

After 1.5 years, RTI provided NREGS documents to Unnao residents



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After ten hearings at the Uttar Pradesh (UP) State Information Commission and 1.5 years from first filing the [Right to Information](#) (RTI) application to seek documents related to [National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme](#) (NREGS) in Miyaganj block of Unnao district in UP, the people of Miyaganj are finally relieved to get those documents pertinent to the NREGS work done in their block.

The RTI application asking for information (like muster rolls and measurement books) under the RTI Act, 2005, was filed on 4 December 2006 by Miyaganj block resident Yeshwant Rao at the local Block office. He received a reply after more than six months (June 2007) asking him to submit Rs. 1,58,400 (at an arbitrarily fixed rate of Rs. 2,400 per village panchayat for 66 panchayats of the Miyaganj Block).

This followed a long battle in the State Information Commission of UP where after more than ten hearings ultimately an order was passed directing the Block officials to provide information free of cost. The people of Miyaganj finally started getting the documents on 6 April 2008.

After a year and a half of struggle residents of Miyaganj Block of Unnao led by Asha Parivar local activists Yeshwant Rao and Virendra Singh, have been successful in obtaining documents related to implementation of NREGS in their Block.

Now the people of Miyaganj block are going a step further. During 20-28 May 2008, they will be conducting a social audit based on the information provided by the block authorities on NREGS implementation. The people will go to each one of the 66 village panchayats, document and verify the NREGS records themselves. Earlier similar social audits of NREGS have been conducted in Bharawan, Sandila and Behender Blocks of neighbouring district of

Hardoi.

Social Audit is a process where in an open meeting of the village physical verification of the records is done with the help of officials, people's representatives and the people. In fact, the citizens of the Gram Sabha are supposed to perform this audit. In addition to the verification of financial details it is also ensured that other provisions of the NREGA are being followed. It is an opportunity for the people to evaluate the entire scheme and also determine the quality of development works in their village. In a new democratic culture building up in the country since the Right to Information Act has been implemented, it is a chance for citizens to intervene and check the rampant prevalent corruption and irregularities in the system.

Also in February 2006, the Rural Development Department of the Andhra Pradesh Government had conducted the social audit of the Andhra Pradesh Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme which was being implemented under the NREGA which had come into force from 2 February 2006.

Andhra Pradesh was probably the first state in the country where such a process took place and the credit for this goes entirely to the then Principal Secretary of the Rural Development Department, K. Raju. It is normally unheard of that any government department would subject its performance to public scrutiny, especially a department dealing with development works where huge siphoning off of resources has become the norm rather than exception. Fake muster rolls are one of the biggest sources of corruption in this country.

"By mentioning fictitious names, names of upper caste people who never perform manual labour, names of people who have migrated to cities long time back, names of people who are too old to work or

exaggerating the number of days of work for labourers who have performed work, it is a common practice to withdraw huge sums of money from the government exchequer. In addition to the abovementioned discrepancies, it might also be the case that the work being shown on paper was never actually performed. In Hardoi District of U.P., recently it was discovered that a canal was being de-silted on paper in 2004-05 by using the funds of Bharawan Block Panchayat whereas the Irrigation Department had taken a decision five years back not to release water in this canal. Over Rs. 3 lakhs were embezzled in this instance" said Dr Sandeep Pandey, Ramon Magsaysay Awardee (2002) for emergent leadership and National Convener of National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM).

"However, if the initiative of social audit remains in the hands of the government or administration, there is a danger that ultimately it'll be subverted. How many cases of corruption do we know where an enquiry was set up and because the individuals who were conducting the investigation were from the same class of people as they were investigating, the results of such exercises did not yield the desired result and the matters were covered up? We would not like to see the social audit process currently being undertaken in A.P. to degenerate to a state where the social auditors develop vested interests shared with the people responsible for implementing the APREGS. Hence it is very important that the initiative of the social audit process remains in the hands of common people. The Gram Sabha is the appropriate body to conduct this exercise and not some externally chosen professionals" cautioned Dr Sandeep Pandey.

Those interested in seeking part in this social audit exercise (20-28 May 2008) in Unnao district of UP, are welcome to contact Dr Sandeep Pandey at: ashaashram@yahoo.com .

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