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**LINKING EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE WITH
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

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The decision of the Government of India to introduce a National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill in the Parliament should be seen as a historic one because it marks the beginning of a recognition of the right to work of, and through that a regular income to, the poorer sections of the population. Once the Bill is enacted in the Parliament, it will translate the political commitment to constitutional protection. However, the debate on the Draft Bill has been mired in controversy and divided between two opposing camps. Although those who oppose the initiative publicly are smaller than those who welcome it, the opposition is mainly on such major issues as adverse fiscal impact and/or implementation problems. On the other side, those who support are unhappy about the imposed limitations such as days of guaranteed employment, non-commitment on payment of minimum wages and absence of self-selection.

In my view those opposing the Bill have unnecessarily given a wrong signal to the people of this country about the desirability of this national constitutional commitment which would go a long way, if properly planned and implemented, in not only alleviating rural poverty but also creating a measure of favourable conditions for the much needed rural regeneration and human development in this era of globalisation characterised, above all, by an enhanced sense of vulnerability. I would therefore prefer to take a developmental perspective on this *essentially protective social security measure* with a view to argue that the initiative need not be seen as a 'stand alone' one. In fact, it is the seemingly 'stand alone' character of the Draft Bill that made Amartya Sen less than forthcoming on this important initiative. Later (Sen 2005) he underscored the importance of integrating EG, a means to enhance private income through employment, with such schemes as child nutrition (e.g. mid-day meals), which are in the realm of public provisioning. This note is intended to argue for such integration and explore the possibilities of the areas of linkage.

The problem of working poor: The linkage between employment and wages

At the outset, I must state that given the reality of poverty and human deprivation in rural India, employment guarantee (EG) *as it is now conceived* is unlikely to make a perceptible dent on the conditions of living of the working poor in rural India. This is borne out by the fact that the incidence of income poverty in rural areas is, at the least, four times the incidence of unemployment (7.2 per cent as per the Current Daily Status in 1999-00). If this measurement is a reliable indicator, then this simply means that the number of working poor far outweighs the number of people who are poor for want of work. This is perhaps an underestimation if one were to recognize, as I would, that the incidence of human deprivation is far more than the incidence of income-poverty. For example, the incidence of chronic energy deficiency among adults in rural areas is around 37 per cent among men and 39 per cent among women. If one takes the incidence of

severe and moderate under nutrition among children, it is around 50 per cent and 48 per cent for children under three years and five years respectively. There are several other equally important deprivation indicators, which are also quite alarming, as for example, the percentage of children out of school, the percentage of women with anaemia, etc.

There may perhaps be at least two reasons for this disjunction between rates of unemployment and the rates of income poverty and human deprivation. These may be due to (a) the existing methods of estimation of unemployment/underemployment poorly captures the true magnitude of the problem especially with regard to its seasonal nature; and (b) the quality of employment is so low that the wage rate is inadequate to take care of even the limited notion of income-poverty let alone the need to take care of basic human development (such as health and education). Given the reality of rural livelihood systems, poor are often compelled to work for sheer survival under conditions of drudgery, physical strain, occupational hazard and so on reinforced by social conditions of discrimination against the disadvantaged especially the poor women. It is quite reasonable to assume that both the above reasons are perhaps valid. Analysis of data from the 55th round of NSS revealed that 36 percent of agricultural labour households were found to be poor (by official definition) where as the incidence was 22 percent among non-agricultural labour households (Sastry 2004). Many micro level field studies bring out the inadequacy of employment for rural labour households, often not exceeding 140-170 days a year as well as wage rates, which are as low as Rs.25 to 30 for women in many parts of rural India¹. One of the indicators of inadequacy of employment is the level of participation in public works programmes. In an exercise to find out the association between employment and poverty, it was found that female members of poor households accounted for half the total person-days of female casual wage employment in public works in rural India while the corresponding share for males was 28 percent (Sastry 2004). This indicates that the inadequacy of employment is much more among poor women than among poor men. The problem of inadequate employment has to be recognised as a real problem. But will it help the poor to get out of the Poverty Line?

Based on the 55th round of the NSS (1999-00), an average rural labour household in India has a family size of 4.67 with 1.74 earning members (1.4 men and 0.6 women). The agricultural wage rates reported were Rs.40.58 for men and Rs.28.57 for women. Taking 273 days as full employment in a year this works out to a per capita per month earnings of Rs.309/- as against the Poverty Line in that year of Rs.328/- leaving a gap of Rs.19 per capita per month. Clearly, even with full employment a typical rural labour household cannot be expected to cross the very low Poverty Line at the prevailing market wage rate for agricultural labourers. This national average however conceals more than it reveals since there are wide variations across states. I have therefore calculated, for the sake of argument, the gap between the per capita monthly earnings (given the family size,

