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COMMENTARY

What Happens to Public Service Delivery under a Weak Civil Society? Evidence from India

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Abstract

This paper argues the performance of public service delivery under weak civil society. Drawing on information from the world's largest workfare programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), it is argued that in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) benefits of NREGA hardly reach the poor. This is due to the presence of weak civil society organisations (CSOs), which is riddled with corruption and factionalism, and operates at the cost of social expense. The ruling elites who hold the key to these institutions have made it difficult for citizens to voice their concerns and negotiate their entitlements.

Keywords: civil society, NREGA, Uttar Pradesh, corruption, factionalism, development, transparency, accountability, villages, India

Introduction

What happens to public service delivery under a weak civil society? How can civil society organisations be improved to incorporate the voices of the poor? I address these questions in reference to UP by taking into account the world largest workfare programme, NREGA.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 1 narrates the performance of NREGA in the context of UP. Section 2 describes the status of CSOs in UP, while section 3 provides policy recommendations to make CSOs vibrant. Finally, the paper concludes.

1. Performance of NREGA in Uttar Pradesh

NREGA is the largest employment provision act operating in India, and major plank in India's anti-poverty policy. NREGA is an act of the parliament, and not merely a government programme (Jenkins and Manor, 2017). This act was legislated in 2005, and promises constitutional commitment on the part of the Indian state to guarantee at least 100 days of wage employment to any rural household whose members demand work. By 2009, the act was expanded to 600+ districts across India, and by

2016-17, NREGA had generated about 2.35 billion workdays of employment, with more than 50 million households associated with it (Misra, 2019).

But implementation of this act varies across Indian states. In the state of Andhra Pradesh, the act has been implemented through the state bureaucracy, while in Rajasthan and UP it has been devolved through elected village councils (the *panchayats* or GPs). In UP, the key implementer of NREGA at the village level is the headman (*pradhan*) who is the head of the GP and is accountable to all beneficiaries. In this state, GPs have failed to deliver anything like an effective basis of democracy and accountability. These institutions have reinforced unequal access to power, where dominance has been buttressed rather than undermined by law. Corruption has spread to such a level that the entire administration thrives only on graft (Dutta, 2012). Rules and regulations are commonly disregarded, development funds are squandered by the pradhan for aggrandisement. Besides, most government schemes such as *Indira Aawaas Yojana*[1] and the *Samajwadi Pension Scheme*[2] are used to mobilise political support at the local level. Village meetings (*gram sabhas*) a part of participatory democracy is rarely held and whenever they are held factional rivalries dominates at the cost of social concerns. This has resulted in loss of trust among villagers towards rural institutions as they think these bodies cannot resolve their problems. This is best captured by a rural proverb '*hakim ke aghadi aur ghodeke pichadi na jaiyyo*' (do not walk in front of an officer or behind a horse), meaning in both the cases you will be kicked or some adversity will befall you! It suggests the lack of trust villagers have over government institutions and officials.

In UP, NREGA was introduced in 2005-06, but was vigorously pursued and expanded across the state in 2009–10. Mayawati[3] was concerned that the word 'National' in the title of the act (amended later to include Mahatma Gandhi) would benefit her opposition (the Congress). This was surprising, as majority the disadvantaged castes who formed the major support of her party were beneficiaries. This poor implementation of the act was reflected in employment-unemployment survey conducted by National Sample Survey Organisation (2009–10), which reflected only 16.24 per cent of rural households participated in the act (Srivastava, 2016). When compared with south Indian states (Kerala,

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[1] Renamed as Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awas Yojana, it is flagship-housing programme by the Ministry of Rural Development, which provides financial support to poor households to construct their dwellings.

[2] Samajwadi pension scheme (launched in 2014) by the government of UP provides a pension of Rs 500 (US$ 7) per month to households belonging to BPL category.

[3] Mayawati was the youngest chief minister of UP. Under her leadership her party held power until 2007, when her party won a landslide victory. She was instrumental in initiating various welfare programmes benefiting disadvantaged castes.

Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry), where participation was more than 50 per cent (Pankaj and Tanka, 2010). The condition of female labourers is even more precarious. Women labourers are only allowed to work in fields owned by farmers of their own caste or if other women from the same caste work there. In Sitapur district (central UP), hostile male relatives and their acquaintances have forced women labourers not to undertake NREGA work, as they considered it arduous, and only suitable for males.

This has allowed the pradhan to manipulate the act on three fronts – economic, political and administrative. At the economic front, the pradhan generates illicit income through various sources. The most common source is through the use of private contractors, although contractors are not allowed under the norms of the act. The biggest political incentive for the pradhan is dragging his feet over NREGA implementation. This includes the ability to ration jobs and distribute them according to his discretion. Rationing occurs due to scarcity, a key determinant behind distorted distribution (Weitz-Shapiro, 2014). From the perspective of the local implementer, a greater availability of NREGA works makes it less costly to distribute it to someone who will not provide (or less likely to provide) any political support in return (Maiorano, et. al, 2018). Finally, at the administrative level, pradhan allies with leaders up the hierarchy. Among them the most important is the block development officer (BDO). The BDO is responsible for approving projects, certifying projects on completion and disbursement of wages. While distributing wages of NREGA, the BDO wields power by digitally approving payments through the use of 'dongle' for electronic signature. This authority provides him the leverage to negotiate for rents ex-ante (before the wages are effectively paid to the workers' bank accounts).

At the village level, the pradhan chooses only those beneficiaries who are scarcely educated. These beneficiaries depend on the pradhan or village assistant (rogar sevak) to supply them information regarding the provisions of the act. This has provided strength to the pradhan, as beneficiaries are called and provided jobs. Calling workers individually are against the norms, as NREGA promises jobs on demand. The pradhan has strong incentive of not acquitting these beneficiaries of their specific rights conferred upon them under the act. This also suits the interests of local bureaucrats who demonstrate there is no unfulfilled demand within their block, as beneficiaries hardly approach them with their complains. This has led to clientelism, a mutual exchange based on discriminatory patronage, where every worker is treated differently. The major feature of this 'give and take' relationship it cuts across caste and class lines. The aim is to derive personal gain out of each beneficiary. Under this exchange, two categories of workers are chosen. The first includes those

beneficiaries who have the ability to garner votes for the pradhan through their network of friends and relatives. The second category includes those beneficiaries with whom the pradhan teams-up to manipulate the act. These beneficiaries are chosen based on services, favours and loyalty.

2. Status of CSOs in Uttar Pradesh

The above discussion indicates that NREGA has been poorly implemented. Two reasons exist. First, poor citizens in rural areas are unorganised and hardly protest against poor service delivery. This has led to low participation in public sphere, as citizens are rarely mobilised over political issues. Second, in complete absence of any podium the poor fail to negotiate their entitlements. This has led to some key questions: what is the role of CSOs in UP? Can CSOs be made vibrant to incorporate the voices of the poor?

In UP, there are two categories of CSOs. The first category includes CSOs that are co-opted by elites. In India, upper middle classes have consolidated their hold over the poor by allowing them minimal rights to bargain for state resources (Chatterjee, 1993). The upper classes encourage the poor to imagine themselves as people in the process of development. The poor receive benefits such as loans, places in schools, scholarships and positions in government institutions. This strategy allows these classes to effectively neutralise social tactics. This broader picture of domination of elites is reflected in UP where elites have seized land from the poor, dominated lucrative work and controlled access to social networks. In these areas, middle classes have reproduced their privilege in part by establishing educational NGOs (Jeffery, et al., 2006). These organisations offer poor children schooling without altering patterns of social reproduction. By controlling educational opportunities, these classes are able to inculcate norms of good behaviour and disciple the poor and, in the process, make considerable money out of education.

