

Ponds on paper

"THIS is our NREGS [National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme] farm pond [water harvesting structure]," says 24-year-old Dhanpati with a flourish.

Puzzled by his rhetorical declaration, I ask him: "Where is it?"

"It is this. You are standing on it," he says with a wry smile.

The farm pond, one of the agricultural revival measures planned by the Central government under the scheme, has not been dug at all.

Well Done Abba, Shyam Benegal's critically acclaimed "celluloid audit" of social welfare schemes in rural India seems to have found its most unlikely real-world manifestation in a remote village in Orissa's Nuapada district.

In the film, the money the protagonist (played by Boman Irani) gets for the *baoli* (irrigation well) allotted under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act goes into paying bribes to government officials at various levels and eventually he is left with no money to get the well dug. Interestingly, official records show the well as dug and even certify the good quality of its water.

In Kushmal, the village in question, seven farm ponds, allotted to below poverty line families under the NREGS, were constructed, paid for and handed over to the beneficiaries in a similar manner – all on paper.

Having seen the film, I could not resist the urge to contact Shyam Benegal and tell him about this incident, wondering whether this was where he got his inspiration for the film. "No, no," he said, laughing heartily when I told him about Kushmal's farm ponds. "My film was based on a similar story from Hyderabad, *Narsaiyyan ki Bavdi* written by Jeelani Bano, but there

are plenty of such cases in India. We make these grand social welfare schemes and then forget to monitor the implementation at the ground level," he said.

The Kushmal pond scam was unearthed when K.S. Sagaria, a resident of the village, filed an application under the Right to Information Act (just like Boman Irani in the film) in the block office last year, seeking information about the number of farm ponds dug in the village, the NREGS muster rolls, the estimated costs and the expenditure incurred.

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The application spilled out information that had mind-boggling inconsistencies. The most awful was the fact that the ponds were never dug. Then, the muster rolls showed an extremely interesting labour pool. The "labourers" who worked to "construct" the ponds included dead people (Lakhidhar Kata, Muthey Sagaria), schoolchildren (Rinky Sagaria, 9, and Phoolmati Gahir, 10), teachers (Sriram and Urvashi Kata) and aged people, one of them even paralysed (Madhav Sagaria, 70, and Pramila, 84). The rolls showed that all the seven ponds were dug by the same pool of "labourers" on the same days working in the same shifts.

"The person who filed the RTI application was threatened and false cases of forgery were registered

against him," says Surat Sagaria, former sarpanch of the village. "When the local media picked up the issue, the junior engineer in charge of the work suddenly came one day in March and began construction activity with an earth excavator, but we stopped him," he said.

The villagers allege that the "gaon sathi" and her husband are responsible for the scam. The gaon sathi, who is appointed by the State government to act as a mediator between unemployed labourers in a village and the administrative authorities who implement the scheme, has come to acquire a position of power in the social structure of villages in Orissa. In the case of a female gaon sathi, her husband usually exercises this power.

"When we received complaints in this regard, we immediately conducted an inquiry and found that the complaints were genuine," says V.P. Panda, the then Collector of Nuapada district. "We suspended two block development officers, an assistant engineer and the gaon sathi. The reason for these unfortunate cases is the enormous scale of work undertaken under the NREGS, which sometimes exceeds the capacity of the implementing agencies," Panda contends.

No action was taken against the Collector and the BDO; they were just warned. Now, with the allotment process scheduled to be restarted from scratch, the villagers of Kushmal are determined to monitor every step. But the NREGS woes of this region are far from over. Just two kilometres away, at Doo-merjar village, the scheme does not exist. None of the 300 families there has ever benefitted from the grand scheme since its inception in 2005.

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