¹ In a recent visit to Gujarat (February 2005), many rural women labourers in the district of Anand reported Rs.30 per day as the prevailing wage rate. They all complained of lack of work, around ten days a month, and wanted work at wages paid for the Food for Work scheme (Rs.30 plus 5 kgs of wheat although the preference was for full cash wages in view of the low quality of food grains given). The women labourers also reported the emerging practice of employment for half-days by paying half the wage rate. Reports from villages in Orissa speak of similar situation with a lower level of wages.

number of earners and the agricultural wage rates as on 1999-00) and the per capita income required to cross the Poverty Line. These are given in Table 1. The results are indeed astonishing. In nine out of 15 states taken here, full employment will not help rural labour households to cross the Poverty Line at the prevailing market wage rates for agricultural labours. These states include not only the 'income poor' states of Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh but also the relatively 'rich' states of Maharashtra, Haryana and West Bengal accounting for 61 per cent of the population of the country. One may even go further to say that even the state averages are only *indicative* of the magnitude of the problem as there are wide intra-state variations in wage rates which manifest in high regional concentrations of poverty within states.

Can full employment help rural labour households to cross the Poverty Line at market wages for agricultural labourers?

**States that cross Poverty Line (+) and that do not (-) based on 55th
Round of NSS (1999-00) (Rs. per capita per month)**

State	Per capital monthly Income at full employment	Official Poverty Line	Gap
1. Andhra Pradesh	375	263	(+) 112
2. Assam	292	365	(-) 73
3. Bihar	258	333	(-) 75
4. Gujarat	341	319	(+) 22
5. Haryana	336	363	(-) 27
6. Karnataka	352	310	(+) 42
7. Kerala	607	375	(+)232
8. Madhya Pradesh	258	311	(-) 53
9. Maharashtra	310	319	(-) 86
10. Orissa	225	324	(-) 99
11. Punjab	390	363	(+) 27
12. Rajasthan	306	344	(-) 38
13. Tamil Nadu	450	308	(+) 142
14. Uttar Pradesh	231	337	(-) 106
15. West Bengal	278	350	(-) 72

This then points to the need to link employment creation with wages and to see employment guarantee as a *linked problem of employment and wages*. Extending this logic of linkage, one may argue that the larger problem of human deprivation in rural India needs to be taken as the main *raison d'etre* for employment guarantee. This means viewing EG as an opportunity for providing employment at an appropriate wage rate (i.e. at the minimum wage rate) linked to such activities that they help enhance human development in rural India in general and the poor in particular. This would mean that the proposed NREG need not be, and should not be, a 'stand alone' programme but part

of a larger and much needed developmental perspective that seeks to enhance human development which has discernible links with growth of a broad-based kind. Such a perspective will also enable linking the EG as *additionality* to the many on-going 'rural development', 'social development' and 'poverty alleviation' programmes so that they could produce a synergy. In my opinion, this will make employment guarantee a part of a much needed macro social policy especially for enhancing the capabilities of the rural poor. It is perhaps pertinent at this point to remind that the gap between rural and urban areas in terms of income and a host of human development indicators is continuously widening for the last couple of decades².

Restricted or Open-ended? Implications for financing

There is considerable difference of opinion on the financial implications of an employment guarantee programme. More realistic estimates suggest that it is unlikely to exceed one per cent of the GDP. For example, T.S. Papola's estimate (2005), which takes into account the incidence of unemployment (CDS) and the likely response of the unemployed to the employment guarantee based on Maharashtra experience, is around Rs.20,000 crores. This is based on the assumptions that (a) there will not be any upper ceiling on the number of days seeking/providing work, and (b) it will be based on self-selection thus making EG a universal one³. To this one may add two possible additional demands arising out of payment of minimum wages and extension of employment avenues to other than strictly *manual fieldwork* in nature. One group will be those working poor whose current wages are below the minimum wage rate. However it will be restricted to those whose opportunity cost (current wage plus the cost of seeking work in employment guarantee works) is less than the minimum wage. Abhijit Sen has estimated that about 12 per cent of rural adults (30 million) would demand employment under the EG at a wage rate of Rs.60 per day. The second group will be those who are currently outside the workforce but would seek work if non-field work were provided. This will be particularly so in the case of women whose labour force participation is quite low, despite high incidence of poverty, for various reasons in a number of states. This is especially the case in Bihar (with a rural female workforce participate rate of 17.3%), Uttar Pradesh (20.1%) and West Bengal (with just 16%). Even in such a scenario, it is unlikely that the financial implications will be so high as to restrict the scope of employment guarantee.

