular cog through which both monetary and political benefits are being garnered. May be huge surge of IBS is one reason accounting for the recent gush of NREGA in the state (at least fund utilisation). IBS affords benevolent role of the politicians and officials, allows creation of huge man-days and fund utilization. For NREGA proper, IBS seems the zero sum game, it spurts a drift to the NREGA mission and drags the programme to yet another beneficiary oriented scheme, say IRDP. Rural people get a chunk of easy money, politicians petrify vote bank politics, officials lay hands to the pie and contractors invade and establish their 'raj' in the NREGA process. If the survival rate and productive outcome is taken into consideration, IBS is no less a failure where at least 60% of total schemes are outright wastage, as many officials admit at informal level. NREGA is thus getting entangled into one avoidable mess where rush for man-days, fund utilization and resultant perversions are belittling the purported objectives of the programme. Unless the drift is arrested earnestly and squarely, the programme is likely to end up in whimper.

For Reining the Rot

It is possible to contain the rot in IBS project in many ways, provided there is will and concerted efforts.

i) Wage payment to the beneficiaries is made in tranches~ for preparation of ground, plantation, nurturing etc. If the payment is sanctioned only after physical verification by GP officials like Nirman Sahayak or if the Supervisor is warned that if any lapse is detected at later stages his payment will be stalled, the situation can improve a bit.

ii) Now each GP is entrusted to expend fixed amount in every month or to complete the target set at the top. And GPs prefer IBS because of few inherent advantages like no estimate and no location selection hazard. While target is the fed of the executive agencies and the target is always one risky proposition, GPs may preferably be asked to implement the number of IBS projects that can effectively be monitored with the available manpower and as per the local requirements.

iii) Moreover, there must have well planned monitoring schedules. As per Operational Guidelines, quantification of 'expected outcomes' of every work is mandatory: i) before placing the

work proposal to Gram Sabha, ii) for moving the work to the shelf of project and iii) after completion of work. When the actual outcome is below per, the personnel responsible for either neglect in design or execution can be proceeded against in the manner as defined in the disciplinary rules governing their service. Unfortunately, such prescriptions are seldom followed at the ground level.

The District, Block - and preferably state - officials should regularly make on-the-spot verification of the assets being created. The visiting teams will also have power to pull the errand officials and the beneficiaries down for clear lapse etc. In fact, any external monitoring is likely to improve the overall situation not only in cases of IBS but also all NREGA works. The elected panchayat members, officials and workers will get the message that everything will not pass muster. The local level supervisory staffs are expected to use the inspection as the caveat or countervailing instrument. It will then be exigent for them to convince others that being officials they are accountable for all the official works and they should better be spared from undue trouble. Such a perception will have some deterrent effects on the politicians and beneficiaries in particular.

One instance in Sitalkuchi Block is instructive. During their visit, the central visiting team asked the officials to measure the depth, length and breadth of the pond. When they found serious discrepancies in terms of project documents, the team members instructed the BDO present to lodge first information report against the officials concerned with measurement and wage bill authentication.

In fact continuous and serious monitoring is one issue that is allowing the drifting and deficiencies. There is one instance when almost all the Nirman sahayak of Cooch Behar district submitted memorandum to District Magistrate and the state government urging for monitoring the programmes works without which they were getting unwittingly entangled in imbroglio.

The excuse of staff shortage is one insistence for shortage of field level monitoring. More serious is the lack of monitoring culture. The administrative preoccupations are with the fund utilization and creation of man-days or paper records. Higher officials pass the instruction about asset creation, physical verification etc. But they do not in general extend tangible support to the lower level officials. In one instance, the BDO repeatedly told the GP officials to plug the loopholes and promised to help them in case of adversity. But he remained nonchalant when the GP officials sought his support during the brawl with the village level politicians.

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