

HT

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Ready to work for 200 days, can't get even 100

NO GUARANTEE For rural working class, NREGS gives hope: jobs for 100 days or allowance. When neither comes, as in many villages, tough questions need answers



bitterharvest

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BATHINDA/BARNALA: The National Rural Employee Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) could have really made a difference to Nachhatar Singh's life. It hasn't. And it is not his fault.

A resident of Selvarah village in Bathinda, Nachhatar says he is ready to work for even 200 days, but the official line is that he has not asked for any work as the NREGA job card column is blank.

The 50-year-old daily-wager can only curse his illiteracy — he and others like him have no option but to trust the village development department official for filling the card.

In Selvarah, each job card this reporter came across shows workdays demanded by labourers in tens and twenties or most columns are left blank (see picture). The reality, however, is that even working for 365 days a year is barely enough for these labour families to survive.

There is a catch here, says Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union, Punjab, leader Baru Satwarg. Under the rural job Act, state governments have to pay unemployment allowance (if unable to provide work for less than 100 days). "So, a new



Despite shortcomings in its implementation, NREGS offers hope and dignity of work to the rural labour, especially women.

VISHAV BHARTI/HT

method has been devised to evade unemployment allowance. Leaving the column blank in the cards or asking illiterate workers to demand less days of work in the application, they claim the state provided work for as many days as asked for by the worker."

Under NREGA, it is mandatory of fill all columns of the job card.

"The 'innovative method' will not only help the state government get away with its responsibility of providing unemployment allowance but on the basis of the same statistics, they will also claim that Punjab is a prosperous state and here nobody demands work under NREGA," says Satwarg. His argument may have sub-

NO FACILITIES

Under NREGA, labourers are entitled to various facilities at the worksite such as clean drinking water, shade for periods of rest, emergency health care. But at not even a single place could we see such facilities provided to workers

stance. As per government records, since March 2009, Barnala district could provide complete 100 days of work to just 11 families, Mansa to 107.

In Sangrur, the figure was 141 and in Bathinda, 388. This when these are districts where labourers have committed suicides in large numbers.

What's more, despite these figures, not a single person was paid unemployment allowance in Bathinda and Barnala. Said Bathinda's ADC (Development) C. Siban. "Nobody was eligible for the allowance here."

Despite instances such as Nachhatar's, with better wages and bargaining power, the rural working class is seeing hope and dignity of work under NREGS. Especially women, who are generally paid much less for work.

At the same time, there is a sense of insecurity among the rich peasantry. Sukhwinder Singh, a landlord and sarpanch of Rure-Ke-Kalan village of Barnala, feels the scheme should close immediately because the "government is just dumping money into ponds".

Manjeet Kaur, a village worker registered under NREGA, is quick to counter him: "They want to fail it because they know if we will get work under NREGS, who will clean their cattle sheds?"

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1.	24-2-09	1-03-09	21	
ਦਰਖਾਸਤ ਅਨੁਸਾਰ ਕੰਮ ਦੀ ਮੰਗ ਦਾ ਵੇਰਵਾ				
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1.	18-2-09	01-03-09	26	
ਦਰਖਾਸਤ ਅਨੁਸਾਰ ਕੰਮ ਦੀ ਮੰਗ ਦਾ ਵੇਰਵਾ				
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27-2-09	09-03-09	19		

In Selvarah village of Bathinda, job cards show workdays sought by labourers in tens and twenties only, with most columns left blank.