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In times of increasing unemployment – work for MGNREGA workers has become a mockery

On one hand migration is increasing in Jharkhand, on the other hand the central and state governments are constantly undermining and weakening the constitutional guarantee for employment in rural areas. Tomorrow (2nd Feb, 2019), it will be 13 years since the NREGA was enacted in the parliament, however the right to work has become a mockery in today's time. On this occasion, Jharkhand NREGA Watch, would like to draw attention to government's inaction in regard to the constant subversion of the rights of the workers.

As per the Act, each rural household can demand 100 days of work, however, in the last 3 years, in Jharkhand each household has got only 40 days of work on an average. Further, the proportion of Adivasi and Dalit households in the NREGA workforce has fallen from 50 percent to 38 percent in the same period.

In the previous financial year, the work demand in Jharkhand was 71 lakh persondays and only 43 lakh persondays of work was provided. That means about 39 percent of the work demand was unfulfilled.

In the last 3 years, the state government has deleted 7 lakh job cards. Many of these belonged to households that did NREGA work and were unaware that their job card was canceled.

The government had conducted the "Yojna Banao Abhiyan" with a lot of publicity in 2015-16. The workers and Gram Panchayats had chosen about 10 lakh works to implement in their panchayats. Instead of taking these into consideration, the state government has imposed schemes of their choice on the people. Along with that they have violated the NREG Act and undermined the Panchayati Raj system by forming Adivasi and Gram Vikas samitis.

The claims made by the Jharkhand state government that 99 payments were made within 15 days are completely false. In about 50 percent of the cases, the delays are not even accounted for. Further, due to issues like incorrect entry of Aadhaar and account numbers in the MIS, wrong linking of Aadhaar to bank account, work done without muster rolls, closing of works when there was lack of funds etc many workers have not been paid. In the last 4 years, 170 crore wage payments were rejected and 100 crore worth of payments are still pending to workers.

Along with this workers face severe hardships when their bank accounts are frozen due to issues in e-KYC and other reasons. While the Act mandates that if there is delay in wage payments beyond 15 days, the workers must be compensated for that. However, only 5 percent of the compensation amount is paid.

The BJP government has made tall claims about about the economic development in the state and the country but has not increased the wages of the NREGA workers even by a rupee this year. In Jharkhand the NREGA wages are Rs. 71 lesser than the minimum wages. Working at such meager wages is akin to bonded labour. Workers' wages have been stopped several times this year due to paucity of funds. The workers constantly suffer due to administrative bottlenecks of the government.

The attitude of the Jharkhand government is clearly reflected in the fact that the State Employment Guarantee Council, of which the Chief Minister is the head, has met only once in the last 4 years. There has been no action against the officials held responsible for violating the rights of the workers

as per the social audit reports. And the position of the Lokpal is vacant in 19 districts. Further, 40 percent of the posts of NREGA personnel are vacant.

There have been at least 19 deaths due to hunger in the state in the last two years. The families of these families have not got any NREGA work in the last few years, And yet, without any investigation, the Jharkhand government sent a report to the Centre, that there was no connection of these death with NREGA. Many of these families continue to be devoid of their right to work.

The lack of political commitment to NREGA workers is not limited to the ruling party. There is not much dialogue among the opposition parties about the rights of the workers too. There has been no discussion on these issues in the current assembly session. Recently, the announcement of 'NREGA Employment Campaign' was appreciated from Jharkhand Mukti Morcha(JMM). However, no action seems to have been taken in that regard.

Jharkhand NREGA Watch will be conducting programs across the state on 2 February, 2019. We urge the state government to take immediate action to resolve the issues stated above. And demands that all the political parties that the rights of NREGA workers are reflected in their manifestos, ahead of the elections.

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