This would of course push the total cost. But the situation is not one that there are no options. For example, if the declining tax-GDP ratio is restored by one percentage point, it will generate an additional Rs.25,000 crores (at 2003-04 level). But the impact of EG at the minimum wage rate to all those who seek work need not necessarily mean an escalation of costs on a permanent basis. From a dynamic point of view, the payment of minimum wages would push up the 'social floor' of wages in rural India and would reduce the gap between the market wage and the minimum wage over time. This would

² One of the indicators is the declining share of agriculture (22 per cent) in national income with a continuing high share of employment (60 per cent) pointing to the wide income gap between agricultural and non-agricultural sectors.

³ An implicit assumption here is that the work provided will be of the kind done in MEGS i.e. manual fieldwork in building roads, land and water management systems, etc.

be especially so for women labourers. Once this happens - and there are states where such gaps do not exist or is quite narrow – the demand for EG would also come down when existing workers no longer have to seek work under the EG.

It is my view that if employment guarantee has to be linked with the objective of human development then some of the restrictive conditions should be done away with. To begin with, it should be an inclusive one as to provide work to all those who are seeking work in the rural areas at a specified wage rate which could be linked to the prevailing minimum wage rate for agricultural labourers. This should mean that it could be manual work of the kind specified in the Draft Bill as well as any other kind of work that has a direct link with enhancing social and human development in the villages. Apart from the category of unskilled wagedworkers, there is also a large category of self-employed (small farmers, weavers, fish workers, potters, etc) who also suffer from inadequate employment for part of the year. There is also the unemployed young adults, especially women whose household and social conditions may not be suitable for seeking work in unskilled manual *field* labour. In addition, young unemployed and the underemployed people with some education in poor households should also have the opportunity to seek work under the EG programme.

This calls for some clarification on the wage rate to be paid. Given the fact that it is an employment guarantee, there should be one uniform wage rate for all kinds of work that could be pegged to the minimum wage rate to the agricultural labourers in the state (or regions within a state). The concept of minimum wage is such that it is a *minimum* and the calculation of that minimum is based on the capacity to pay as well as the minimum requirements of the concerned labour household. It is quite strange that those who oppose the payment of minimum wage rate are not so zealous in opposing the high (and, in the Indian context, quite inequality-enhancing) salaries and perks in the private corporate sector. In fact, there is a great sense of euphoria when financial and business media report the fantastic salaries and perks given to executives and young entrants in the private corporate sector.

The Maharashtra experience is often cited for non-payment of minimum wages. This perhaps explains, to an extent, the absence of a perceptible impact on rural poverty in Maharashtra. Despite increases in capital formation that now includes private land of farmers, real wages for agricultural labourers in Maharashtra with the highest (or second highest) per capita income, has remained one of the lowest in the country⁴. Rural poverty in rich Maharashtra was higher than the national average till 1993-94. It has been reported that from 1988 onwards Maharashtra had in fact stipulated payment of minimum wages, which might have contributed to some reduction in rural poverty. Even then Maharashtra is not in the list of least poor states. The reason could be that the minimum wages were fixed at such low rates that they made very little difference from that of the prevailing market wage. This is also indirectly borne out by the fact that the percentage poor women seeking work under the EGS has been on the increase

⁴ Of the 16 major states Maharashtra ranked 12th in male agricultural wages followed by Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa and 14th in female agricultural wages followed by only Orissa as per the 55th round of NSS (1999-00).

presumably due to the unwillingness of men to work at such low wages. In fact the share of wages in total expenditure declined steeply between the early seventies (80 per cent) to late eighties (to fifty per cent). It is only afterwards that it has started recovering but not yet reaching the early level of 80 per cent. The lesson of the MEGS experience is that rural employment guarantee should not be delinked from the question of payment of minimum wages that is expected to help the poor to cross at the least the officially determined poverty line. Given the low human development indicators of rural Maharashtra, the argument for linking EG with the objective of enhancing the human development of the rural poor becomes stronger. This is especially so when the dedicated fund for the EG has accumulated more than Rs.3000 crores.

In parts of rural India where high wages are paid for rural labourers, it has a direct relationship to either labour productivity or the bargaining capacity of labour or both. Therefore, from a growth point of view, money wage per se is not the issue; it is one of wages in relation to labour productivity and one way to increase labour productivity is by demonstrating that the availability of cheap labour (often at starvation wages as in many parts of rural India) does not become a disincentive for increasing labour productivity. If this argument is accepted then the case for linking employment with potentially growth promoting works becomes stronger as has already been pointed out by some economists (e.g. Shah 2004; Bhaduri 2005). This could result in capital formation in rural areas in the Nurksian sense. Viewing the labour of unemployed and underemployed as hidden savings, this brings us to the point of designing the employment programmes and projects at the local level in such a way as to promote capital formation wherever feasible. This is certainly a part of linking EG with human development via creation of income both in the short and long runs. It is particularly satisfying to note that the Draft Bill recognises this linkage to some extent. This may be seen as ~~creation of natural capital~~ by transforming the given natural resources. Such capital formation is of labour augmenting kind in the long run.

