

NREGA: A Challenge for Civil Society

DEEP JOSHI

Allocating financial resources to the rain-fed areas in the country will result in the country reaping huge dividends; organizing people to use the legitimate space that NREGA allows could be civil society's way of meeting the challenge of transforming the de-humanizing poverty in rural areas

If the poor of India were a separate country, they would form the third largest country in the world, according to the World Bank data. And according to the Government of India data, the poor of India would form the fourth largest country in the world. The data also show that 60 per cent of the rural poor are farmers; this means that the poor have lands and they plough it and grow crops. The data on agricultural people show that two-thirds of our farming is rain dependent... rain-fed.

There is zero investment in the rain-fed areas because of the poor techniques of farming. In fact, there is a lot of disinvestment—the cutting of trees and the ploughing of fields that are not worthy of agriculture. Two-thirds of the *kheti-badi* (farming) is actually in a terrible shape in this country. I have pleaded with the Planning Commission, “Please, please, let’s make some investment in rain-fed areas. Why is it that you can invest more than Rs 2.5 lakhs per hectare of irrigation potential in big dam canal projects such as Narmada or Bhakra?” In those places, for every hectare of irrigation potential that is created—I don’t know the current numbers—the amount some time back used to be more than Rs 2 lakhs per hectare; this doesn’t benefit individual farmers. And I say, “Can we increase the investments in rain-fed areas and the national watershed programmes?” These were launched during the 90s and are under the Ministry of Rural Development now. The rates of investment in these used to be Rs 4,000 per ha; after a great deal of haggling, it was raised to Rs 6,000. Several of us from the NGO community pleaded for it to be made Rs 20,000. After much debate, it was said that the sum would be Rs 15,000; then we discovered that the ministry had already quoted Rs 14,000 to the parliamentary committee, that is, Rs 14,000 per ha for rain-fed areas and Rs 2.5 lakhs per ha for dam canal irrigation!

Somehow, the planners themselves don't seem to be convinced about investing in rain-fed areas. Instead, there is the conviction that there is no development on a piece of land unless you have a line of water coming from a dam to irrigate the land. There is plenty of evidence to the contrary in small experiments, including one by a farmer near Jalgaon, who has been practising rain-fed farming for the last 15 years and has earned Rs 1,00,000 per acre or Rs 2,00,000 per ha. He does not get affected by drought because he practises a particular kind of agriculture. He has made some amendments to the land: he has created bunds, dug some small pits and so on and so forth, so that all the water that comes from the 'rain god' stays there.

There are places in Rajasthan such as Anantpur and there are places in this country where, whatever you do, you can't produce much because the total rainfall may be 250 mm per year or 500 mm per year, and two out of three years there is drought. However, there is a large part of India where the gods are quite generous. We get rainfall of more than 700–800 mm all way up to 2,000 mm but most of it just runs away. So there is need to harvest rainwater where it falls in the field. My guru of many years ago, Mishraji, famous for his Sukhomajri project, used to say, "Catch the rain where it falls when it falls."

If one did that, in most of the rain-fed areas in India, I think much of the poverty would go away. These arguments somehow still haven't convinced the powerful people, who take decisions. However, through some mechanism, we have a scheme—NREGA—through which we can actually do the same thing that some of us have been pleading for many years. Most of my working life I have spoken of the great injustice that is done to

the rain-fed areas and have pleaded for intervention. In an unwitting way, the Government of India has actually created a vehicle through which we can transform rain-fed India and with that we can get rid of much of the de-humanizing poverty that we have in this country. If the goals of NREGA are met—and there is actually a key there for the goals to be met...which is that this is not a scheme, or a budget or a project...this is law. If, somehow, we could take advantage of that fact, and that's important for those who work in NGOs and civil society, we do not have to depend on others. Some officers are at least willing to hear an NGO *wala*; they may not agree with you but they will be willing to listen. Most of them, however, don't. We don't have to worry about that anymore because we can get the money through the law.

In the past three months, I travelled through the Bundelkhand area both on the Madhya Pradesh and the Uttar Pradesh sides; everywhere I asked about NREGA, about the old-age pension and things like that. And everywhere I was told that these are not working. The poorest people, say, the Ahirwars, do not have job cards; their job cards are invariably in the pockets of the *sarpanch*. I asked these questions in Hamidpur in UP, Mahoba in UP, Banda in UP and in Chhattisgarh, in Tikamgarh and in Panna. These are villages where PRADAN is not working so I do not have any links with them. Nobody in these villages knew I would be coming. I was conducting a study with some other colleagues of the Bundelkhand region. Everywhere I was told the same thing. The slightly better-off people, who can speak up, had their cards. The cards of the poorest, for whom this programme is most valuable, were invariably with the *sarpanch*.

