

The Government of Maharashtra launched the E G in May, 1972. This Scheme, however, was suspended due to famine condition in the State during 1972-73 and 1973-74. The scheme was put to work again in December, 1974.

Later on, it was decided to give the scheme a Statutory Status. The Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Bill was introduced in the State Legislature in August, 1977. The Bill was duly passed. However, it could not get the President's assent immediately. The Central Government and particularly the Planning Commission, were not in favour of giving rural workers a statutory right of employment. This, they thought, would necessitate heavy financial burden and would jeopardise other development scheme. It was also argued that once the State of Maharashtra gave such a guarantee, the rural workers in other states would also demand the enactment of a similar law. However, due to the persistent demand of Maharashtra Government, the bill finally received President's assent in January, 1979.

The Act is in operation for over 5 years. Surprisingly enough, the potential of the scheme to organise the rural poor was never realised by the political parties. The leftist bias towards industrial workers made the left parties blind to the advantages of the scheme. A number of voluntary agencies and social action group did not pay attention to the operation of the Act.

However, from early 1980s, various social action groups began to take interest in the operation of the Act. They organised people to demand work under the Act. The Development Group in Pune began training activists in the intricacies of the scheme. It also began training the workers working on various

E G S projects. Economists and the other social scientists never paid any attention to the Political potential of the scheme. No effort was made to activate public opinion to demand the enactment of similar legislation in other States. It is only recently that the Centre for Tribal Conscientization is inducing different social action groups in the country to initiate such a move.

Rural workers form the majority of the workers in the country. They are the poorest of all the workers and are quite unorganised. Different political parties have farmers and agricultural workers organisations. However, these organisations are dominated by farmers. They are also nowhere very strong. There have been peasant revolts in the country but most of these were against money-lenders and heavy taxation. The agricultural labourers, the biggest section among the workers, remained more or less unorganised, oppressed and exploited. Unless this mass of the poor is organised there would be no socio-political transformation in the country.

Agricultural workers work with different masters at different times. It is very difficult to contact and organise them. They are also divided by caste considerations. Social Action Group in Maharashtra have found that it is possible to organise the rural workers at the E G S projects. It is possible to meet these workers in groups at project site. They can be organised and politicised in the process of demanding employment.

Most of these workers belong to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward Castes. It is possible to take up the issues of these weaker sections of the society after

establishing contacts with them. Such efforts have succeeded in reducing the caste tensions in the rural areas. E.G.S. has reduced the dependance of these persons on the landlords belonging to the dominating caste.

E.G.S. has also reduced the starvation period of agricultural labourers, particularly in drought prone areas. This has given the workers some sustaining capacity to fight for higher wages.

About half of the E.G.S. workers are women. Paasant and workers organisations of all the parties have been dominated by men. It is unfortunate that women's organisations have never tried to study the problems of women agricultural labourers. It is possible to organise these women workers at E.G.S. sites.

Several Social Action Groups in Maharashtra are now taking up the issues of E.G.S. workers. Chetana Vikas, a group in Wardha, succeeded in introducing pass books to record the wages of E.G.S. workers. Several groups have taken up the issues of corruptions in the E.G.S. schemes. A group in Chandrapur successfully fought a case in the High Court to obtain arrears of wages for E.G.S. workers.

The political potential of E.G.S. needs to be realised in two ways. (1) It is necessary to involve more and more groups in organising the workers through E.G.S. (2) It is also necessary to induce the social action groups in other States to demand enactment of similar law. If this is done E.G.S. would be a major instrument to organise the rural workers and thereby to challenge the present exploitative and oppressive socio-political structures.

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