

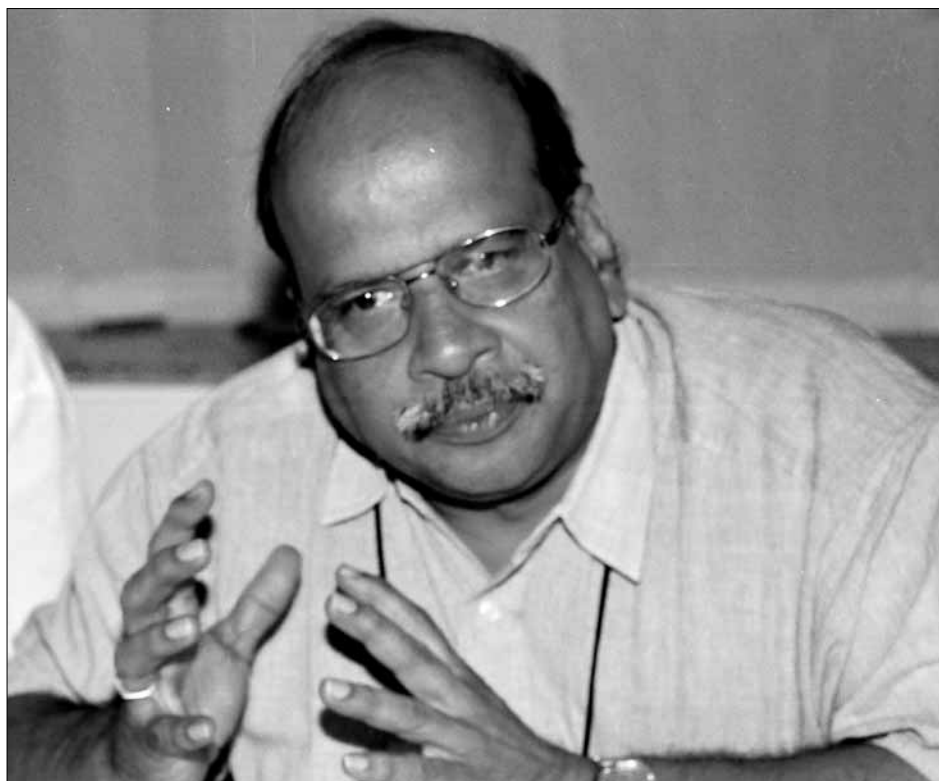
Land, Livelihoods & Food Security

By K.S. Gopal

At the time of our Independence Jawaharlal Nehru said, "Everything else can wait, but not agriculture". The 4th report (13th April 2006) of the National Commission on Farmers notes that "unfortunately this profound truth is yet to be converted into concrete policies and action on an adequate scale". Agricultural growth has decelerated during the last decade leading to a decline in the real per capita incomes in rural India. 65% of India's population has farming as its principal source of livelihood. Our farm population is rising annually by 1.84% and the average farm size is becoming smaller each year and the cost-risk-return structure is becoming increasingly adverse. There has been a drop in govt. investment in agriculture while private investment has also slowed down. Land use and fertilizer consumption have promoted unsustainable exploitation of groundwater and soil micronutrient deficiencies. Land holding is severely skewed with the bottom half the rural households having a total ownership of only 3.33% of the land.

The worst effected are the areas dependent on rain-fed agriculture and holding the bulk of the rural poor and hungry. In such places the livelihoods of pastoralists and small farmland owners is threatened by progressive loss of grazing lands for farmers. No wonder recent NSSO survey showed that 40% of the farmers want to quit farming. So the situation on the ground is of nearly 75% of children in the country being underweight due to inadequate nutrition. India has the largest number of under-weight and low birth weight and their prevalence is almost double that of Sub-Saharan Africa. Micronutrient deficiencies are widespread. More than 75% of preschool children suffer from iron deficiency anemia while 57% have sub-clinical vitamin deficiency while adult farmers are committing suicide while there is a rising household debt in the agricultural community.

Several significant initiatives have been taken up over the last two years including the



Bharat Nirman, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, National Horticulture Mission, National Rain-fed Area Authority, National Fisheries Board, expansion of agricultural credit at lower interest rates, etc. But they are all on paper as two years is considerable time and some momentum should have gathered in its work. At the same time this period witnessed the negotiations at the WTO on agriculture, licensing of BT seeds, commodity futures market, import of five million tons of wheat, fall in cereal production despite an overall okay rainfall regime, contract farming and liberalization in land holding size, giving away of large productive lands to industries and knowledge companies and "rehabilitation later but dam first". The only silver lining was that interstate water disputes were low because we had adequate rainfall all over India especially in peninsular India. The performance of the

Agriculture Minister done by a well-known weekly magazine showed it to be lesser than his counterparts in other ministries.

