

Community Information Resource Centre: Information Empowerment for Rural India

By exposing corruption in NREGA, the CIRC Ratnauli threatens to undermine the pillars of the establishment.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), launched seven years ago in 200 districts, is going through a critical learning phase. During this period there are bound to be many procedural problems, all the more so as the NREGA guidelines are very exacting. This does not detract from the fundamentally positive nature of this initiative, or from the possibility of making it a success. In the recent years, it did give the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) good reasons to demand remedial action when the programme came under its redoubtable scanner. The question remains whether NREGA funds actually reach the poor.

Bihar had barely begun the transition from the “traditional system” of corruption in public works schemes (involving private contractors, mass fudging of muster rolls, and institutionalised kickbacks) towards a transparent and accountable system. The transparency safeguards had been sabotaged by vested interests and the system was virtually unverifiable.

The silver lining is that even in this corruption-ridden state, there are some indications of positive change. As checks and balances are put in place, the system is becoming harder for vested interests to manipulate, and corruption is coming down. Thanks to ‘Community Information Resource Centre’ (CIRC)-the clampdown on corruption has recently intensified, after Bihar earned a bad name for mass corruption in NREGA.

CIRC – Ratnauli

Like other deprived villages in Bihar, Ratnauli of Muzaffarpur is also steeped in poverty. Majority of people are scheduled caste Paswans, Dusadhs, Sahni and Mahtos, who mostly work either in the agricultural field as labourer or run local small business for their livelihood. The information regarding NREGA job card has been always been a distant dream for the villagers. But, with the initiative of Digital Empowered Foundation (DEF), it’s not a dream anymore.

Corruption has turned almost into an art form in NREGA. Sarpanchs, Panchayat members are run by groups acting in their own interests rather than for the benefit of the citizens. The poor people of Ratnauli lose trust in Panchayati raj institutions and in those entrusted with power.

There was evidence of significant fudging of muster rolls in NREGA in villages of Muzaffarpur. In some cases, this had been done (illegally) to augment the material component of the scheme, without appropriating any funds, but there were also cases where embezzlement was involved.

The “hoarding” of job cards by Sarpanchs, Panchayat secretaries or others was a common problem in Ratnauli. The usual excuse is that they need the job cards to make requisite entries in them. The real reason, quite often, is that they want to be free to make fake entries in the job cards, beyond public scrutiny, as part of their attempts to fudge the records and siphon off NREGA funds.

Now, the muster rolls and other NREGA records are usually available for public scrutiny at the CIRC centre in Ratnauli in computerised form. Till date, labourers from 15 Panchayats in the Ratnauli region come to this CIRC centre and take information regarding their NREGA job cards. Most of them are women labourers.

In May 1, 2013, Digital Empowered Foundation started Ratnauli CIRC centre, aimed as information, communication hub dealing with products and services in this regard serving the needs of the local communities in education, health, livelihood, public service delivery services and others. One important purpose of these CIRC is to fulfill the content needs of local communities through online and offline facilities.

Hope is a repudiation of today's desperation and a celebration of tomorrow's opportunities. The hundreds of workers get the details of their job card from Ratnauli CIRC centre. They show it to the other villagers who were not aware about this. In this way, CIRC-Ratnauli movement has voiced the collective frustration of the people. The NREGA workers are hoping that this movement will be the father of change in their village. They dare the stormtroopers of a paranoid local governance institutions, awaken the working class, and shake the foundations of a corrupt regime that kept changing its fig leaf in its anxiety to curtain shame. This is the magic of CIRC.

Due to Community Information Resource Centre the villagers of Ratnauli now get the Internet connectivity where there is rarely electricity supply, just the odd TV set and no roads to speak of. Moreover, there the people are barely literate, who haven't been near a computer in the past.

In the last six months, with nearly 10,000 beneficiaries, it is fast becoming the citizen's tool to fight corruption in NREGA in Ratnauli. Not just in Ratnauli but across 24 Panchayats, including Patahi, Toorky, Mahantmaniyari, Gwaridih, Dumari, Harishankar, Majhauliya and Rampurmani villages. The ultimate goal is to equip the people with Information.

These records also are useful reading for those who believe that NREGA funds are systematically going down the drain. Equally enlightening are people's testimonies.

Who bears the cost of corruption? The World Bank ranks it as one of the biggest barriers to a country's growth, bringing it down by 0.5 to 10 percentage points a year. Our democracy has become a democracy that money can buy.

Marginalised communities are the primary beneficiaries of the CIRC Ratnauli – this is one of the strongest arguments for it. A large majority of beneficiaries belong to Scheduled Caste and OBC families. Similarly, the proportion of women among workers is more than 50 per cent, and rising day by day.

Disadvantaged communities benefit from the CIRC not only as wage earners but also in many other ways. For instance, the centre is an entry point for their active participation in gram sabhas and other institutions of local governance. It is also an opportunity for them to organise around common interests – this may turn out to be one of the most important roles of the CIRC.

Through CIRC, Digital Empowered Foundation is also working to increase digital literacy and internet awareness to make rural India digitally empowered. The rural population in Ratnauli are actually becoming aware of the new technology and realizing its benefits. With the majority of population residing in remote villages being dependent on agriculture the internet has variety of information to provide.

The centre is also disseminating information regarding Agriculture, Weather, Village and Panchayat's development activities, State and Central government's schemes for rural areas, which is crucial to the farmers. To provide digital services like printing, scanning, educational film screening, the centre is well-equipped to give the villagers a better insight into various problems and address the local issues like unemployment and education.

Behind the story of CIRC-Ratnauli, there is one overarching lesson. Corruption can be eradicated from NREGA, and the way to do it is to provide relevant information through proper connectivity. There are 250,000 Panchayats in 635,000 villages through 3 million elected Panchayat representatives. If we connect one Panchayat, in turn it becomes a hub for potential Internet users from two-three villages.

The NREGA is not the answer to everything. If the Act is well implemented, it can provide an important form of social security in rural areas. The NREGS can also help revive the rural economy, by creating productive assets, generating purchasing power, strengthening institutions of local governance and promoting new standards of transparency.

But still, there is a limit to what can be achieved with Rs.16,200 in a year for a NREGA worker, however well spent. Permanent solutions to agrarian distress require other interventions as well, such as public investment in rural infrastructure and more equitable property rights.

However, no sensitive person can fail to be moved by the words they have used to describe how CIRC Ratnauli helped in NREGA employment to live with dignity, feed their children and send them to school. Now, this is not the time for a loss of nerve.