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Move beyond spadework

India gave itself the world's largest social security programme in 2005, when Parliament enacted the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Its implementation, however erratic, has provided daily-wage jobs to millions of people in rural 'manual labour' projects. Yet, this phrase itself shows a class bias among lawmakers — an assumption that all that villagers can do, or should be doing, is manual labour.

Absurdly, the NREGA bans machines and contractors. This was supposedly a move to prevent the exploitation of villagers. But it is only serving to keep them in the Dark Ages, even as we talk of a new urban India. Whether it is digging ponds, making or repairing roads or building check dams, all these are achieved manually. The world's largest social security scheme is only creating millions of labourers.

The time has come to amend this law, as well as this mindset. Why should white-collar jobs like teaching not be brought under its ambit? Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has emphasised on the need for government-run schools in the villages to propel economic growth. But for that to happen — and in the lack of any other imaginative measures — the NREGA must include the building of, and more importantly the running of, village schools.

This is unlikely to be a drag on the NREGA's resources. Daily wage under the NREGA varies across states: while the average is Rs 80 a day, Uttar Pradesh has raised it to Rs 100, and many other states pay Rs 60. It would surprise many to learn that this is more than what village teachers are paid in most parts of India. Still, in its current form, the educated, unemployed rural youth show little interest in seeking jobs under the NREGA. But if this scheme starts offering rural white-collar jobs, it might prevent many educated people from migrating to cities.

A decade or so ago, the Mandal Commission report informed us that 27 per cent of OBCs are educationally backward. Now, the Sachar report tells us that Muslims are more backward than the Dalits. But the real social divide is not based on religion or caste; it is the rural-urban divide. And more than among the average citizens, this is more deeply entrenched in the minds of our policy-makers. It's not just the NREGA that highlights this. Even when the government spends millions on 'vocational training courses' for villagers, the only vocations it can think of involve physical labour. All we seem to want to create are masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, shoe-makers and tailors. Should villagers not be groomed to also become engineers, doctors, management trainees and computer scientists? Despite poor educational facilities, some rural students have the aptitude to succeed in advanced skills.

That brings us to the other reason to include teaching in the NREGA. Rural literacy is 58.7 per cent against urban literacy of 79.9 per cent. Only 46.1 per cent women are literate in villages, compared to 72.9 per cent in cities. This anomaly exists because educational facilities are concentrated in the cities, where 27 per cent of our population resides, and are dismal in rural areas, where more than 72 per cent live.

Rural students depend mostly on government schools for education, where the quality is on the decline. But can we blame just the teachers? Do we give a thought to what governments make village teachers do these days? Everything, but teaching. For example, these days, primary school teachers in UP are conducting a scrutiny of ration cards of families living below the poverty line. At other times, they help with polio vaccination, statistical surveys, preparing voter lists, supervising the construction of school buildings, and even with the cattle census. Does this leave them with any time and motivation to teach?

Add to this the shortage of teachers in these schools. There are no replacements for a large number of teachers who've retired, despite the increase in the number of schools and students. This problem of shortage of staff can be resolved by hiring from among educated, unemployed village youth using NREGA funds.

A major governmental intervention to improve rural education was the Navodaya Vidyalaya movement. These residential schools started in 1986 with the aim of providing quality education in rural areas. But they were a complete mismatch with the realities of rural India. Why should they be boarding schools if they are supposed to benefit the local talent? Emphasising their failure is the fact that children from villages around these schools hardly ever get admission there. Similarly, the rural poor cannot expect much from the Sainik Schools, Kendriya Vidyalayas and Railway schools either because of tough competition for admissions. Rural students get mid-day meals, scholarships, uniforms, books, free education — practically everything quality education, and in many cases, teachers. Educated youth in villages can at least be appointed part-time to fill this gap.

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