

The view from Abu Road

A grass-roots look at the impact of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act on rural India

By RINA BHATTACHARYA & RATNA M. SUDARSHAN

Os the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) delivering what it promised to?

Among other things, the Act was expected to help create productive assets for rural development and also act as a social security scheme, especially for women. On both fronts, there has been lack of delivery.

Given the crisis in Indian agriculture, productive rural assets are critical for growth. The Act tries to involve local communities through representative institutions such as gram panchayats and gram sabhas. Assets created are not to be those convenient for local bureaucrats, but those that respond to felt deficiencies in the local economy.

Entitlements for women include the provision that one-third of the work undertaken should go to women; men and women are to be paid equal wages; and women are to be part of planning, monitoring and evaluation committees. An important provision in the Act is that if there are five or more children, below the age of six, accompanying the women working at any site, one of the women workers should be deputised to look after the children. And she is entitled to the same wage as the other labourers.

The Institute of Social Studies Trust and Doosra Dashak recently surveyed more than 1,200 households in Abu Road block of Sirohi district of Rajasthan, covering 11 villages, from both hilly and non-hilly areas of the block. Despite the acute water shortage in this drought prone area, especially in the hilly segment, road construction dominates the choice of

works. About 5% of the respondents said that gravel roads were constructed as part of NREGA work, of which 24% added that the construction remained incomplete; 31% reported water conservation structures, of which 30% cited digging new tanks/ponds (*nadi kudai*) and only 1% mentioned construction and repair of embankments (anicuts) and canal cleaning/reconstruction. Land development through plantations and land levelling has not been mentioned.

Households were asked if these works had made any difference to their lives. Only 7% mentioned benefits (potable water, availability of water for animals and other uses) from water conservation. Some 32% reported benefits from improved road connection—such as greater ease in getting the sick to hospital.

Data from the Block Development Office confirms that during February 2006-March 2007, priority has been given to gravel roads and digging of tanks. Anicuts and *merbandi*, effective in preventing soil erosion especially in the hilly areas of the district, are missing.

As far as the second promise—entitlements for women—goes,

NREGA has not met two main objectives—creation of rural assets and social security for women

observation of worksites around the two villages, Mahikhera and Nichlagarh, between October 2006 and April 2007, showed that no crèches had been provided. Neither was a medical kit available on site. The only facility provided everywhere was drinking water. Lack of crèches restricts participation of women. Children may be left alone or unattended while the mother works. At a minimum, a crèche ensures that young children do not hurt themselves at the worksite and are provided with basic care. Why had crèches not been provided? At every discussion, the question was met with silence. Has money been allocated for this purpose? No one knows.

Does the absence of a crèche mean absenteeism from school for the elder daughter? Discussions at a workshop confirm that this often happens. As one woman put it, food comes before education: '*Pet pehle bhareng, padhai baad me sochenge.*' Her own granddaughter had dropped out of school to look after the younger siblings at home while her mother was away at the worksite. What other alternative was there? Despite its stated intentions, enough financial resources and technical guidance have not been given to the panchayats for providing crèches on the thousands of worksites being opened under NREGA. The consequences—exclusion of some poor women with infants, absenteeism of older daughters from school, and the historical over-burdening of women—will continue until such time as matters are set right.

The quality of productive assets is a critical issue. Bela Bhatia and Jean Dreze report from Manika and Mantu districts in Jharkhand that most works remained incomplete, in danger of being washed away in the monsoon, and that technical standards of the well-built kaccha roads were very low.



Similar reports continue to come in from other areas.

Some questions need answers. Why are works left incomplete, with deterioration and consequent capital waste? Does the implementation of NREGA preclude technical supervision to ensure creation of long-lasting, quality productive assets? Why do household responses show relatively low-perceived benefit, if works have been selected as per expressed needs? Why is low priori-

ty accorded to works that are critical to the health of the local ecology, such as the construction of anicuts and *merbandi* which can prevent soil erosion in Sirohi? In short, is work undertaken as a matter of routine rather than its expected utility?

Rina Bhattacharya and Ratna M. Sudarshan are with the Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi. Comments are welcome at theirview@livemint.com

RAVI RAVEENDRAN/AFP