The second category includes those CSOs who have a good track record, but are unable to operate in villages, due to existing local power structure, which holds sway on the basis of caste, class and religion. Mahila Samakhya (launched in late 1980s) is a quasi-public agency for women's literacy and empowerment. It operates under four broad areas – education, health, governance and law – and organises rural lower caste women. As part of a government order in Sitapur district, the organisation in 2010-11 was responsible for running of mid-day meal scheme.[4] The coordination of this scheme

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[4] The mid-day meal scheme was introduced by the central government to provide cooked food to children in government schools.

was always a source of conflict between the female staff responsible for preparing the meals and school heads. The school heads would come late for work, and would interfere in the cooking process. This irritated the female staff as they reported the matter to government officials responsible for monitoring this scheme. But officials dismissed the complaint on matter pertaining to purity and pollution.[5] Given the realities of social exclusion and inequality in rural UP, it is hard to reject the hypothesis that upper castes have captured rural institutions making CSOs difficult to operate.

3. Making CSOs more Vibrant

In order to make the CSOs vibrant a CSO-panchayat partnership needs to be established. This will regain the confidence of villagers over rural institutions, and improve public service delivery. But to form this partnership some challenges need to be crossed. Women and lower-castes elected as panchayat members under the 73-74th Amendment Act, 1993-94[6] are scarcely educated and have little understanding of politics. When these members confront issues of transparency and accountability power-holders become antagonistic, as they emerge from power structure that has dominated the agrarian landscape for decades. This poses problems for the poor, who become vulnerable to these elites. Since poor are unorganised, they need protection against these groups. Protecting the interests of the poor is difficult, as politics in the state is criminalised and atrocities against disadvantaged castes is everyday affair. The second important challenge is how to obtain reliable information from panchayat leaders. The Right to Information Act (RTI Act)[7] is difficult to implement, as the asymmetric state-citizen relationship will prevent citizens from accessing information. As the pradhan and his associates who handle developmental programmes will ensure that the line between state and society remains blurred, making difficult for citizens to access information thereby protecting their interests. Therefore, in order to establish a mature CSO-*panchayat* partnership the following steps are needed:

Building capacity to *conduct gram sabhas*: Villagers need to be realised regarding the importance of *gram sabhas* as effective instruments for administrative matters. The best way is to organise meetings and workshops. Issues pertaining to the interests of villagers need to be discussed at length. These meetings should be open to all castes and classes, but participation of lower castes should be made

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[5] The concept of purity and pollution is interlinked with the caste system. The hierarchy of the caste decides the degree of purity and pollution. This concept plays an important role in maintaining distance between castes.

[6] This act ensures reservation of seats for disadvantaged castes and women in panchayats.

[7] The RTI Act was introduced in 2005. The Act empowers citizens to obtain information held by the government.

mandatory. In Andhra Pradesh, this experiment was carried by Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP, government imitative), which trained several scarcely educated women and men to join village groups. This increased the awareness of these villagers, adding pressure on rural institutions and their leaders to demand better public deliverables.

Mobilise community-based organisations (CBO) or caste leaders: CBO along with caste leaders[8] should be made aware regarding poverty alleviation schemes, minimum wages act and issues of transparency and accountability. This will enable better dissemination of information. At present information is held by block officials or the pradhan who dispenses it according to their discretion. Another way of disseminating information is to develop a pictorial beginner guide enabling villagers to understand the information.

External capacity building: Staff members from CSOs should be encouraged to visit the worksites, write reports and present the findings to the gram sabhas. These presentations should be written as commissioned articles and circulated in local newspapers. Appropriation of developmental resources by the pradhan or a local bureaucrat, should be taken up by the local media acting as 'public watchdogs'.

Conclusions

In UP, developmental gains did not translate in mobilisation of citizens. In the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, mass mobilisation of marginalised castes created spaces within social policies which led to process of development. There is no evidence of such initiatives in UP, as successive governments are engaged in disputes with their rival parties and are busy imposing allegations against them. The planning commission revels that poverty outcomes have not improved substantially in the state despite funds through centrally sponsored schemes like NREGA. The state still has the largest concentration of the poor as their voices remain muted, in the absence of strong civil society. Private investment, the main driver of growth in India, is absent in the state as prefers to operate from progressive states. Against these odds the future of the state remains uncertain.

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[8] These leaders assist their caste members in various chores. They are useful in disseminating information regarding various welfare schemes.

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