

New hope for NREGA from Chhattisgarh

Avijit Ghosh, TNN, Jun 25, 2007, 03.22am IST

NEW DELHI: The national rural employment guarantee has so far been more about promises and less about implementation but a remote pocket in Chhattisgarh might provide a ray of hope. A group of students from JNU and DU who have been tracking the scheme's implementation say they see tangible improvement at grassroots.

The findings of their latest survey carried out earlier this month in 19 worksites of Batauli block in Surguja district show noticeable improvement in distribution of job cards, levels of employment, payment of minimum wages and the quality of works. The last survey was in June 2006.

Investigations show that labourers received 95% of their wage payments. "Even 5% leakage is unacceptable. But we must remember that during the earlier survey, the corruption level was much higher. Often more than 50% of the wages was lost in systemic leakages," says economist Jean Dreze, who organised and participated in the survey. There is a flip side though. As per NREGA, labourers are entitled to wages within 15 days of work. But the survey showed that in most villages, payments were still delayed up to three months. At almost 70% of worksites, wages were not paid on time. Many labourers can buy a meal only after getting their daily wage, which means payment alone is not enough, it has to be on time. At some places, even work applications were refused. In Govindpur and Jharganwa, work began four months behind schedule.

Yet, Nan Sai, 45, of Govindpur gram panchayat says the scheme has made life easier for tribals like him. "Earlier, during summer, men and women had to go looking for jobs in other villages. With the rozgar guarantee scheme, we are getting jobs near home," he says over phone. The NREGA stipulates that as far as possible, the scheme must be within a 5-km radius from the village of workers.

The NREGA was launched in 200 districts in February 2006 and has been extended to 330 districts this year. Union ministry of rural development's statistics show that between February 2006 and February 2007, the scheme generated 73.3 crore person-days of employment. As much as 42% of those employed were women. The total expenditure during the period was Rs 6,758 crore of which Rs 4,527 crore or 67% was spent on wages. The scheme's budget for 2007-08 was raised to Rs 12,000 crore.

Local activist Gangabhai Paikra of Chhattisgarh Kisan Mazdoor Andolan says the scheme's relative success in Surguja has generated a degree of self-confidence among the villagers. "During a recent Jan Sunvai (public hearing), unlike in the past, people openly spoke up against the sarpanch," he says.

Ritu Sain, deputy development commissioner of Surguja, says that regular field visits and stringent monitoring has helped bring about the change.