

NREGA schemes check villagers' exodus to cities

Women making up the majority of workers is helping supplement incomes; money is reaching those it should

Bhilwara (Rajasthan): In Danta village, 15km from Bhilwara city, 30-odd women start filing in at 8.30 am daily to resume work on building a concrete water reservoir. The women are among the 2,000 people in the village who have got work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) since the scheme, promising 100 days of work a year to one adult member of every rural family, was launched two years ago in the region. Many of the beneficiaries are women who did no gainful work earlier.

In these rural parts, NREGA serves as an effective safety net for the unemployed, especially during years of famine and drought, supplementing household incomes and reducing migration to cities by villagers in search of work. It helps the rural poor economically by not just putting cash in their hands, but also helping them create sustainable assets.



National model: Villagers work on a NREGA project in Rajasthan's Bhilwara district. The rural development ministry plans to promote the district as a development model by introducing several pilot projects there. Madhu Kapparath / Mint

"People get 100 days of employment in a year and get Rs95-100 per day and, hence, are able to earn close to Rs10,000 every year," said Ram Deo, a social

activist associated with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Danta village. "Given that around 80% of the workforce under NREGA comprises women, it means whatever is earned under the scheme is additional income for the household, something that has helped increase their purchasing power and disposable income."

NREGA is the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government's flagship programme and has been credited with helping it return to power in 2009's general election.

Launched in February 2006, the programme, recently renamed the Mahatma Gandhi NREGA, gets the most government money among social welfare schemes, with an allocation of Rs39,100 crore in the year ending 31 March. As Mint reported on 23 January, it may get a 15% hike in allocation in Budget 2010, scheduled to be announced on 26 February, taking the outlay to Rs45,000 crore.

For a change, the money seems to be percolating down to where it needs to reach, resulting in the generation of income. In Danta village, this has had the effect of stemming the movement of people to the city.

“Earlier, we would all have to migrate to a city during the lean season. But now, in most cases, even the men don’t have to go,” said Kamla, an NREGA worker who uses only her first name. “There is only one problem; we are not getting our payment in time in this village. We get it after every three-four months. Also, with such inflation, the minimum wage rate should be increased.”

NREGA stipulates that workers should be paid within 15 days, and timely payment is crucial for beneficiaries of the scheme at a time when monthly headline inflation has risen to a 15-month high of 8.56% on the back of soaring food prices.

Rajasthan is one of the states where NREGA is known to be implemented effectively, and the ministry of rural development is looking to use Bhilwara district—also the constituency of rural development minister C.P. Joshi—as a development model by introducing several pilot projects in the region.

A social audit of NREGA was conducted by NGOs in Bhilwara in September-October, making it the first district to be covered by such a check, which uncovered some cases of corruption, irregularities and delayed payments. The administration of Bhilwara district, however, said delayed payments do not reflect any lacunae in the release of funds.

“Around 75% of the payments are made through post office accounts and delays at that level might cause late payments, but funds from our side are released on time,” said Manju Rajpal, district collector of Bhilwara and a former NREGA commissioner. “To that extent, the postal department has to be strengthened. As far as timely payments are concerned, our role is limited to depositing money in the workers’ accounts.”

Rajpal also said the impact of the scheme is now visible and one can see how it has increased “bargaining power” as well as household incomes among the poor in rural areas.



“Around 80% of the workforce is (constituted by) women, who were previously unproductive. By working under the scheme, women are able to bring (in) supplementary income,” she said. “Also, NREGA does not just give wages to labour, but also creates community assets which are useful for the villagers in the long run. It has both direct and indirect benefits.”

Till January, 481,912 households had been given NREGA job cards in Bhilwara district and 386,734 provided employment under the scheme. Of these, 116,095 have completed 100 days of work this fiscal.

To widen the scope of asset creation under the scheme, the Centre last year tied NREGA to other government schemes related to agriculture, water resources, land resources, forests and rural roads.

Apart from traditional NREGA work such as digging wells and ponds and building water reservoirs, paved roads are now being built in Bhilwara district in association with the public works department (PWD). According to officials, 257 such roads have been sanctioned, 185 are under construction and 34 have already been completed.

"We are also in talks with dairy cooperatives for work related to dairies under NREGA. The forest department has also been roped in, in some cases," Rajpal said.

In Govindpura village, NREGA workers are constructing a paved road under PWD.

"I have already worked for 65 days and am getting Rs90-95 per day," said worker Leela Ramlal, who made the point that people don't need to go off to cities any more during the lean season.

Most villagers prefer to work under NREGA rather than in factories nearby since the scheme entails eight hours of labour a day against the 12 hours workers have to put in at the latter.

"Our payment is usually regular and we get paid within 15 days of work." Ramlal said. "Since we have started working under NREGA, our economic condition has improved by a great extent."

In another experiment, the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES)—a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Anand, Gujarat, which seeks to conserve ecologically sensitive land and water resources—is working as the implementing agency for NREGA in a few villages in Bhilwara and Udaipur districts. FES—the only NGO acting as an NREGA implementing body in Rajasthan—aims to leverage the scheme to scale up measures for environment, land, soil and water conservation.

In Manoharpura village in the north-east of Bhilwara district, where FES acts as the executing agency, villagers are developing a pasture surrounded by a cattle protection trench to prevent animals from destroying the pasture before it is ready to be grazed. The 40ha plot also has a continuous contour trench to check soil erosion and recharge the water table.

Manoharpura illustrates the impact of NREGA on the economic lives of the rural poor and consequently, on migration.

Inhabited primarily by the Bhil and Kalbelia tribes, apart from Rajputs and Brahmins, the village earlier saw large-scale migration of entire families to cities during lean periods—a trend that is fading now.

Before NREGA, all the 10 Kalbelia families in the village would migrate to cities, said Harnath Singh, activist and field coordinator for FES. That's changed—just the men from six of the families have gone looking for work in cities for a few months, while everyone from the remaining four has chosen to stay back in the village, he said.

NREGA, it appears, has succeeded in removing the kind of wrenching poverty that the community endured. "These Kalbelia families would often go from one house to another in the village, begging for food," Singh said. "Now, even that has ended."

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