16.12.09 Hindu

Violence and threats bring a government to its knees

Rajasthan had emerged as a model for transparency and accountability in NREGS implementation. Tragically, entrenched interests have been allowed to hijack the process.

Vidya Subrahmaniam

Through the second half of October and for most of November this year, Rajasthan was engulfed in an unusual form of protest, spearheaded in the main by gram panchayat officials. Joined in some places by elected MLAs and MPs, and backed covertly by a section of District Collectors, the panchayat staff held meetings, sat in dharna, issued threats, and when these did not suffice, blocked highways, to get a single point across. They would not tolerate civil society participation in social audit of works done under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).

The protestors filed cases in two courts and obtained stay orders against the inclusion of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social activists in future social audit exercises. It would have been easy enough for the Ashok Gehlot Government to convince the courts that civil society participation brought credibility to the audit exercise. Not only did the government not do that, it went a step further and called off the audits it had announced for one panchayat each in 32 of the State's 33 districts.

It was clear to those who incredulously watched the action-reaction sequence that the Government had succumbed to pressure from a small yet powerful group of people who had made it plain that they would not have their wrongdoings investigated. It was a classic case of an entrenched power bloc flexing its muscles — and getting reward points for it.

Ironic turn of destiny

For Rajasthan, seen up until then as a model for transparency and accountability in NREGS implementation, the cancellation was an ironic turn of destiny. Only two months earlier, the Gehlot government had gone into overdrive, gathering NGOs and social activists for an unprecedented joint social audit conducted under blazing arc lights in the panchayats of Bhilwara. State Ministers conveyed their congratulations to the audit teams from decorated podiums, as did C.P. Joshi, Union Minister for Rural Development and Member of Parliament from Bhilwara, who was the guest of honour at an October 11 rally that marked the conclusion of the audit.

Enthusiasm ran high as thousands of NGO volunteers, who had banded together under the Aruna Roy-led Rozgar Evum Suchna Adhikar Abhiyan (right to employment and information campaign), or the RESAA, set out into rural Bhilwara for the audit. Of the district's 381 panchayats, 11 were chosen for focussed attention while the rest were covered over 10 days by teams of padayatris tasked with checking compliance with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 — both by means of physical inspection of works, job cards, muster rolls and so on, and through feedback from villagers.

As the 11 audit teams got to work, they realised that they were on to something big. Damning evidence was emerging of diversion of NREGS funds by a defrauding mechanism that went all the way up from the sarpanch at the bottom to block and district-level staff. The padayatris reported missing job cards, fudged or absent muster rolls and improper maintenance of other NREGS documents. (Later reports from other districts would corroborate the corruption, and it would come to light that two District Collectors had been recommended for suspension for irregular use of NREGA funds.)

By-word for hope

The corruption and the irregularities unearthed in Bhilwara were alarming, but the silver lining was that the social audit had zeroed in on them, as was in fact envisaged by the job guarantee Act. Indeed, the ecstatic public response to the audit, and the official stamp on it, made Bhilwara a by-word for hope and inspiration — as much for civil society advocates of the largest guaranteed job employment scheme in the world as for the many millions of poor people drawing sustenance from it, and already feeling its impact, despite the corruption involved in the scheme and its patchy and half-hearted implementation.

Perhaps it was too good to be true. The Bhilwara exercise was itself a product of struggle. The sarpanchs had tried hard to block the audit, and failing in that, they had openly raised their voices at the *jan sunwais* (public hearings) where the preliminary audit results were read out. In some places audit teams reporting irregularities were heckled and intimidated. But the audit sailed through because the Rajasthan government put its weight behind the project.

Post-Bhilwara, Ms. Roy and others in the RESAA had been flooded with requests for similar audits to be done in their districts. One such request came from Congress MP from Alwar Jitendra Singh. He was not to know then that this small act would unleash a storm that would take him in its sweep.

The Bhilwara social audit ended on October 11, and with that went out the message that the audit juggernaut was moving to Alwar. Within a week, sarpanchs of panchayats in Alwar had organised themselves into a sarpanch maha sangh. On October 25, Independent MP from Dausa Kirorilal Meena addressed a meeting of State panchayati raj staff, where he announced a formal boycott of civil society groups. "We will not let Aruna Roy and her team enter Alwar," he thundered, and promised to get the Chief Minister to intervene and stop the audit.

