

NREGA and its impact on child labour: field notes from Dungarpur

Neera Burra

neeraburra@gmail.com

The recent Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report has highlighted some of the implementation problems faced by NREGA. This has led many commentators to argue that NREGA should be wrapped up as it is a waste of money. I would like to suggest that this is a short-sighted view. Recent field visits to some remote villages of Dungarpur district to study the incidence of child migrant labour were extremely revealing. Dungarpur district, as also other southern Rajasthan districts, are notorious for large-scale migration of children between the ages of 10 to 14 to work in the BT cotton fields in Gujarat. Children also migrate to Gujarat to work in brick kilns, in dhabas and workshops, in textile markets and on construction sites.

Discussions with villagers revealed that there has been almost a 20 per cent reduction in the incidence of migration amongst children. I was amazed at how villagers themselves saw reduction in child labour as a direct result of the impact of NREGA. People did say that if there were residential schools for 10-14 year old children then more parents would keep their children in school. The only other factor mentioned was the work of the Dakshini Rajasthan Mazdoor Union (DRMU), a trade union, in campaigning extensively against child labour.

Dungarpur district has the privilege of having at least two membership-based organizations such as the Vagad Mazdoor Kisan Sanghathan (VMKS), a partner of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghatana (MKSS), and the DRMU. These organizations undertook door-to-door campaigns telling people about the provisions of the NREGA and the rights and entitlements of the people.

People spoke with confidence about the impact or usefulness of EGS. In Piyola village, Kuan Panchayat, the Sarpanch Dhaneshwarji Damor said, “ Now there is no starvation. People are able to get two meals a day. EGS has ensured that. If 200 days of work was given per household, then children won’t be sent to Gujarat for work.” He was very clear that EGS was different from drought relief work where there were many fraudulent names on the muster rolls. He said, “EGS is different. People have more awareness. Job Cards have photos, muster rolls are read out in the gram sabhas. Large numbers of people come for gram sabhas. Job Cards have entries of number of days worked and the amount of payment made and then all this is registered in panchayat records”. In Navapadar village, Lalita, age 20, reported a major change brought about by NREGA. She said, “ Now parents are sending their children to school.” There are subtle changes that can be seen, she reported. For one thing, earlier, children left home for longer periods. Now, children stay back for longer periods. Younger children are re-joining school. Parents are sending small children to school because of EGS.

The villagers of Kuan and Biliyabadgama panchayats were fully aware of their rights and entitlements. Every single villager I met said that they had got 100 days of employment and Rs. 73 per day as wages. Even when Manibehn from Gandheri village complained that she didn't get full wages she admitted that the problem was not because someone was siphoning off her wages but because of other factors. She said, "In the beginning we got Rs. 70 per day. In one muster roll, we got full Rs. 70. Now it is less because everyone is doing less work. The problem is that many people come for work but sit around. If 50 people are employed on one site, 30 work hard and 20 don't work much, but all of us have to get paid equally." On being asked whether there were fraudulent names on the muster rolls, she said that those days were over now with a Job Card with a photograph on it. She went on to say that in the current scheme of things, the question of fraudulent names on muster rolls did not arise. She was emphatic that if all nuclear families got a Job Card, no one would migrate to Gujarat for work. In Kesarpura village, migration had reduced by 50 per cent because of EGS.

Vasudev Kachraji Dhamar of Badgama village said, "In Badgama all the labourers know that Rs. 73 is to be paid for completing 10x10x2 pits. So now we get full wages. No one is allowed to sit around doing nothing. The DRMU has gone from village to village telling people of their rights. Our union told all the labourers that 'pura kaam karo or pura daam lo'. He went on to say that earlier a family could afford to send one child to school but now with EGS, they can send two children to school. If 200 days were provided, then no child would be sent to work to Gujarat.

I interviewed school teachers who also indicated that EGS had reduced migration by 10 to 20 per cent and school enrolment and retention had improved by 25 per cent. This was largely because parents were staying back because of EGS work availability. A major concern was the lack of teachers. Most schools in the tribal belt had only one teacher and this had severely compromised the quality of education. A local NGO representative, Devilal Vyas from People's Education and Development Organisation (PEDO), also agreed that migration had been reduced by 20 to 25 per cent as a result of EGS.

My visit was in order to study child labour but the villagers were more interested in telling me about NREGA. They wanted 200 days of work and Job cards for every nuclear family. At present Job Cards are being given according to ration cards and one card is not enough to support an extended family. Secondly, many villagers suggested that the government should start land development on their private lands so that they could harvest better crops. At the moment all EGS works are on government land. I asked whether children were being employed on EGS sites and the answer was a categorical no.

Local people admitted that the relief code of the past had made it possible for people to earn without working. That culture still had to be changed and it would be a while before people fully understood that EGS was about output and not a dole. On corruption, Vasudev Kachraji Dhamar said, "in Biliyabadgama panchayat there is no corruption in EGS works". He said, "Now people are vigilant. There is no corruption in EGS but we know there is corruption in other public works where inflated amounts are shown. But we

don't have the wherewithal to monitor that kind of work." He went on to say, "Earlier muster rolls would disappear but now they cannot".

When I was doing my fieldwork in December, 2007, villagers were gearing up to migrate to Gujarat because their 100 days were over and they needed more employment. This was the only complaint people had.

While the detractors of NREGA wait in the wings to find every opportunity to knock it, for those whose livelihoods depend on unskilled manual work, NREGA is a life-line. There are a number of problems with the implementation of the Act and a major issue is lack of performance –oriented administrative structures in many districts across the country. Dungarpur's success is to be explained not only by a proactive local administration but also by the fact of mass mobilization by people's organizations like VMKS and DRMU. Ultimately, NREGA will succeed where there is social mobilization and when people themselves understand their rights and responsibilities and can monitor the programme themselves. The CAG audit is a valuable reminder as to where there are lacunae and what should be done. The Government of India and state governments need to support NGOs and CBOs to undertake social mobilization around NREGA and not rely entirely on the efforts of local bodies and the administration. A partnership between civil society organizations and the state, as displayed in Dungarpur, has lessons for other parts of the country as well.

The end of starvation, a reduction in the migration of both adults and children and an increased enrolment and retention of children in schools were the major impacts of NREGA, according to the villages themselves. Surely, even the critics of NREGA would agree that these are worthwhile goals for public policy.