The good thing, however, was that people knew about this scheme. People did not know all its intricacies, for example, that one is entitled to 100 days of employment and that one can demand work. The procedure was not known but, by and large, nobody in all these travels told me that he/she did not know or had not heard of the scheme. They all seemed to know about it, albeit by different names.

I think the challenge, therefore, before civil society is to organize the people so that they will get the money because it is the law. You don't have to plead on their behalf, and you don't have to go to DRDA chief or the collector or the state secretary, and say, "Please sanction this money for some small watershed." If the poor people are aware, they can demand 100 days of work and they can use it for developing the land that they own or work on. If you have a village with 100 families, you can get Rs 10,00,000 per year for as long as you need that money to develop your land and water resources. I think that's the challenge for civil society. Can we do this? Can we organize people so that you and I, the English speaking people in civil society, don't have to go and plead with the *sarkar* because of our connections. People can actually get the money and that's what is required, especially in places such as Bundelkhand, which is a dark area because the *sarpanches* are all erstwhile exploiters. The *sarpanches* very clearly don't want the Ahirwars to develop their own lands or have an assured source of income. For example, a Tiwariji, who is the *sarpanch*, may have 15 acres of land and yet he is not a 'rich' man. He would like the Ahirwars, nevertheless, to plough his land. If these Ahirwars begin to get whatever little land they own developed and get an assured source of income, where will the

sarpanch get his labour? This is what I was told by the people themselves. So that I think is where the test and challenge for civil society is. Are we up to it, can we organize people and help them get their rights? Mind you, in this country neither you nor I, nor even probably the Prime Minister, if he went incognito, can get his rights. Those of us, who have tried to get a driving license, passport, or whatever, know how difficult this is. This is a fantastic country, with fantastic people, who make fantastic laws. No other country has something like NREGA, which has earmarked Rs 18,000 crores a year, and which is expected to increase. There is no other place in the world that has such fantastic laws. However, there also are not too many places where it is so difficult to get what is your due, to get your right, to get laws implemented. The only way you can do this is by organizing people, by making them aware and having them demand what is their due. For me, in some ways, NREGA actually is a test for civil society in this country, for those who are working in rural areas for promoting livelihoods. If we are technically competent and capable, we will be able to draw on this programme and transform rural India as far as the economic front is concerned.

NREGA will also enhance democracy. Not only it is going to provide temporary employment but it is also going to pave the way for other democratic mechanisms and forums. And, it is not going to happen by training *sarpanches*, believe me, neither will it happen by giving an engineer to the *sarpanches*. It will happen only if those who need this wage are organized enough to demand work and wages, knowing that this is their right, and that you will give it. And if

that does not happen, an application can go to the government; and, hopefully, the government will put together some mechanisms sooner or later to address that.

It is also a challenge to our technical capability that we make good use of this money. If we start digging a pond on the top of a hill where there is no water it is counterproductive. Even if all of us do the same, it is not going to make any difference. You will not get rid of poverty then and people will be more and more deprived. So, both in terms of our technical capability as well as our engagement with the people, we should resolve to make use of this programme, simply because it's a law and it is the law that gives you the money; there are very few laws that give you money to do the things that you want to do in a village. That to me is the biggest challenge for civil society.

During my travels in Bundelkhand, I came across a young man, who told me that if this scheme does not get implemented properly for several years, there is going to be a naxalite in every district of the rain-fed area. This young man in Bundelkhand made me cry. He said that it was his bad luck that he was born in this state. He is a wage worker and migrates to Delhi every year; so he has seen life that is slightly different. And in the back of beyond, that is, in Bundelkhand, things are very different. He said this with an anger and passion simply because he knew that there exists such a law, that there is money for him to use, which his *sarpanch* is

eating into...he knew that. When a large number of very poor people become aware that money that is actually meant for them is not reaching them...it's not a question of whether your name is in the BPL list or not, that's the interesting thing about it, it's not the BPL list. The *sarpanch* can say that your name is not there in the list so what can he do. If you want to dig earth, there is money and the people know this. There is rampant migration from Bundelkhand; people who come to Delhi work as construction labourers and carry bricks and mortar. These people have now become aware. I think the government must check the nitty gritty of this fact. Because if the government implements the law well, it will change things in a positive way; if it is not done well, I am afraid that it will go to the *sarpanches* and *sarkari babus*. I see the increasing anger because when people don't get what they know is theirs, how long will they keep quiet? At some point, they will say, what shall we do? That is the other side. If you don't make use of this programme properly now that people know that there is something that is meant for them is not coming to them, people will begin to get organized and will, on their own, begin to do things which are not good for them, for society, or for the nation.

From the speech delivered at the workshop on "NREGA: Beyond Wages to Sustainable Livelihoods" held on 21 November 2008, New Delhi.