

'Panchayat Bodies still being bypassed'

Special Correspondent

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Actual control lies with administration, reveals pilot study

Even as the Centre has decided to extend the national Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGAS) to all districts across the country, the role of Panchayati Raj institution in its implementation remains a far cry from what was originally envisaged. Despite the "central role" given to the PRIs, the control still lies with the Administration.

A new pilot study, underlining the need to institutionalize the role of PRIs in the execution of NREGS, has revealed that the Pradhans of panchayat samities and Zilla Pramukhs of districts were being bypassed and their role was being suppressed in Rajasthan where 90 per cent of the work under NREGS is claimed to be implemented through village panchayats.

The study was conducted by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) in 12 village panchayats of Sapotra and 10 village panchayats of Karauli blocks in Karauli district, covering a total of 220 households. It found that elected representatives of panchayat bodies were not even co-signatories under NREGS unlike other development schemes.

PRIA State coordinator Anju Dwivedi said here on Saturday that the PRI members interviewed during the study expressed disdain over the centrality of role "provided theoretically to panchayats when the actual control lies with the administration". Even in matters of transfer of NREGS staff, the Pradhans at panchayat samities are not consulted.

The study also pointed out that the average wage reported from the State

- Study conducted by the Society for Participatory research in Asia

- PRI representatives not co-signatories under NREGS

was Rs.50.78 a day, which was less than the minimum wage, prescribed under the scheme. In a disquieting repercussion of low wages, people's trust in NREGS is waning rapidly and the migration from villages in search of employment, which initially showed a downward trend, is again on the rise.

Ms.Dwivedi noted that the State Government had recently reduced the task by 30 per cent for calculating wages under the scheme. The new norms, benefiting mostly women and old labourers, have been brought into effect from October 1.

The study observed that women at the work site were not getting basic amenities, leading to the neglect of children.moreover, many young children from 10 to 14 years were found to be employed on work sites on the job cards of their family members.

It was also noticed that only 25.8 per cent of the labourers engaged could complete 100 days of employment, while the families below poverty line (BPL after the 2002 survey were denied registration on flimsy grounds.

Since the demand for employment is weak in some areas, people who do not get job within 15 days of application lose the right to stake a claim for unemployment allowance. “Not a single case of unemployment allowance being paid has been reported in Rajasthan,” said Ms.Dwivedi.

With Rajasthan having won accolades as a “performing State” vis-à-vis the implementation of NREGS, the study revealed that 11.75-lakh people were given employment till March this year, job cards were issued to all the households registered in the scheme, 70 per cent of labourers were women and 90 per cent of work was implemented through village panchayats, at least in papers, through “bottom-up planning”.

“Yet there is much to learn and act upon. In addition to a strong community mobilization, the monitoring system needs to be strengthened with people’s participation in the State to check irregularities and make the scheme successful,” said the study.

Norwegian delegation visits women panchayat in Haryana

Minisha Jha

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To get a glimpse of the functioning of a women panchayat in Haryana a have a meaningful interaction, a Norwegian delegation including Norwegian Minister for local Government and regional Development Magnhild Meltveit Kleppa visited Neemkheda village in the Mewat district of Haryana on Tuesday. The function was organised as a part of a three-day programme organised by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj during Ms.Kleppa's visit to India.

Residents of Neemkheda village, said to be the first village in Haryana to elect an all women gram panchayat, welcomed the delegates by organizing a cultural show showcasing Haryana's traditional songs and dance. A guard of honor was also presented to Ms. Kleppa by the Haryana police.

Elaborating on her background, Ms.Kleppa said: "The first women panchayat was elected in Norway 82 years ago. I too began my political career first as an elected representative from my village in Norway in the 1970s and along the way I have come to learn that women too matter in dealing with local problems and they care more about social issues than men do."

"Women being gifted with the ability to balance home and work are capable of bringing about a change in society and for this attitude of men towards them must change and they should be more understanding and supportive," she added.

Ms.Kleppa hoped that just as the history of the first elected women panchayat is still relevant in Norway, similarly

Neemkheda too is making history and showing the way for others in its own way.

As a token of their gratitude, the delegates led by Ms.Kleppa presented an impromptu song in Norwegian language for the villagers and they also presented them a book on Norway along with a music disc comprising Norwegian songs. Ms.Kleppa said: "The song we have presented before you talks about a bird and just as a bird is said to be an optimistic, let us too be optimistic about the future."

"Panchayats in India and local municipal councils in Norway face similar challenges such as children's education and women's health and so we hope to continue dialogue between the two countries on how to strengthen such local bodies," she added.