



Does NREGA Encourage Corruption and Leakage?

With more than ten years in operation, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA) has come of age and has become a favourite with the development administration. However, allegations have been raised about massive corruption and leakage, resulting in defeating the very purpose the scheme set out to achieve.

It is notable that under NREGA, there is an in-built mechanism to check corruption and leakage of government money by means of better supervisory and monitoring arrangements. The same is supposed to be ensured by way of regular monitoring, field visits, issuance of online muster roll, muster roll checking by public, uploading GIS coordinates on the online MIS (Management of Information System) system, online payment of wages, wide publicity of the details of the work being done or already done through an information board, and other social auditing measures by the beneficiaries and other members of the society. The muster rolls are supposed to be publicly read to ward off corruption.

However, the same is not being done regularly, thereby giving rise to suspicion of foul play. The provision of keeping an account of job demanded and provided through the specially designed individual job cards carrying photographs of the household members is also supposed to be a major anti-corruption tool. While it was believed that these very arrangements were reasons for a general apathy initially among the programme implementing agencies to implement the scheme effectively as there was almost negligible scope for siphoning of government money as was available earlier during the previous wage employment schemes including Swarnjayanti Gram Rojgar Yojna (SGRY) days.

But as they say, human ingenuity knows no bounds. The vested interests immediately discovered newer ways to sabotage the programme and got onto the gravy train. If some newspaper reports are to be believed, not only many fake job cards have come to notice of the monitors, but also there have been many reports where it has been found that implementing agencies or locally dominant factions have got a good number of job cards

deposited in their custody and are using the same for nefarious purpose of minting money illegally.

Reports of preparation of cooked-up muster rolls without execution of any work have also come to notice, not to speak of many other known ways of making money. Not only this, employment to job card holders is still being given more as an obligation than as a matter of right. It is complained that the site selection for the schemes is often politically motivated. Usually, those areas are alleged to be preferred for NREGA works which are under control of the locally dominant factions, and not those as are populated by the supporters other than the locally dominant factions. It has also been alleged that the locally dominant party often uses the scheme to oblige its supporters, thereby giving a miss to the workers who are opposition followers.

It has been alleged that by means of fake cards, the vested interests have ensured siphoning of government money by making false entries into the muster roll and the daily attendance sheet. It has also been complained that job cards have not been issued to all those who wanted it and applied for it, but only to those who are loyal to the locally dominant party/faction or could grease some palms. The practice of getting a cut out of the labour wages of workers in collusion with the local banking authorities has also come to the notice and has been reported in the press. With regular monitoring, supervision and participatory social audit, scope for such shenanigans have been reduced considerably.

Also, here the wage is supposed to be paid as per the quantum of work done by the individual labourers. However, the same has been noticed to be paid at a flat rate irrespective of the efficiency or work quantum standards in some of the cases, thereby rewarding a hare and a tortoise equally, something which goes against the purported objective of the scheme. The initial idea was that those working harder with higher productivity should be able to earn higher wages under the scheme. At many of the places, officials have pointed to the practical constraint of continuing with the 'flat rate wage payment' as differentiated payment creates discontentment among the workers.

Again, the workers have often unfairly refused to work beyond a few hours or at the pre-determined wage on various pretexts. This is simply because NREGA being a government scheme, they would not like to work harder and would like to just have their wages without putting in the requisite labour for a requisite output. At least, that is what has come to be heard by the implementing agencies at some places. NREGA is alleged to have become an income redistribution scheme where easy wages are distributed for relatively lesser or no work. But thankfully, such practices are still not widespread enough to completely discredit this scheme as seen from its popularity among the toiling masses.

Also, the basic work site amenities as are supposed to be there as per the programme guideline are often not found to be available. The provisioning of a crèche for children of working women, provisioning of the first aid boxes or potable water at the work sites are still not seen at most of the places. The stock argument proffered is that people feel that employment created through such works are less strenuous and villagers object to the fact that some people can earn their wages without putting in any hard labour.

If at all such amenities are provided, they are only to comply with the guideline rather than to fulfil the real spirit behind the provision. What they fail to realise is that such works can accommodate not only the physically handicapped people, but the same works can be rotated among the beneficiaries, if the handicapped or such other people are not readily available.

The signboard giving details of the ongoing or completed NREGA works is also found missing at many of the sites and is often put up without much details. However, the absence of the information board giving scheme details says something about the intentions of the implementing agencies, the motives being pre-empting people to question the quality and quantity of the works done. But such an argument does not stand in this age of Right to Information when any and every information can be accessed by way of the rights created under the said Act.

Surprisingly, unemployment allowance paid so far anywhere in the country is a very negligible amount of the total expenditure. The reason proffered for the same is provisioning of job within the statutory 15 days which is not the case. Actually, many implementing agencies have mastered the art of refusing unemployment allowance by not issuing the signed receipt for the applications demanding job. The payment of unemployment allowance is not only a charge on the local government, but also means the failure of the implementing agency to provide job within 15 days.

In case of such a failure, the officers and staff members concerned are supposed to be penalised if responsibility is fixed. Hence, the penchant for avoiding payment of unemployment allowances. There have reportedly been regular failures on the part of the many executing agencies to provide the demanded work within fifteen days, thereby defeating the very objective of NREGA. Not only this, no government official has yet been penalised for having failed to realise this programme objective notwithstanding there being the provision for the same.

While there definitely have been cases of corruption and leakages under NREGA, these are still more in nature of aberrations. The fact remains that NREGA continues to be one of the most successful employment guarantee schemes in the country but the same needs to be regularly revised and modified in view of the relevant executional inputs to check any scope for leakage or corruption during implementation.

Salient Points

- Allegations have been raised about massive corruption and leakage in implementing MGNREGA.
- There is an in-built mechanism to check corruption and leakage of government money by means of better supervisory and monitoring arrangements.
- The vested interests immediately discovered newer ways to sabotage the programme.
- Employment to job card holders is still being given more as an obligation than as a matter of right.
- Those areas are alleged to be preferred for NREGA works which are under control of the locally dominant factions.
- With regular monitoring, supervision and participatory social audit, scope for such shenanigans have been reduced considerably.
- NREGA is alleged to have become an income redistribution scheme where easy wages are distributed for relatively lesser or no work.

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- unemployment allowance paid so far anywhere in the country is a very negligible.
- Despite all this, NREGA continues to be one of the most successful employment guarantee schemes in the country.

Glossary

Penchant: A strong inclination, taste, or liking for something