

Citizen's social audit exposes: 'Where trees are planted before they are purchased'



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On the second day of training of about hundred citizens who are preparing to go into the villages of Miyaganj Block of Unnao District to conduct social audit of the NREGS, the DM Rajshekhar addressed a gathering of citizens of this Block. He said that he would not tolerate any discrepancy in muster rolls as well as measurement books.

A number of officials and people responsible for implementation of this scheme believe that only one of the two documents can be prepared honestly, the other will have to be manipulated to fit the first. He said

that NREGS had tremendous potential to transform the rural landscape and standard of living of rural poor but equally there was enough possibility for large scale embezzlement of funds. He said that if there was any embezzlement of funds found in the implementation of NREGS and people decided to go to the court even a DM might have to go to jail.

Even before the teams go out into the various village panchayats discrepancies are being discovered in the records obtained through RTI. For example, in village panchayat Nurullapur in a work 3000 bricks have been shown to have been purchased for Rs. 74,481. This implies that a brick cost about Rs. 21.

The people are already asking what was the brick made of? The Pradhan of this panchayat Samim has shamelessly put his signature at all places on the muster rolls – from taking attendance of the labourers to verifying the work. Usually different people are supposed to perform different functions. But he seems to be the only authority in his village panchayat. He doesn't see the role of any panchayat level employee or a supervisor for the work.

The other instance of corruption discovered is purchase of saplings at the rate of Rs. 4 per plant which can be bought for fifty paise to Re. 1 in the market. A purchase of Rs. 20,000 has been shown in each panchayat from a single supplier – 'Messers Paurush Priya Traders.' Muster rolls have been filled for 7-10 days for plantation of these saplings and for 10-15 days for watering of these plants. In reality not a single sapling has been planted.

This implies straightaway embezzlement of over Rs. 13 lakhs. Even more interestingly, in village panchayat Barha Kalan the saplings have been shown to have been planted between 1st and 12th October, 2006

whereas the purchase of saplings has been shown on 29th November, 2006.

However, the purpose of social audit is not simply to expose such corruption and discrepancy. Social audit should be institutionalized as a process within the Gram Sabhas wherein the citizens should conduct continuous audit of their panchayat records. They should make their Pradhans and government employees appointed to serve them accountable to themselves.

They should not just be passive observers to the rampant corruption around them but play an active role in checking that corruption. Except for this there doesn't seem to be any way that the lot of rural poor can improve.

The time has come when the beneficiaries of the government schemes must assert their rights. RTI Act and NREGA, both implemented in 2005, are citizen-empowering laws. The two laws are playing a vital role in changing the equation between the ruling elite and the common people. It is up to the people to use the two laws creatively to break the hold of corrupt officials and mafia on their resources.

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