

**Critical Issues of Local democracy and Participation:
 Implementation of Wage Employment Policy in Rural Areas of
 Nashik District (Maharashtra)**

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This paper intends to analyse the issues involved in practicing local democracy and participation with special focus on wage employment policies, especially the Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) implemented at the villages in Nashik district of Maharashtra. It is generally believed that with more local democracy and participation, we seek better inclusion of the beneficiaries and wider as well as wiser benefits to the poor. The paper argues that without capacity building of the rural poor and effective decentralization and participation along with emancipative socio-economic structural changes as well as overall awareness and knowledge building of local democracy and decentralism, the decentralization does not work in favour of the rural poor.

[Key Words: Panchayati Raj, Nashik district, village, rural poor, democracy]

Introduction

Many globalizing and urbanizing nations are facing a serious dilemma of handling the villages and its social development. Globalizing and urbanizing forces are forcing the villages to be crumbled and the issues of rural development becoming more and more critical. Two sets of the dominant rural development ideologies are apparent in this scenario. One is the western style set of ideology that is based on neoliberal-capitalist, centralized and trickle down model of rural development and other is based on indigenous, democratic-decentralized, and participatory model. For many reasons in India and many developing –third world countries, the second set of ideology has proved to be more viable, sustainable, appropriate and justiciable as well. From last few decades the policies of social development in rural areas are thus getting impressed by this ideology. The Panchayati Raj, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitutions of India and many other recent policy frameworks, like Mahatma Gandhi NREGS, of rural development all provided a platform for the progress of this model. However, there seems many dilemmas, many anomalies observed at the village grassroots that create hurdles in the success of democracy based, participatory model.

Methodology

The researcher's collaborative research project with IDS, UK and Department of Sociology, Pune University, Pune was started from 2002 and completed in 2004¹. The data base of 29 villages of Nashik district was used for the project. Again 12 villages from six Talukas of Nashik district were studied later on from 2004 to 2007, for Ph. D. Research.² The survey based quantitative data and qualitative data of the two field works that was gathered from different respondents comprising workers actually working on the EGS and SGRY worksites, the rural poor, Sarpanchs, Assistant Sarpanchs, Gram Sevaks, Talathis, political leaders, officials and activists from villages of Nashik district.

This paper, based on the empirical data, focused on to outline those issues, dilemmas and discrepancies of democratic decentralization and participation in consideration with the wage employment policies with special reference to SGRY work projects implemented at the villages in Nashik district. It also intends to see how local poor could earn maximum benefits of the social policies through local and participatory democracy.

Tehsils or Talukas of Nashik district



Source: Official WebSite of Nashik District.htm

Relating Wage Employment Programmes to Local Democracy

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution strengthened the system of local self-rule under empowered Panchayati Raj. Around the 1990s, 'decentralization emerged as a dominant trend in world politics' (Johnson 2003:1). The process of decentralization spreading all over the world has been having impact on the policy framing, policy implementation and performance of the policies and programmes oriented to rural development and poverty reduction. India is no exception to that. "Since the 73rd Amendment envisages a shift of the planning and implementation of Anti-Poverty programmes from the bureaucracy to local democratic institutions, in which the local community, including the poor, can have greater say..." (Srivastava: 2006:131). Policies and

programmers based on local democracies mainly started with Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) in 1993. Joint Forest Management, Jal Swaraj, Participatory schemes like Yashvant Gram Samrudhhi Yojana (YGSY), SGRY and recently Mahatma Gandhi NREGS are some of the other programmes based on localistic democratic decentralized framework.

WEPs in India are constructed, founded on Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra in 1972. V. S. Page, the Congress leader who had Socialist-Gandhian perspectives and who had practical plan of getting rid of rural poverty, the drought conditions in Maharashtra, the left movements all contributed for the emergence of EGS in Maharashtra. EGS went on developing to be one of the leading poverty reduction programmes of the world having legally supported and right based mechanisms. It was suggested that the better decision making at the village level and ensuring participation of the villagers in the planning and implementation of these programmes would produce positive effects. And, in turn the idea of participation and local democratic involvement was introduced in PEPs with the introduction of JRY and its modified JGSY) and Shramshaktidware Gram Vikas³, a sub scheme under EGS etc.

