

Disempowering the People*

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The aim of all fascistic governments is to disempower the people; and the Modi government is no exception. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) which promised one member in every rural household a maximum of 100 days of employment per year was a demand-driven scheme. In a limited sense therefore it gave people a right to employment, not to everyone and not for as many days as a person wanted; but a right nonetheless. It ran counter to the logic of neoliberalism, but became possible because of pressure from the Left at a time when the government at the centre was dependent on Left support. Since then however there has been a persistent attempt to whittle down the scheme on one pretext or another; and this attempt has reached a climax under the current fascistic government of the BJP, whose opposition to it has been articulated by none other than the prime minister himself.

The BJP, like several other political parties, is perfectly willing to make cash transfers to women to get their votes. Indeed such transfers are supposed to have played a major role in ensuring the victory of its alliance in the recent Maharashtra Assembly elections; yet it is attempting to decimate the MGNREGS. The basic difference between the two schemes lies in the fact that the cash transfer scheme is a charity for which the recipient is supposed to be grateful, while MGNREGS confers a sort of right to employment on the beneficiary; the beneficiary gets a payment in return for work for which there is no question of any gratitude on his/her part. It is this conferring of a right, which amounts to according the beneficiary the dignity of citizenship, that irks the BJP. MGNREGS is a form of empowerment which cash transfers are not, for, while being useful, they can be cut off at any moment at the whim of the government. And fascistic outfits always seek to disempower the people which is why MGNREGS is under attack.

There are five distinct ways in which this attack is being launched. The first is through the government's insistence on the National Mobile Monitoring System which requires that the workers should upload their pictures to prove that they were present at the work-site and that the work was executed, and on the Aadhaar-Based Payments System which requires their bank accounts to be linked to their Aadhaar cards. It is exceedingly difficult for workers to fulfil these requirements, one important reason for which is the sheer non-availability of the internet over large parts of rural India. As a result, large numbers of workers become ineligible for claiming work under MGNREGS; in fact, according to a report in Newslick, an NGO, LibTech India, has estimated that 67 million workers have become ineligible for MGNREGS owing to the absence of the Aadhaar link.

The second way is by denying MGNREGS funds to states, typically to those states that are ruled by opposition parties, on the plea that there is large-scale corruption associated with the scheme; West Bengal has been a prime victim here. Carrying out a social audit is the way to tackle complaints regarding corruption and the central government accuses states of not carrying out social audit. But the social audit units are supposed to be paid by the central government which has not paid them for quite some time. Besides, even assuming that the state government is at fault, any blanket

denial of funds by the central government for a scheme that is supposed to be fully funded by the centre, amounts to punishing the people for the sins of the state government; this is just an excuse for running down the scheme.

The third way in which the scheme is being run down is through the building up of wage arrears. At a recent demonstration by MGNREGS workers in Delhi, many people complained that they had been paid their wages three years after the work they had done! The law provides that workers should receive compensation if wage payment is delayed, just as it provides that an unemployment allowance must be paid in case work is not assigned. But till now there has been no payment of either unemployment allowance or any compensation; this is a gross violation of the law for which however nobody has ever been punished. Delayed wage payment discourages applicants and hence undermines the scheme.

The fourth way in which the scheme is being sabotaged is through inadequate allocations for it in the central government budgets, which, incidentally is one of the reasons for the delay in wage payments. This trait goes back to the UPA-II government. The then Finance Minister, P Chidambaram always underprovided for MGNREGS in the budget and when asked about it responded by saying that since it is a demand-driven scheme adequate provision would be made for it if the need arises. The problem however is that in the process of making this provision, when the need does arise, sometime gets lost, which then results in delayed wage payments; this in turn gives rise to a lower demand for work because of a “discouraged worker effect”. The BJP government has carried this to an extreme limit.

The budgetary provision for MGNREGS for 2024-25 was Rs 86,000 crores, which, after deduction for wage arrears, would come down to around Rs 60,000 crores. This is so low that wage arrears would build up again, thus creating a permanent and ever growing pool of wage arrears that effectively discourages applications and serves to undermine the scheme. The revised budget for MGNREGS, when thousands of workers had trekked back to their villages because of the sudden lock-down on account of Covid, had been Rs 1,13,000 crores. This had provided them with a life-line. This urban-to-rural migration however has not been reversed despite the abatement of Covid, which means that the allocation, even at the current level of the scheme, should be in the neighbourhood of that very figure. Instead we have this year an allocation of just Rs 60,000 crores after excluding wage arrears which only prolongs the syndrome of delayed wage payments and discouraged worker effect. In fact the protesting MGNREGS workers in Delhi on December 6 were demanding an extension of the scheme and an allocation of Rs 2.5 lakh crores, which gives some indication of the scale of requirement.

The fifth way in which the government is strangulating the MGNREGS is by keeping the wage-rates inordinately low. An idea of how low wages have been, can be got from the following. The erstwhile Planning Commission had taken 2200 calories per person per day in rural India as the benchmark for poverty; and according to the NSS large sample survey for 2011-12, access to 2200 calories has come when the daily per capita expenditure has reached approximately Rs 50. Since then there have been no comparable NSS surveys, but if we simply use the consumer price index for rural areas then the corresponding wage-rate for 2023-24 comes to Rs 82. Assuming a household of five persons (husband, wife, two children and an elderly relative), this would require a daily wage rate of at least Rs 410. In fact the daily wage rate has to be

even higher, both because some money needs to be set aside for emergencies, and also because the consumer price index does not fully capture the increase in the actual cost of living. This is because it does not capture the effect of the privatisation of essential services like education and healthcare which also makes these services more expensive.

Even a committee of experts appointed by the central government has recently recommended a daily wage rate of Rs 375 for MGNREGS workers. By contrast not only are there large variations in wage rates across states, but in no state was the wage rate anywhere near Rs 375. In fact only in four of the major states, Haryana, Kerala, Karnataka and Punjab, was the daily wage rate above Rs 300; in all the remaining states the wage rate was between Rs 200 and Rs 300. Such abysmally low wages, which moreover remain unpaid for long stretches of time, act as a great disincentive for workers.

These are the ways in which the present government is running down a rights-based scheme which had been one of the most consequential pieces of legislation in post-independence India, and forcing people to beg for the mercies in the form of cash transfers. But then what else can one expect from a government headed by fascistic elements?

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