



MAHIM PRATAP SINGH



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**WITH ITS OCCUPANTS** having migrated for work, a house remains locked in Kurli village in Bolangir district. (Left) Residents of Doomerjaar in Nuapada district. None of the 300 families in the village has been issued an NREGS job card.

erabad. "The problem is that the contractor divides family members and sends them away to work in different locations, which makes women vulnerable to harassment." Informed sources in Hyderabad also listed the near absence of medical care and clean drinking water among other problems the migrant population faced.

**FAILURE OF THE NREGS**

"We used to work from 4 a.m. until 10 a.m., take rest up to 2 in the afternoon and then work again until 9 p.m.," says Basu Bhoi of Bahbal village, who has been going to Hyderabad for the past three years. However, he stayed back in his village this year as he found work under the NREGS.

Although the NREGS has managed to curb distress migration, it has failed to emerge as a viable source of livelihood. "Luckily this time, there was some work under the scheme, but even that didn't stop most of the people as wages are almost always delayed," says Dasrathi Bhoi.

Delayed payment of wages is proving to be the weakest link in the NREGS apparatus and also the prime

reason why the scheme has not been able to curb migration to the expected extent. Delays of four to six months were reported by several workers who had found employment under the scheme.

In the case of those who were paid wages the same day, their job cards were blank. This indicated the involvement of contractors who pay lower wages and leave the cards blank.

Further, the presence of contractors in the NREGS has meant that labourers have to work under conditions laid down by them. This has resulted in a strange trend of inter-panchayat migration of NREGS workers whereby a contractor recruits labourers from a village to work in a neighbouring panchayat. This micro-level trend also explains the preference for migrant workers to local workers.

**PREFERENCE FOR MIGRANT LABOUR**

"Migrant workers are easy to manage. They are off their support systems and as such their bargaining power is low in comparison to the local people," says B.P. Sharma, an advocate from Kanta-

banji in Bolangir district, who has been working with migrant labourers for over two decades.

"Once they are away from their local connections, they have to work unconditionally. Further, migrants also ensure completion of work since they cannot leave midway. This explains the general preference for migrant labour," says Sharma.

While labour agents and employers promise medical benefits at the time of migration, they are often not given. In Behran Silet village of Turikela block, five families recently returned from Hyderabad before the end of the season owing to health problems.

"All of us, my husband, mother-in-law and two children, had malaria. Our employer did not provide us any medical help and since we could not work, he denied us food, too. We had no option but to return," says Mithila, 35. Jugesar Sona of the same village, who received Rs.15,000 as an advance for his *patharia* consisting of himself, his wife, his mother and his two children, returned with his family under similar circumstances. □