

MGNREGA in Andhra Pradesh's Tribal Areas

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India's scheduled tribes are among the most deprived socio-economic groups and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme has great potential in tribal areas. While the Andhra Pradesh government has made an effort to ensure implementation of the scheme in the scheduled areas, the gap between administrative orders and the grass-roots level is wide. This article lists measures that could radically improve implementation of the scheme in tribal areas.

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The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is likely to change significantly in the coming months. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has promised to make it more outcome-oriented, less prone to theft and to improve implementation. Changes are likely to occur at the state level too, especially where there were changes of government. Andhra Pradesh (AP) is a case in point. On the one hand, the bifurcation of the state will probably translate into quite radical administrative changes; on the other hand, the new Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government has already started talking about introducing potentially radical policy changes.

We point out a few measures that we believe could radically improve the implementation of the scheme in tribal (scheduled) areas of AP (and possibly in other states). It is well known that the scheduled tribes (STs) are among the most deprived social groups in the country. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs' website, STs lag far behind the rest of the population in terms of every

possible human development indicator. According to the 2001 Census, in unified AP 61% of STs are below the poverty line. Tribals derive their sustenance from land and forest and are mostly engaged in agricultural activities which are very primitive in nature and offer very little income. It is therefore crucial that, in reforming the MGNREGA, the special needs of tribal areas are taken into account, since the STs are the section of the population that most desperately need the safety net that the scheme is supposed to provide. This is even more important since official data shows that the generation of MGNREGA employment in tribal areas is lower than in the plain areas. In 2013-14 the average personday in AP (excluding Telangana but including tribal areas) was 54.49 days per household. In tribal areas the corresponding figure was just 43.21 days per household.

The starting point of any policy regarding tribal areas, emanating from constitutional provisions and the Nehruvian Panchsheel principles, is that these areas deserve special treatment because of their peculiar ecological, cultural, demographic and socio-economic context. This should of course apply to the implementation of the MGNREGA too.

The AP government seems to be aware that tribal areas require special attention, and it has indeed tried to adopt special implementation arrangements. On the one hand, it has devolved the responsibility of implementation to the Integrated

Tribal Development Agency (ITDA); on the other hand, it has issued a number of circulars and government orders meant to tackle specific implementation problems.

Different Reality

However, the reality on the ground does not match the administration's efforts. The devolvement of powers to the ITDA, although established on paper, has just not happened on the ground. In many cases, personnel of the rural development department (RDD) are still in charge of the implementation of the MGNREGA and field staff still report to them. There are obvious reasons why the RDD at the local level does not want to let the MGNREGA go since it constitutes a substantial chunk of the department's spending. Less obvious reasons include the power structure that surrounds the MGNREGA, an extremely popular scheme. These power structures are formed by a network of local politicians and administrators that have all the incentives to retain whatever control they can exercise on the scheme (and on the procurement of material). Effectively devolving the responsibility to implement the scheme to the ITDA means disrupting these power structures, a process that is of course resisted at various levels.

However, this is an extremely important step. First, the ITDA operates from a level that is much closer to the grass roots than the RDD, that operates to a significant extent from the district headquarters. This does not only affect the administration's understanding of the ground reality of tribal areas, but it has practical and logistical implications too. For example, the district programme director (PD) is extremely unlikely to visit tribal areas that could be several hours of travelling away (according to official data out of 5,948 tribal villages 1,092 do not have road connectivity at all). This of course affects the crucial monitoring function of the PD that proved to be one of the key reasons for the good implementation of the scheme in other parts of the state.

Also, no district in AP is exclusively tribal. This means that it is objectively difficult for the already overloaded PDS to pay special attention to the needs of

tribal areas. Finally, there is plenty of evidence that the ITDA is much more equipped to understand (not least from a cultural point of view) the needs of the tribals. It could be added that given that most of the staff of the ITDA belongs to the STs themselves, open discrimination is less likely to occur. This could incentivise MGNREGA beneficiaries to raise their voice and report malpractices without fears of being humiliated.