SGRY emerged in 2001, by amalgamating the two earlier schemes, the JGSY and the EAS, into one and it became the largest ever wage employment based WEP at all India level. SGRY is basically not a demand driven scheme. The specific work under the first stream is given to specific village on the basis of selection of the village done either by Panchayat Samiti member or by ZP member. Under second stream, specific funds are allotted to each Panchayat on certain fixed criterion and the villagers had role to play in making decisions about the development work in the village. The Gram Sabha based participatory decision making, collective implementing as well as monitoring and supervising were the arenas of democratic decentralized model of WEP.

Democratic decentralization and participatory model of wage employment based WEP has always praised for many reasons. Power of participation and localism did miracles in many areas of socio-economic-political life of commons in states like Kerala in India.

There have been several assumptions regarding democratic decentralization and localism in enhancing the quality of implementation of the programmes. Many researchers found local democracy has certain positive impact on policy implementation. (Crook and Sverrisson: 2005, Johnson Craig: 2003)

Localism or democratic decentralization would help to-

- Better identification of issues, needs and problems of the local people.
- Better planning of the programme implementation and deciding their own preferences for the development of the people and village.
- Collective decision making and consensus would reduce the controversies and lead to better planning

- Better targeting due to knowledge of the most needy sections of the community
- Sense of belongingness generated due to participatory efforts of implementation
- Improvement in the quality of work generated by better and continuous monitoring and supervision of the projects
- Preference to local skill holders and contractors and thus controlling the outsider big contractors and middleman
- Lessening the leakages by monitoring and social audit
- Evaluation, assessment and impact of the programmes by continuous interactions in the Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats.
- Better redistribution of resources, wages and scheme benefits
- Improvement in quality of life through socio-economic development which come as an outcome of the policies and programmes.

Positive outputs of Local democracy for SGRY Implementation

The observations from the field reveal that there are certain areas where participatory localism did positive impact on the rural poor in Nashik district. There are certain areas where participatory localism did work. Firstly, it was apparently observed that the local democracy helped to select need based, useful projects for the villagers. The location of the SGRY worksites was more within the village. People think that they were thus more useful for them. Although, the decisions about selecting the projects were not taken in genuine Gram Sabha, the leaders who took the decisions did consider the usefulness of the project. The SGRY projects as compared to the EGS projects were relatively closer or within the village. Many of EGS projects were associated with soil and water conservation needed certain geographic locations or proper worksites. Therefore such works were shifted to such locations and thus went away from the village borders. The data collected from the Sarpanchs reveals that the assets generated under SGRY were more useful than the EGS.

Secondly, local democracy imbedded in SGRY helped to some extent to better the implementation of the projects. SGRY implementation was better in the sense that there were fewer delays in paying wages and food grains to the workers. The funds already made available to the local implementers like Sarpanch and Gram Sevak helped in relatively prompt wage distribution. SGRY projects seemed to perform better to have fewer, smaller time gaps in project implementation. SGRY projects also seemed better with regard to completion of projects in stipulated time. This is due to the relatively smaller size and length of the SGRY projects. Less gaps in completing the stream II SGRY work projects were there for, advanced funds in hand and relatively smaller size of the work projects.

Where did Local Democracy Fail While Implementing SGRY

A closer empirical look over the programmes all over the world, however, tells us that these expectations from the localistic and democratic

decentralization based policies and programmes did not realized. A local democracy and participatory method to perform in favour of rural masses or the poor has been an issue of anomalies and dilemmas.

Genuine needs, expectation and preferences of the rural people are supposed to be reflected in the participatory decision making under the SGRY project implementation but the reality from the sites was telling otherwise. The specific empirical enquiry of SGRY from the rural pockets of Nashik district, Maharashtra reveals that participation and localism in WEP implementation did not always benefit the poor. The decentralization based policy leads to some positive and many negative implications on its implementation and on the distribution of the benefits under the scheme. There were many dilemmas, and anomalies of SGRY implementation.

Following are some major areas of dilemmas, and anomalies of SGRY implementation-

1. More ignorance about the localistic Scheme

During the field visits, it was revealed that most of the workers and even some Sarpanchs did not know even the name of SGRY. Some of them still called it by its earlier name 'Jawahar Yojana'. 91.8% of the workers did not know that their respective villages get SGRY funds annually to plan and complete the works for generating employment for the poor.

2. No real participatory decision making in selection of works

SGRY provides the opportunity to take decision about the work by the Gram Sabha in participatory, democratic manner. Only 26.47% of the SGRY workers said that the Gram Sabha was conducted for deciding, planning and managing the works. During informal discussions, most of the villagers and members from Gram Panchayat said that they did not know about the collective-democratic decision making and planning incorporated in SGRY. The Gram Sevak did not explain the basics of SGRY in the meetings. When asked the question to workers that 'who took final decision about the SGRY work?' The responses revealed that the decisions about the selection of the works was not being taken in Gram Sabhas or according to the procedure laid down. The authoritative decision making by rural elites and contractor middleman was more prominent.