Two items were included in the Common Minimum Programme announced in June 2004. One was a national rural employment guarantee, the focus of this note, and the other to develop a medium term strategy to address food and nutrition security along with strengthening the public distribution system. One may add that while NREGA came into effect only in the last three months the UPA govt. undertook in October 2004 a National Food for Work. (NFFW). The dismal performance of NFFW in terms of the work and wages it generated for the poor shows that the UPA govt. was tall on promises but very short on performance. No effort was made to learn the deficiencies of NFFW and take corrective measures in the NREGA. As regards food and nutrition security more

seems to be coming from the Supreme Court rather than from the govt. Even here the recent scheme of grain banks is a repeat of what has failed and well known as being bogus.

One of the most debated CMP commitment and with potential to significantly impact and improve the lives of the rural poor is the NREGA. Let me review its performance and what must be done to make it work effectively on the ground. In Feb 2006 the NREGA was launched by the Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh in Ananthapur district in Andhra Pradesh and in all it has begun. It is now one hundred days old scheme that offers one hundred days of employment as a guarantee to each rural household. What is its performance? First not one state has constituted the State Employment Guarantee Council while the Central govt. has not decided to set an example by setting the national one. States are making their own NREGA guidelines and diluting some of the key provisions of the Act. These include the provisions related to the role of Panchayats and gram sabhas, allocation of state contribution to the NREGA financing in the state budget, making laws related to unemployment compensation being vague, procedurally cumbersome and the responsibility being vested with the lowest officials, incompatible with minimum or equal wages etc.

Let me present the NREGA as it is unfolding in Andhra Pradesh. I am doing so because that is the state I belong to and closely watching its implementation. It is also for other reasons that I choose AP because it was launched in Andhra Pradesh by the Prime Minister, claims of being a pioneer and innovator in this task, has a bureaucracy known for better deliverance of social programmes with a congress govt. and paraded as a model to other states by the minister for Rural Development Sri Raghuvansh Prasad Singh.

In Andhra Pradesh thirty-eight lakh households have registered from employment covering thirteen districts. Of this about a third are yet to receive their job cards. To obtain the job card poor households had to take a photo at their own costs. In some places they had to pay some money to the village secretary for obtaining a receipt for their job card application. But in the guidelines and the Act all these were to be done by the govt. at its cost. In a television interview with this author the Chief Minister proudly reported that 3.5 lakh households have taken to NREGA even while from his own records only ten percent of the people seeking employment cards have been provided with work. In Ananthapur itself only two villages have been taken up per Mandal for implementing the NREGA.

The Act stipulates that at least fifty percent of the "works" are to be decided by the Panchayat. But they are nowhere in the picture and the decision wrests with the bureaucrats. This can be seen from the fact that in Ananthapur district only two types of works are taken up - farm ponds and bunds on private lands. Also the govt. has given targets to various departments to come up with works and hence the whole participatory nature of choosing works in the NREGA is ignored. The forest and irrigation department has prepared a shelf of works even while they acknowledge that they cannot take up such massive schemes, as they are five to ten times higher than what they have done in the past. Thus transparency in decision-making on works is completely missing.

In AP the wage payment to the workers is paid through post offices. For this the poor have to take individual photos each costing rupees twenty, must give a deposit of twenty rupees to open the account and after all this the post office is deducting two percent of the wage received by the worker as service costs. All these are costs to be incurred by the govt. but the responsibility has been shifted to the wage seekers. Above all this the job card notes the "head of the household" who is invariably a man and thus all the wage incomes are accruing to men even while women are doing the actual work. The Act also provides for work place facilities but only drinking water was observed as being made available and that too in only some places. There is provision of village boards giving details of works sanctioned and their estimates, display details of the muster rolls, show who have been paid how much for their wage work etc but nowhere is it being practiced. One reason is that both transparency and work place facilities is the monopoly of Village Organizations which were created under a World Bank funded poverty alleviation project. These village organizations are getting substantial money for tasks that they do not undertake but show cases to impress the World Bank as a sustainable institutional model in order to seek fresh borrowings.