A second very important issue that needs to be tackled urgently concerns the staff that implements the scheme. In short, it is unconceivable that the same amount of personnel that the scheme requires in non-tribal areas is sufficient to reach the same targets in tribal areas. To give just one example, consider the norms that regulate the appointment of field assistants, who are the main implementers at the gram panchayat (GP) level. According to these rules, if a given GP has more than five habitations, two field assistants will be appointed. This works reasonably well in non-tribal areas. T Arjapuram GP in Ravikamatham mandal of Visakhapatnam district, for example, has eight habitations. Accordingly, it has two field assistants who are able to cover relatively easily all parts of the GP. But in tribal areas the average number of habitations per GP is considerably higher, not to mention the fact that they are scattered in much larger (and less accessible) areas. Solabham GP in G Madigula mandal in the same district, for example, has as many as 48 habitations and yet only two field assistants! While Solabham could well be an extreme case (in other tribal villages the number of staff has been increased), the geographic and demographic configuration of tribal areas requires a greater effort in terms of appointing field staff.

This is an instance of a larger problem that concerns administrative spending in tribal areas. According to the MGNREGA Act, up to 6% of the total spending should be used for administrative requirements. An implication of the constitutional safeguards for tribal areas and of the Nehruvian Panchsheel principles is that the administration, to put it bluntly, should spend more in tribal areas to achieve the same target that can be reached in

non-tribal areas. Official data shows that the opposite is true. In 2013-14, the administrative expense in AP was 10.63% of the total MGNREGA spending, whereas in tribal areas the corresponding figure is as low as 1.88%.

Such a low spending makes it just impossible for field staff to implement the scheme properly. Think of a technical assistant who has to travel long distances to take care of a number of gram panchayats (and hence an exorbitant number of habitations) with a salary and a travel allowance that is only slightly higher than that of his/her colleagues in the plain areas where the distance to be covered is just a fraction. One of them told us that he was somewhat "forced" to steal something from the scheme just to be able to pay for the petrol for his motorbike. The government has issued orders for hiring more staff. However, though the order was issued in May 2013, the recruitment of the additional staff proceeds at an excruciatingly low pace.

Social Audits

A related problem concerns the social audits. AP can be proud of its highly institutionalised social audit system, which has no peer among all other Indian states. However, when it comes to tribal areas, there is the need to adopt special procedures for conducting the audits. This has again much to do with the ecological configuration of tribal areas. If it takes four hours for a social audit team to reach a given GP (and hence four hours to go back), this means that very little time (if at all) is left for the auditing procedures. (Reaching most gram panchayats in tribal areas from the mandal headquarters takes far more than four hours). According to civil society groups working at the grass-roots level, at least in certain cases the social audits are conducted from the mandal headquarters, without any contact with the beneficiaries, thus losing the social component of the audit. It is also worrying that social auditors are (relatively often) denied official documentation (this applies to non-tribal areas too).

The good news is that the society that implements social audits in AP appears to be aware of the problem. A new social

audit process (specifically designed for tribal areas) should be rolled out starting from September. This could be the occasion also to strengthen the partnership with local-level civil society organisations, who have a better understanding of the area and that could make the work of the auditors easier.

Finally, the administration should consider that small administrative changes could make a great difference in tribal areas. For example, most of the tribal population of AP lives on the Eastern Ghats where the soil is particularly hard. This means that, in order to complete a certain MGNREGA task, more work is required than in areas with softer soil. This has important consequences on the wages the beneficiaries

get. The MGNREGA system takes into consideration this aspect and allows administrators to classify the soil as normal, hard or rocky. However, local implementers virtually never choose the “rocky” option. This is probably due to the fact that on the one hand, classifying the work as “rocky” requires an authorisation from higher levels; on the other hand, doing so will increase the probability of being subject to checks by the state government. In other words, it is a risky activity for a small reward. Simply allowing administrators in tribal areas to classify the soil as rocky – which much of the soil in the Eastern Ghats is – without the need for a specific authorisation would increase the wages of the beneficiaries to the levels comparable

to that of the other wage seekers in the state.

Conclusions

To sum up, STs are by far the most disadvantaged groups in India’s society and in most cases they live in very remote areas where very little economic activity takes place. The MGNREGA in tribal areas constitutes an essential safety net against starvation and destitution, particularly during the lean agricultural season. It is crucial that the peculiar ecological, social, cultural and economic conditions of tribal areas are taken into account. The state administration did make a sincere attempt to do so; but a greater effort is needed in order to fill the gap between government orders and ground reality.