Power, Public Administration and Poverty: An Enquiry into Implementation of Rural Employment Program in India

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Abstract:

The State vested with the political right to govern over the sovereign must engage in ensuring prosperity among its citizens. In a harmonious society this is achieved through provision of space to individuals and groups to co-exist with differences, such differences in skills and beliefs constituting the basis of private profit ensuring prosperity. This obligation, however, is difficult to discharge in practice. In nations, such as India, rural underdevelopment and the accompanying poverty of a large section of the population continue to be a blight on the narrative of development.

As part of the development planning exercise in India, the government has been carrying out direct poverty alleviation programs for over two decades now. The thrust of such programs has been generation of employment in rural areas through State financed public works construction programs that build up the rural physical infrastructure as well. We argue in this paper that the basic thrust of the program is misplaced. Rural unemployment and poverty is, at its roots, an outcome of deskilling of large parts of the rural population (even the rural elites) or devalorization of the skills that they might still possess (leading to a lack of markets to trade). Central to this process has been the shift of political power (of rule making) to the urban metropolis. In India it has taken the form of disempowerment of the local government that has lost rights to police, tax and engage in such other activities in its own jurisdiction. Strategic action is therefore beyond the ambit of the local government bodies. That has left even the rural elites to remain &ldquo;gent mobilizers&rdquo; for a fundamentally centrist political undertaking. Rural skill building and nurturing institutions have therefore been left to lurch.

We take up in this paper the case of employment generation scheme in India (sponsored and financed mostly by the Central Government) - looking into rules (or norms) of the scheme, the process of rule-making and the implementation process at the field level (in one province of India) - involving local political elites, the local administration and the
poor folks around whom the scheme is designed. The structure of the program, we argue, reflects the overall structure of State administration in India. Rule making remains the preserve of the Central bureaucracy, failing to reflect numerous local particularities. Norms are violated (or deviated) in practice and around such deviations a local macabre economy grows up. Lacking the glory of skills, the accumulation (and ensuing prosperity) of those who benefit from such arrangements fail to strike a chord of harmony. Skills and entrepreneurship take a back-seat. We argue that a reversal of these dynamics can be attained through re-empowerment of the local polity (which has partly been met by the recent changes strengthening Panchayats, the village level local government, by legitimizing it through an electoral process similar to that of the provincial and federal political bodies) and regenerating a discourse around skill formation and building institutions of skill generation and transfer. Trading on the strength of such skills would provide a sustainable escape out of poverty.

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