3. Intervention of Political leaders and stakeholders

Undue intervention of higher level political leaders and stake holders in demanding, sanctioning and implementing the worksites was observed. For example; -1) giving priority to one's own village or region or caste while demanding, allotting the EGS or SGRY (first stream) works, 2) Influencing the worksites and its implementation to facilitate or satisfy the interest of one's own party men, kins or class-castes etc. Implementing officers from Minor Irrigation, Agriculture did often complain about such undue interventions. They believed that this was the most unpleasant part of their duty.

4. Higher the involvement of illegal machines and middleman, lesser the chances of getting employment

Works under SGRY are expected to be planned, managed and implemented by the locals. They can take technical help from the agency departments but here too contractors, middle men are not allowed (SGRY Guidelines: 5.16.1:19). But still the involvement of middleman or and other intermediate agency was observed while executing the works under the programme. The data from the Mukadams reveal that, 33.3% of SGRY works, there was 100% involvement of big outside contractors.

Outside contractors tend to use machines that causing exclusion of the human labour was obviously highest on those sites. There was more widespread use of illegal heavy machinery, especially JCB earthmovers, to substitute for labour in SGRY projects.

5. Meager Fund Allocation

The SGRY stream- II works are especially conducive for democratic decentralization and participatory management. Fund allocation for SGRY works, especially from the second stream was smaller in size. The funds are given for the whole year, mostly in installments and no one can get more funds beyond the limit for the same year. The second stream fund allocation under SGRY was so meager that only two villages out of the 12, received funds more than one lac.

6. Problems of Supervision, Monitoring and vigilance on the site

Monitoring, supervision and vigilance both at local level and also by the governmental bodies was almost absent. In eight out of twelve SGRY projects nobody visited with intention of vigilance. Special committees are appointed from National level to Taluka level for vigilance and monitoring. Their visits on sites were rare. At the empirical level it was found that, 33.33% (four) of these works were also recorded and managed by the contractors, one from the workers themselves, one from Gram Panchayat Peon and in one case no supervision or recording man was visible.

SGRY works implemented relatively poor in supervision and monitoring the worksites due to the negligence from the stake holders, villagers and the implementers. Without proper supervision and day-to-day technical informational support, the quality of assets generated decreases.

7. Exclusion of women and most deprived sections

SGRY guideline specifies that 30% of its employment opportunities reserved for women. This norm was not followed under SGRY. In general terms, considering the total number of workers working on the SGRY worksites (not only from the sampled sites) female participation in the labour force of SGRY works was 26.25%. Average female participation on EGS sites was 47.91% against 26.25% on SGRY projects.

In case of five sampled villages women were totally excluded from the SGRY works. There were several case specific reasons for that. SGRY works in four villages were given to outsider big contractors where women were

totally excluded from the works. Along with women the most backward sections of the society, for example, Dalits, tribal communities like Mahadev Koli also tend to exclude from the benefits of SGRY.

8. Poor amenities at work

On general terms, we can say, amenities at work were almost absent except drinking water. Water, the basic amenity, was not even made available in few cases. Shelter for shed was observed only in 6 workers. In general, SGRY implementers did not know much about the amenities. The marking features of SGRY implementation also adds, low transparency, low accountability, weak targeting, and unsatisfactory asset creation. A similar kind of observation was presented by Gaiha Raghav, Kaushik P. D., and Kulkarni Vani, (1998: 928-949). They argue on the basis of their study on cases of JRY, (the earlier version of SGRY) in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, that in many cases of JRY, targeting was poor and the proportion of unsatisfactory assets was high.

9. Elite capture of PRI and its decision making

The lady Sarpanch from one village was unaware about the SGRY procedures. She said her husband, manages everything. When asked to the husband, who was acting as if he himself was Sarpanch, about the delays for completing SGRY works, he replied, “The political patriarch (godfather) from that village did not yet ordered to think about SGRY works. He also said, “We discussed this issue in Gram Panchayat meeting and decided to wait for the order from the leader. We were not aware of the two-year limit of completing the work either.”

