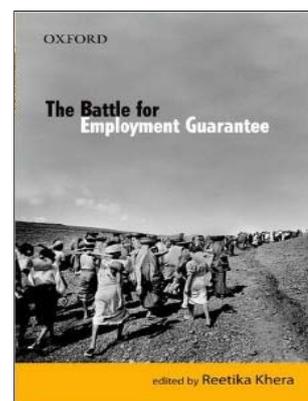


BOOK REVIEW

Title : The Battle for Employment Guarantee
Authors : Reetika Khera
Publisher : Oxford University Press, First Edition 2011
Pages : 307
Price : Rs. 626/-



This edited volume by the author is one of the comprehensive works on the highly controversial theme of NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), enacted in 2005. The volume in wholesome is the sense that NREGA has been studied from diverse angles, ranging from issues like wage payment, corruption, pros and cons for women workers. Based primarily on the survey research by the researchers carried out in different pockets of the country, it gives an authentic glimpse into the ground realities of the NREGA's execution. The cover page is Sohrab Hura's contribution, where his black-and-white lens has captured the workers on their way to work.

Broadly speaking, there are four parts in the volume: Part I (Early Days); Part II (Ground Realities); Part III (Contrasting experiences); Part IV (Trouble spots). Thus, Part I gives a comparative summary of the official NREGA statistics at the state level. Part II is based on the NREGA Survey studies which were conducted in the six Hindi-speaking North-Indian states, in 2008. Part III is primarily case-study in approach, with instances from Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, Chhatisgarh and Tamil Nadu. Lastly, Part IV discusses the need for proper grievance redressal mechanisms or of accountability in the system; issues related to the payment of minimum wage payments and non-payment of minimum wages, and, an unhealthy politicization of NREGA.

Khera, associated with the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, on its Faculty, is candid in acknowledging the limitations of the volume in that it does not cover all the representative samples from parts other than North India. Thus, regional diversity is seriously lacking in the study, inspite of covering case studies, here and there. A second limitation of this work lies in the limited scope of the issues. Thus, the work is silent on appraising the productive assets in rural areas, for instance.

Jean Dreze is the introductory author in the volume (Ch. 1, "Employment Guarantee and the Right to Work"), where he speaks of the possible empowerment of the rural laborers, should they be free from the corrupt-ridden practices which have defaced NREGA. With the switch from cash payments to bank payments of wages under the NREGA, Anindita Adhikari and Kartika Bhatia appraise the "Wage Payments: Can we bank on the banks?" (Ch. 6) whether embezzlement of wages did cease in toto. Sudha Narayanan (Ch. 7, "Employment guarantee and child care") delves further into the need for child care facilities at the NREGA

worksites, which are visibly absent in a majority of cases. The chapter 14, "Breaking the Nexus of Corruption", authored by Jean Dreze, emphasizes on the need for transparency in NREGA. Chapter 15 is "Wage payments: Live without Pay?" authored by Reetika Khera. In the following chapter, "The Perils of Gandhigiri", penned by Jean Dreze, the main issue being raised is that of naming NREGA as MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) under the aegis of the ruling Congress government, and, the politicization of the entire programme. Chapter 19 of the volume, "Estimating Leakages in India's Employment Guarantee", has been authored by Clement Imbert and John Pepp. This brings us to the close of the volume. As a token of appreciation, Amartya Sen, the Noble Laureate, observes:

"... Reetika Khera has led a powerful team of visionary but critical thinkers who have assessed both the achievements that deserve to be recognized and the challenges that have to be addressed. Policy improvements are dependent on clarity of analysis and penetrating scrutiny, and this book provides a truly major contribution to the understanding of a critically important area of public action..."

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QUOTES

Leadership is lifting a person's vision to high sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations
Peter Drucker

*Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked;
leadership is defined by results not attributes*
Peter Drucker