

## Opinion

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Opinion - Op-Ed

### NREGS: not caste in stone

P. Sainath

*It would be rash to conclude that the NREGS is breaking down social hierarchies big time. It is certainly calling them into question, though.*

— PHOTO: P. SAINATH



**ECONOMIC NECESSITY: The NREGS is not breaking down social hierarchies but certainly calling them into question. Across Andhra even those from dominant castes are seeking work under it in a time of grave crisis.**

Balijas, Reddys and other upper or dominant castes working on improving the lands of Dalits? It's happening here in Kondama Naiyuni Palayam village of Anantapur district in Andhra Pradesh. Call it necessity. Call it NREGS. The heavy late rains may have brought relief to Rayalaseema region in terms of fodder, and drinking water. But they also devastate the short duration crops that people have sown. So this village and its neighbours are heavily NREG dependent.

"We work together, all of us, and not on a caste basis," say E. Ravi and K. Maheshwar, both Balijas. NREGS work priorities are clear here. The land development programme under it must first exhaust dalit and adivasi households before serving the others. In places like K.N. Palayam, where the

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villagers are organised, this actually gets done. It is not the same everywhere. And it would be rash to conclude that the NREGS is breaking down social hierarchies big time. It is certainly calling them into question, though.

There is also economic necessity. "Even people with 25 acres in our rainfed farms seek NREGS work, says Narasimha Reddy in Palacherla village. Yes, he confirms, most landowning Reddy households in this village of 350 families are reporting for NREG work — a big shift in attitudes. About 400 people — an equal number of men and women — go to the NREG site.

#### Impact on social structures

Within limits, says Malla Reddy, a 35-year veteran of NGO activism here, the NREGS does impact on social structures. Now, when landowners call Dalits or Adivasis to work, they are relatively more respectful. Because the labourers have the option of Rs. 100 a day work here."

In K.N. Palayam, groups like the Rural and Environment Development Society have sharpened that impact. REDS has managed a creative interpretation of NREG rules locally. "You'll find several households that have exceeded 100 days work," says C. Bhanuja, President of REDS. We did.

It isn't all quite simple, however. Both, the programmes' own problems and those within the economy and society surface often. A full fifth of those seeking work in K.N. Palayam are over 60 years of age. S. Kadhar Wali, who is well over 70, puts it simply: "Why work at 70? You may as well ask, why eat at 70." He and his wife S. Bibi have been doing NREGS work from 2006. This year, Bibi dropped out after a bout of typhoid. "We returned to work as the rise in food prices has destroyed poor people these past few years."

In Aiyaram Gopalapadu, Kurnool, ex-Sarpanch C. Sankaraiah, clings to the old hierarchies. "I won't do it," he says, dismissing NREG work. "I own nine acres. It's insulting." But what about those 30-acre rainfed farmers in Anantapur, spotted at NREG sites? "Anantapur politics are very different from our politics here." But one of his sons is working at the very site he leads us to.

Contradictions do plague the NREGS in its present avatar. One, between landowners and landless labourers. "This Rs. 100 a day wage is killing us," grumble many of the bigger landowners. Actually, most workers average Rs. 80. But the bigger owners are hostile. And then there are the small and medium land holders. They employ wage labour — but also work at NREG sites themselves to make ends meet. "This wage is hurting our farming operations and driving the price rise," goes the chorus in Palavai, Palacherla and elsewhere.

The same voices protest when asked what they would do if the NREG wage fell to Rs. 50 tomorrow. "How will we survive? We need this wage." These are people owning between 5 and 8 acres.

The late rains stoke the farmer-labourer contradiction. The farmers want NREGS put on hold so they can attend to their fields and find labour for them. The landless cannot afford to go without work for any length of time. That's when migrations surface again, though overall, the programme has reduced them considerably. That's the case in K. Nagalapuram in Kurnool, where we run into many labourers leaving for Bangalore. Another universal complaint is about payment delays. "These are killing," says Somappa as he departs for Bangalore.

There is also the odd village where the NREG has been captured by local mafias determined to keep the wages down. As In Harekal in Kurnool district where NREGS work vanished for months. (However work resumed the next day following a report in *Eenadu* after our visit.) Or in Pothireddypalli in Mahbubnagar, where the priority for work on Dalit lands is being subverted. Tractor owners evade land development work on Dalit farms. "Our bills will

never be settled," claims one of them. In Anantapur, the Lambada adivasis of Kareddypalli *tanda* are bogged down by bureaucratic quibbles and local tensions. "Our *tanda* is in Kadiri Mandal [rural]," points out T. Nagesh. "But our fields are just yards away in the next, Nallacheruvu mandal. The people there won't let us work and the officials do nothing." And so several in the *tanda* have migrated — to Kerala.

And there is the work itself. The broad success of NREGS in states like Andhra has seen some romanticise it. You only have to attempt the body-sapping work that a hungry malnourished people do, in sizzling temperatures, to swiftly abandon such ideas. Hearing of NREG "boycotts" in villages like Sanevaripalli in Anantapur, we went there. "What boycott?" asks Nagappa, who owns five acres here. "They give us impossible work. See this rocky land. Don't tell us about trenching and digging, just try it yourself in this hard and dry soil. And what will it achieve? Why can't they give us sensible work which we can do."

#### Not insurmountable

"These are not insurmountable problems," says Malla Reddy. "The people of this village themselves are showing us alternatives within the NREGS." They show us large tracts of land that can be made cultivable removing the small but heavy rocks that dot them. "Then there is the development of common lands with vegetation and fodder. Farm ponds could also prove crucial. You have to be imaginative and use diverse approaches across regions. In Anantapur for instance, we have forests without trees. The regeneration of those could be a major work. In zones like these, rain-fed horticulture development would help. And in fact, we should be creating work for landless and small farmers round the year. We need very strict enforcement of priorities that demand Dalit and Adivasi lands be the first to benefit. Finally, it means dumping the 100-day per household yearly limit on work. All this can only happen when you move from piecemeal action to integrated, long-term planning."

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