When asked, what he would do if the funds were called back by the government for not completing the work in the stipulated time, he laughed and said, “This will not happen especially about this particular village because the so called leader had good chair and also connections with the concerned authorities.” Later on, after six months they did this work from outsider professional contractor and his own outside workers.

Why was SGRY implemented poorly?

The most striking feature of the failure of the SGRY was associated with the weak Panchayati institutions in Nashik district. The strength of Panchayati institutions at village level (Gram Panchayat) can be assessed with the points like- how frequently of Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha meetings were held, was the attendance to the meetings was sufficient, what were the issues raised in the meetings, was there any genuine number of demands made in the meeting, who took the decisions, was there monitoring present around the projects under and after construction from the villagers, was there any attempt to social audit in Gram Sabha etc.

Poor participation of the worker-villages in Gram Sabhas was evident in many of the villages under the study. Therefore no effective collective and participatory planning was there. These villages did have a background of poor, low income. However, villages with better education and better income were

not much different.

Many of the researchers and scholars have emphasized the relevance of external NGO or action group support make the PRIs empowered. My empirical study showed that 91.7% of the SGRY workers did not have such external guiding support from the NGOs or action group. Vachan, Pragati Abhiyaan, Lok Adhaar these are the NGOs who are working in Nashik on rural development areas. Their training, awareness building activities really pushed the local poor and the villagers to learn many things that are important organize, manage and participate in the decentralization based WEPs or poverty programmes. However, the efforts from these NGOs are not suffice to the requirements from the villages of Nashik district.

Without knowledge and awareness about schemes, governance, democratic political procedures and rights; without inabilities and external support, and with socio-economic dependency voices of the local poor and mobilizations like strikes for less or delayed wages, for less amenities at worksites or for any leakages, malpractice were almost absent.

Crook Richard and Sverrisson Alan (2005) did commanding comparative analysis of the literature on studies and cases from the developing countries for understanding responsiveness and social economic performance outcomes of decentralization to poverty reduction. They hold that “the elite capture of even democratic decentralization remains the main obstacle to the possibility that decentralization might result in pro poor outcomes”. Elite or local dominant sections get system sated opportunities to realise their stakes and get engaged in negative political interventions while implementing WEPs. They always work with a liaison with other political leaders at Block or district level and with the contractors. Poor capabilities and bargaining power of the rural poor led them stick to passive receiving end. Size of the village, composition of the villages, Caste-class-tribe dimensions, patron-client type relationships, economic dependencies at local level, forest area limitations of acquiring land for the development, voicelessness of the Gram Sabha poor, down caste-tribe members are some other socio-economic determinants that makes conditions for the weak application of democratic decentralization and local participatory management of the WEPs.

SGRY projects, in general, do not conform to the expectations of 'democratic localists' stance. This was mainly due to the poor capabilities of the PRIs in all the three levels of Nashik district. The weak capabilities of the local democratic institutions were grounded on several factors. The potential workers or village poor have very weak political abilities and voice in PRIs at various levels from Zilla Parishad to Gram Sabha. Their incapability, caste domination, class domination, economic dependency over the higher class big farmers and games of electoral politics around villages has still remained strong there.

WEPs in India and all over the world are stressing on ideas of democratic decentralization, participatory management of the WEPs and social audit. The reality of the situation from Nashik district reveals that these ideas

will not work without awareness building, capacity building of the village poor backwards and without strengthening the Gram Sabhas.

Approaching the ideal role of local democracy in policy implementation, therefore, depends upon the overall systems of inequality in rural society. The genuine Gram Sabhas, collective decision making and participation in planning and implementation are not observed at the village grass roots.

The state, the promoter of rural local democracy, though, understands quite well the importance of reaching to the local poor to make them empowered to make their own decisions is apparently not willing to do so. Jayal Niraja G., (1999:254-255), argues, "State's discourses of scarcity have generally adopted the language of succor and charity, rather than that of welfare rights or entitlements. As such, the administrative view of the scarcity-affected population is characterized by a benevolent paternalism. This is facilitated by the adoption of manipulative approach to the social facts of hunger or starvation, which are translated in to the technical language of drought-relief as purely physical and natural phenomena, so as to maintain political responsibility. The language of democracy is as far removed from the lives of the affected citizens. Jayal Niraja G., further added that (1999: 256), "it is clear that the Indian state's project of social transformation as expressed through its developmentalist or welfarist goal, it is not above bargaining and compromise. It is closed only to democratic negotiation by vulnerable categories of citizens.