There are some positive things done by the AP govt. and they are worth mentioning as being of value to other states. They are good as intent of the AP govt. but seeing what is happening on the ground there is something missing in the content. Thus merely enshrining them will not help unless there is commitment to see it effectively through by addressing other bottlenecks.

The first was that AP undertook a "Time, Motion & Work" study that showed that workers were receiving less than a third of the minimum wage as out turn is paid for and this is valued against the Standard Schedule of Rates. Following the study findings the

SSR has been revised for works taken up under NREGA and people are likely to get fair wage. But although the issue of minimum wages not accruing to the worker is well recognized and the central govt. has advised states to do this before implementing the Act, no state has come forward. Officials in the states I visited did not want to open the Pandora box and took umbrage saying that this would have a cascading effect on agriculture and it is already unprofitable. I am told that even the central govt. has developed cold feet on this issue.

The second good step was that AP developed an IT based APREGA. For instance the entire calculation of the costs of the "works" is by a software and gives details of how many can work and for how long and other details, it also decides on the payments for each worker when the work progress data is recorded and advises the post office of the same. This has denied the engineer who was the king pin not having any role to enhance payments or bring in contractors. But bureaucrats in states are reluctant to using software and other new tools and prefer the old approach despite acknowledging its weaknesses and being the source of corruption and information opaqueness.

The key NREGA officials at the cutting edge namely the village secretary, panchayat engineer and programme implementation officer are just not interested and openly say that have nothing to gain from NREGA works and do something only when pressurized by a top official most of whom seem reluctant to interfere in view of local powerful vested interests. They want NREGA to fail so that the govt. will go back to "business as usual" as that is of benefit to them. This task is made easy because on one side being a "right" the onus is shifted on the worker while all the decision making power is vested with the bureaucracy. There is no locus standi for anyone else and activists have to helplessly watch a good law being made to fail. It is vital for the UPA to put the NREGA a mission mode with clear outputs being demanded of officials rather than leaving it to helpless poor people to get the legislation effective on the ground.

A whole lot of stories abound leading to the workers distrusting and not coming forward especially as their past experience has been one of being cheated on the rightful wages, inordinate delays in making payments and denials in case they protested. There is no external grievance redressal mechanism and villagers have to only be at the mercy of the village secretary and lower level officials. Unless transparency is widely and proactively taken forward, workers get their wages properly and on time, facilities at workplace are created and flexible work-





ing timing is allowed to suit summer heat, the workers will continue to be distrustful of NREGA and unless they challenge the system and take on its might the NREGA will meet the fate of similar development interventions.

The Center for Environment Concerns looks at the NREGA as a valid approach to meet some of the CMP goals in terms of reducing poverty and hunger. It recognizes its potential to address multiple development objectives in the rural areas. So even before NREGA was launched, we undertook a pilot under a memorandum of understanding with the state department of rural development. I am sharing a few learnings, space and time being the constraint.

NREGA can work effectively only when key players such as the community leaders, elected representatives and activists work together with clarity on what must be done and by whom. For this to happen the power must be shifted and officials held accountable. The officials must serve on a mission

mode with the administrative mechanism designed to deliver services on time and with courtesy. The existing govt. system is just not suited to serve NREGA and must be thoroughly overhauled. In the whole task the village secretary plays a key role and this must be shifted to the panchayat who should have clear authority, responsibility and accountability to the outcomes. NGOs must assist the panchayat in making its task effective through facilitation services, resources to undertake the task effectively, make available technology including connectivity and bond closely with the workers by providing them with information and tackling the myriad problems they face in taking employment under NREGA. If such a process could be triggered even in some places it will have a multiplier with people seeing and knowing the steps for the fruition of their goals.

In short, unless the workers gain confidence there is no way they are going to participate in it even if it is a right conferred on them. Once the workers have the confidence

the bottlenecks NREGA is now facing will be overcome through their challenge and collective strength. One of the outcomes of the pilot is that villagers refused to apply for work unless a third party such as the NGO gives them the assurance. The task of civil society activists in NREGA is to take responsibility to volunteer being an honest intermediary and develop worker teams who can work to seeing work that provides proper wages and on time along with developing the natural resource base so as to improve the quality of life. Once these forces move and taste NREGA they will create a new dynamic that could be harnessed to spiral a process that realizes to full potential the multiple goals conceived in the Act.

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