Ms. Roy and other RESAA activists also met Mr. Gehlot, following which both sides decided to drop the idea of saturation social audit in favour of a model social audit to be conducted in one chosen panchayat from each district in two batches through late- November and December. Each audit team was to consist of 10 Block Resource Persons (BRPs), 10 gram panchayat members chosen from neighbouring panchayats and two civil society representatives. Civil society participation was kept to the minimum to satisfy the protestors. And, since the purpose of the audit was to examine how NREGS funds were being utilised, the choice fell on the panchayat showing the maximum material expenditure.

The highest-spending panchayat in Alwar was Madhogarh. The audit here was to start with a two-day November 21-22 training programme for gram panchayat staff. But the sarpanchs had already made up their minds to block the audit. On November 18, the gram sevak of Madhopur locked up the panchayat office, reported sick, and disappeared with the NREGS records. The Block Development Officer (BDO) broke open the locks in the presence of the District Collector, and finding the records missing, filed an FIR against the gram sevak, the sarpanch and the rozgar sahayak (NREGS secretary). But with pressure mounting on the BDO, he himself would flee to Gwalior to escape being present when the audit team arrived.

Around this time came news that the NREGS Commissioner for Rajasthan, Rajendra Bhanawat, had twice recommended the suspension of the District Collectors of Chittorgarh and Dholpur for irregular employment of NREGS funds. This inflamed sections of the IAS fraternity, adding more muscle to the anti-social audit campaign. Mr. Bhanawat has since been transferred out.

By November 24, the mood had turned ugly in Madhopur. Congress MLA Tikaram squatted in dharna while a crowd of 300 people led by sarpanchs and other panchayat staff blocked the Alwar-Delhi State highway, relenting only after the Additional District Magistrate announced that no civil society representative will join the audit. Four Bharatiya Janata Party MLAs were among those named by the police in an FIR filed against those who indulged in obstruction.

Here was an incredible case of people's representatives joining hands with village-level government officials to block an audit of funds earmarked for India's — and the world's — biggest welfare programme. The NREGS was the United Progressive Alliance's flagship project. Mr. Gehlot was a Congress Chief Minister. Yet, as it happens with all such cases, the FIR was withdrawn and the case against the obstructors closed.

With Alwar showing the way, the agitation spread to Jailsamer, Barmer, Sirohi, Chittor, Rajsamand and other districts. In Barmer, the social audit team was intercepted by a 400-strong armed mob that included panchayat officials and politicians. In Rajsamand, Lal Singh, a civil society representative on the audit team, was surrounded by a violent mob that bundled him into a vehicle with the threat that he would be killed if he returned.

Powerful axis

A powerful axis of panchayat staff-legislators-district officials had brought the government to it knees. It was evident that those who were meant to be in the vanguard of fighting corruption were fighting to protect corruption. It was evident too that the report of the Bhilwara audit (a copy of which is available with *The Hindu*) had unearthed something that threatened to shake the system.

Consider these by way of example. In gram panchayat Para, auditors examining bills for construction material supplied by "Devnarain Krishi Firm," found no supplier by that name. A phone call to the number listed in the bill was answered by the sarpanch's son. This single "firm" had billed the panchayat for material supplies worth Rs. 25 lakh. In the same panchayat, suppliers 'Nakowda Agency' disputed the statement that they had supplied material.

In gram panchayat Sangwa, auditors found hand-written, *kaccha* bills for material supplies amounting to over Rs. 40 lakh from a fake firm called "Dinesh Kumar Trivedi." Trivedi and Rajkumar Talior, another supplier, were also shown to have sold kerosene.

However, a visit to the location showed a ramshackle shop with a single tractor and no stock of materials claimed to have been supplied. In panchayat Devaria, the auditors found no supplier by the name "Tulsiram putr Ramaji Teli." In the same panchayat, suppliers "Gopi Putr Gokul Teli" gave it in writing that the bills generated in their names were fake.