The rural people are less capable of doing such negotiations. Their bargaining power is weak. The marking features of SGRY implementation also adds, low transparency, low accountability, weak targeting and unsatisfactory asset creation. A similar kind of observation was presented by Gaiha Raghav, Kaushik P. D., and Kulkarni Vani, (1998: 928-949). They argue on the basis of their study on cases of JRY, (the earlier version of SGRY) in Maharashtra and Utter Pradesh, that in many cases of JRY, targeting was poor and the proportion of unsatisfactory assets was high. Signs of a general loss of interest in local issues coupled with ignorance or lack of sufficient knowledge about local government and participatory management is extremely worrying.

The issue is not to determine whether local democracy is good or bad while implementing policies and programmes. The real issue is how to maintain and enhance the potentialities of PRIs and the rural people and make such institutional arrangements that could enhance people's participation in the Gram Sabhas and in the decision making. The politics played at village level around inequalities, land issues, issues of migration, caste, elections, welfare schemes and development programmes, nexus and patronage are the real hurdles before localism and democratic decentralization. Poverty, underdevelopment, backwardness, remoteness, ignorance and unequal feudal agro economic set ups are the main areas to make local democracy and decentralization viable in the rural sections. Improved implementation of public policies and programmes are thus seen to be means as well as ends.

Furthermore, local democracy is impossible, unless such institutional

arrangements comprising the change in present rural hierarchical conditions by equitable and right based model of development policy is visible. It is a long term process that starts with awareness building, NGO and action group support, organizations and conscientization of the rural masses. Change in the policy strategies can work positively. The recent steps taken by the NREGS about implementing the works 50% by the Gram Panchayats, social audit mechanism along with the Gram Sabhas, appointment of Rozgar sevaks, involvement of NGOs in monitoring and vigilance are welcoming. States bureaucratic machinery, its political will and has yet to adjust with the change.

Areas of Hopes and Alternatives

Recent reforms in MGNREGS are intending to give more power to Panchayati institutions. However, the decisions about the nature of WEP works, its demands, and the locations of worksites and so on are not made in fully representative manner. The members elected through reservations are in position to take independent decisions and oppose the established vested interest groups. The best way in this context is to strengthen Gramsabha. Cultivating the citizenship, giving more rights and powers to them in terms of suggestions, decision making and supervising will certainly help the poor masses in getting more access to the benefits of assets, created under WEPs.

Villages with better local-decentralized democracy performed better in policy implementation in certain villages having certain promoting conditions. Johnson Craig (2001: 521-532) mentioned three of such conditions- one right balance between autonomy and accountability, support from the external actors and encouragement to democratic deepening. Awareness building and training to the local poor as well as villagers can be seen as prerequisite for the democratic deepening and capacity building of the Gram Sabhas and local politics. Susan Steiner's (2008) rigorous study, based on to assess capacity of local governments in Uganda, showed remarkable association among capable local governments and higher household consumption. She argues (2008:30), "Districts with more capable local governments, which are here regarded to be those with relatively higher financial resources at their disposal or a higher level of technical and administrative capabilities, achieve higher household consumption as well as higher enrolment in public schools than districts with less capable local governments."

Local youth, local educated persons, young leaders, and technical and knowledge support from the NGOs, action groups or any other civil society organizations can collaboratively work for the capacity building of the local governments and especially the Gram Sabhas. Their training, task working, and monitoring watch by the Gram Sabhas can enhance their performance.

However, the village poor's needs and expectations in seeking the benefits of policies and programmes would not be possible just by building their awareness. Power relations among the villagers coincided with caste, class; tribe equations mostly determine the implementation process and the performance of the policies and programmes. The gap between design and implementation has

to be removed. Failure of genuine local democracy in India due to 'unrepresentative and exclusionary character' (Niraja Jayal 1999:255) on one hand and lapses and lacunas in the policy and programme implementation on the other have interlinkages between them.

Notes

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² The 12 sample villages selected from the six talukas for the empirical study comprise Shivangaon, Govardhan, Pimpalgaon Nipani and Marhalgoi (from developed belt comprising Nashik and Niphad), Mahaje, Ozarkhed, Shivade and Ramnagar (from semi developed belt comprising Dindori and Sinnar), and Dhadoshi, Nandgaon Kohli, Mangone and Gavandhapada (from less developed belt comprising Peth and Trimbakeshwar).

³ The idea of participatory management of village development through (*Shramshaktidware Gramvikas*) was introduced by Shri. V. S Page in the 1980s. This was incorporated in Maharashtra EGS in 1989 but was remained neglected.

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