

UNGUARANTEED WAGES

## **Unending Aila Woes**

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Workers wait for 6 months for NREGS wages in Aila Affected Areas in the Sunderbans even amidst existence of widespread hunger.

The proper implementation of NREGS and timely payment of wages had the potential of restoring some purchasing power to the poor in Aila affected areas of South 24 Parganas and bringing them back from the brink of destitution. Employment created under NREGS could have prevented the endemic hunger that is stalking parts of the Sunderbans where agriculture has failed after Aila. Families are shuddering at the prospect of the next few months when food shortage will be more acute, broken roofs will leak and a rise in the price of rice will take away whatever little food finds its way to the plate of the poor. But, so far, the administrative set-up has failed to ensure, both sufficient number of working days and the timely payment of wages.

Gauri Majhi climbs slowly and steadily out of the tank being dug under an NREGS scheme, balancing a basket of soil on her head. Keeping her eyes on her feet, she explains that she has not yet been paid for the 10 days of work she had done on the embankment in September 2009. She must keep working, she says, in hope of the wages she would earn.

Many other women like Gauri–Bimala Maity, Tuki Pramanik from K-plot share her woes. In fact, most people from the Achintyanagar GP have not been paid for their work since last September. As of 11-03-2010, 1841 households in Achintyanagar have been employed under NREGS for 2009-10, receiving an average of 20 days of work. The number of days of individual employment would be around 10 days for 2009-10 and this is the mother of all statistics. Ten days of employment in a year instead of 100.

The failure of agriculture in the Aila affected areas has created a shortage of food, employment, fuel and roofing material. Able bodied men and women have migrated in distress and those living on the margins have taken to begging. Hunger is widespread amongst the families of the Aila affected areas. With so much resources put behind NREGS by the government, it has not been extended as a coping mechanism to the rural poor of South 24 Parganas. In fact the delay in payments has de-motivated people to apply for work.

Amoy Sardar, the young Pradhan of Kankandighi GP blames the district administration. He alleges that it does not give money for more than 5 schemes at a time. Labourers from villages far away cannot travel to the limited points where the schemes are being implemented, he adds. By the time the cycle of 5 schemes is finished, the year is gone and Amoy Sardar is not left with much option of generating

more employment. Here too, a household has received an average of 23 days of employment under NREGS in 2009-10.

The officials at the Mathurapur II block office have a different story to tell. According to the Assistant Program Officer, Subhendu Ganguly, it is the Panchayat that is the executing agency, not the block. His office is prompt in sending out the payment draft as soon as the work is finished and verified. He is even ready to accept applications from the villagers directly if the Panchayat does not accept them. So the problem, clearly lies somewhere else!

One is welcomed into the NREGS cell in the Zilla Parishad by a display board with large figures of the total money spent in 2009-10 in South 24 Parganas, number of people that have received work and the total number of person days generated. What is one to make of all this data (Till Feb. 2010)? Consider this:

Families that have applied for work	:	1,38,467
Families that have received work	:	1,38,467
Number of schemes finished	:	1961
Actual expenditure	:	Rs 1049.23 lakhs
Total Person Days generated	:	31,28,000

What is missing from the board is that the total NREGS fund available for the district is Rs 57.76 crores while the total expenditure has been Rs 37.33 crores. Mired in the statistics of large numbers, one soon loses touch with what it means for an agricultural labourer in the Sundarbans to survive without a livelihood option.

Payment of wages too is no one's problem.

Why have not the workers been paid even after 6 months of their completion of work when the rule stipulates that a worker should be paid within 15 days of completion of work?

According to Bibhas Mondol, the Chief Nodal Officer for South 24 Parganas, the post office requires that the district administration should deposit money in advance based on prospective disbursement. This, Bibhas Mondol says, has already been done. It is the loop of the draft that the block office deposits with the local post office, which in turn is sent to the sub-post office that duly forwards it to the head post office in Baruipur where the district administration has made the deposit. Only the head post office is authorized to clear such large sums of money. The money then retraces the path of draft in the opposite direction in an effort to reach the local post office. This is what takes the longest journey, according to Bibhas Mondol. Three to four months, at times!

But people in K-plot were complaining of 6 months of non-payment.

To address the concern that money meant for wages was being siphoned off, in early 2008, the Ministry of Rural Development mandated that payment for work

under NREGS could be made only through a bank or post office account. Large number of the rural poor did not have accounts and many still do not have it.

A Panchayat staff supervisor of Achintyanagar GP said that the total labour payment of a scheme has to be made at once. If there are workers without accounts, then the payment for the entire scheme is withheld. A serious problem indeed!

The postman, however, explained that it was only he and the postmaster working at the local post office. How were they to handle lakhs of rupees meant for wage payment of NREGS work? Moreover, he said, it is only by 1pm that he can get the money released from the sub-post office in Raidighi. By the time he reaches his remote village it is 4 or 5pm. Carrying so much money on his person would make him an easy target. What about police protection? The sub-Pradhan indicated that the post office would get it from the block if they asked for it, but the postmaster really does not want to do this work.

Isn't it a genuine problem that so much more is being expected from a village level institution without giving it access to any extra resource or authority? But then the problem as explained by the Pradhan or the block office or the Chief Nodal Officer rang true too.

In this maze of genuine problems and logistical issues where does someone like Rambha Jana, from a family of eight find a solution to her problem? She has to manage with a kilogram or two of less rice a day. Bondona Das of K-plot gets rice on credit based on her prospective wages. As the shopkeepers become increasingly skeptical and begin to tighten credit, Bondona has to work on empty stomach. Where every inch of the human landscape is fiercely contested amongst the political parties in West Bengal, implementation of NREGS is yet to appear on their agenda.

In absence of a political will, an administration far removed from the sufferings of the poor and no vibrant people's movement voicing the real concerns of the people, the people of the Aila affected areas in the Sunderbans are yet again left on their own to face the difficult months ahead. They will survive with or without their entitlements like they always have. □□□