

## Recasting National Employment Guarantee Programme: Mental, not menial

Anil K Gupta

Providing Employment Guarantee in regions where market fails to clear the demand for work at reasonable wages is a necessary responsibility of the state. However, the present programme does not discriminate between the regions where market wage rates are higher than the minimum wage rate or where it is lesser. Obviously, the effectiveness will be limited. As if this was not enough, the programme considers poor people to be having only hands, legs and mouth but no head. If such was not the assumption, the programme would not focus only on menial work of breaking stones, making roads, digging earth, etc. More than 100 years ago, after the Deccan riots, British rulers realized the need for food for work. Conceptually, we have not moved much since then. Irony is that India aspires to be a knowledge society and rightly so. And yet, more than 250 million people, provided 100 days of employment in activities which do not draw upon the resource in which poor people are rich, i.e., their knowledge, values and unique location specific skills. There has never been a bigger effort to de-skill the society. Recently, there was a news about diamond workers returning to their native villages, to work under employment guarantee for digging earth.

There are large number of schools which need vocational education, workshops which need skill upgradation and local resources which need to be value added. For another 70 to 100 years, I hope India does not have to face a similar economic crisis when millions of skilled people will be moving to villages. This could have been converted into a unique opportunity for transforming rural India. That will require having faith in the knowledge and wisdom of people. In these days, it is not easy to have faith in the creative and entrepreneurial potential of the common people.

I suggest that Employment Guarantee Programme be totally recast to generate an entrepreneurial revolution. This will make it possible for dreaming of a day when state will not have to provide menial employment to anyone because local enterprises will absorb labour. There are several levels at which changes are required to make this programme an unprecedented historical experiment to transform India. Minds of millions of people can be mapped besides mapping the physical, biological and other natural resources. At least for five days, 250 million people will document various plants, minerals, soils, water and other resources and with their unique uses wherever applicable. Women in the village know, from which well they should fetch water if they have to cook a dal, which takes longer otherwise. Mapping of biological resources is envisaged under People's Biodiversity Register, a responsibility of the National Biodiversity Authority (NBA). The Register of other resources including traditional knowledge about soil, mineral, climate change, etc., has been maintained by the National Innovation Foundation (NIF). Together NBA and NIF can map the whole country in a few years time and then periodically update this knowledge base through National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme. Never before so much of knowledge will become available for value addition and entrepreneurial exploration.

Outstanding knowledge so documented can be pooled to develop new products and services for which social venture funds can be set up in each district to promote new enterprises.

Even if more than half of the enterprises fail, people would learn to try, explore, experiment and innovate.

In different parts of the country, people have myriad interpretations of Ramayan, Mahabarat and other epics. Almost in every corner of the country, communities believe that Lord Ram and Sita had visited that region. Numerous other forms of tales exist among people following different faiths. Imagine a portal at which the recorded narrations of tales, songs, stories, riddles, puzzles and various other forms of cultural creativity are available for download in local language with local dialects. Not only will the web get populated with local language content [which is very scarce today] but also lot of hidden talent come to the fore. Rendering these stories, recording them and uploading them on the net would be one of the very meaningful, joyful and purposeful employment. Future generations will bless us for having prevented the erosion of precious folk culture. One can make the site e-commerce enabled so that after listening to some stories, if children want to adopt e-grannies, they may with one rupee or fifty paise per download. Alternatively, advert revenue can be shared with the knowledge providers so that distributed management of social knowledge also provides economic means of livelihood to creative performers, writers, poets, singers, story tellers, etc.

Nutriceuticals are known to be far better means of preventive health in the long run than just the curative pharmaceuticals. One needs both. It is known that soils in the dry regions are not drained enough because of low rainfall. Crops, particularly minor millets grown in such soils are naturally rich in the minerals found in the soil. Some of these plants have capability to mobilize trace elements in higher quantity than some of the major staple food crops like rice and wheat. Once nutriceutical qualities of such crops is characterized, these can common lot of premium in the market place. Using compost to grow such crops would be an added advantage. A whole range of activities are required for managing watersheds and manure development in dry regions. Such employment can require manual work coupled with important technical knowledge.

Thousands of local varieties preserved in the National Gene Bank are supposed to have descriptive information about the local uses of various varieties whether for medicine or for food processing. However, the relevant column for the purpose either do not exist in the descriptors of the gene bank or are blank. Employment Guarantee Programme can be used to generate such data from different households and put it in the gene bank. Food processing industry will get a fillip in the process.

Lot of tribal people have similarly a rich knowledge of making liquor as well as other traditional medicine. The technology of developing herbal extracts is just a few inches removed from liquor making. There is no reason why people cannot be weaned away from the harmful effects of liquor by providing high income generating opportunity of making herbal extracts. Market for such extracts can be generated within the country and outside.

The opportunity for recasting employment programme requires moving away from a colonial legacy of treating people as worthy of only menial labour. India deserves better. Indian labour deserves even better because it has such an intimate knowledge of resources, climate change, environment and other uses for survival.