However, the feasibility of such linkage and its success depends on detailed planning and implementation at the local level. It is here that the importance of recognising Panchayat institutions at the district, block and village levels becomes explicit. It is not enough to confine the responsibility of preparing a list of preferred works for different areas in the proposed State Council only. An alternative strategy could be to think of three levels of planning for EG projects. It should begin with the Village Panchayat where the concerned Panchayat authorities could identify and formulate a shelf of projects. In this they would certainly need technical and administrative assistance from higher levels as well as from civil society organisations and concerned citizens. The next level could be the Block Panchayat where planning should confine to the formulation of projects which go outside the boundary of one Village Panchayat as well as consolidation and correction, if needed, of projects prepared at the Village Panchayat level. The third level should be the district level where the Zilla Panchayat could conceive of projects that are not confined to a single Block as in the case of irrigation works (repair and renovation of canals, strengthening of river embankments, etc.). At this level, a consolidation of projects from different Blocks could also be undertaken with a view to vetting them as well as disseminating model projects and works to different Village and Block

Panchayats. It may be neither desirable nor practical to leave the preparation of schemes at the level of the State Council. It should take care of laying down broad guidelines, technical assistance as well as drawing up broad plans for a period of say, five years and also evaluate the implementation on a periodic basis. Based on evaluations and feedbacks from Panchayats there should be scope for revision of the guidelines and broad plans. The Draft Bill is explicit on listing land and water management and development works but not so forthcoming in a number of related areas. The provision for "any other work, which may be notified by the Central Government" should take into account a whole range of other works of a capital formation nature such as the development of livestock, fishing, etc.

Beyond Physical Capital Formation: Linking Employment Guarantee with Income and Human Development

Given the increasing realisation of the importance of human development, especially of the poor, the idea of linking employment guarantee with human development should have received explicit recognition in the Draft Bill. In fact, every conceivable opportunity has to be taken advantage of if human development of the poor in India, most of which are comparable to the poorest parts of the world, has to be progressively enhanced. It is well known that investing in human development subsumes the idea of investing in human capital. While human development is desired as an end in itself, for its intrinsic value, its instrumental value should not be underestimated. When one is poor, it is the instrumental value that becomes the primary concern because of the deficiency in basic socio-economic security. The concern for survival takes precedence over everything else. If human development is perceived as an objective for its instrumental role to the poor, then the proposed works that can be taken up under the EG need to be widened and linked to what is often referred to as social sector activities. As in the case of physical capital formation, the activities in the social sector that are closely linked to human development should also be amenable to design and implementation at the local level. This then is also related to growth via enhanced labour productivity, even if it comes with a lag, through a combination of physical capital formation and human capability.

This point may be illustrated with a few examples. Take the case of childcare, especially for the working poor mothers or strengthening primary and secondary schools in the villages. In both cases, additional employment could be provided for strengthening the existing services. An additional help in the *anganwadys* (Child and mother care centres under the Integrated Child Development Scheme, ICDS), for example, will go a long way in taking care of the poor children for such periods of time when their mothers are at work. The assistance could be in a variety of forms of not only taking care of the children but also taking care of hygiene and sanitary facilities under the housekeeping work. Although the ICDS was started in 1975 with an extensive coverage, there are many states where the coverage is less than 50 per cent in terms of villages covered. As per the National Family Health Survey 1998, seven states (Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya and Sikkim) had a coverage of less than 50 per cent, another five states 50 to 60 per cent (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi), and four states with 60 to 80 per cent coverage (Andhra Pradesh,

Jammu and Kashmir, Mizoram and Punjab). Such a gap points to the work to be done in this area. Given the condition of a large number of schools in rural areas, it is hardly necessary to point out that there is considerable scope for additional employment. Schools in villages could generate employment by way of extra help in providing mid-day meals, repairs of the buildings, up-keep of premises and facilities, or creation of new facilities such as for drinking water, toileting, sports and so on.

In a similar vein, there is considerable scope for improving the conditions of such human development related facilities as Primary Health Care Centres (PHCs). A whole range of manual and non-manual work could make a difference to their functioning – be it in keeping the premises clean, repair of buildings and facilities, maintenance of sanitation and related facilities, etc. Often, an extra help will go a long way in effectively implementing such programmes as immunization, vector control and related public health activities. Not everything may be amenable to the definition of unskilled manual work (often to denote *field* work) but all these are of a kind that would be more convenient to poor women in rural areas.

Strengthening of the activities of the Panchayat institution is another area that should also be thought of under the EG so that a variety of services that are not performed now due to want of staff could be taken care of. Some of these should be in such activities as collection of Panchayat taxes, numbering of houses and buildings, collection of information for various projects and programmes, building of markets and maintenance of centres, sanitation works, etc.

The Need for Qualified Labour

What has been stated above is to argue that employment guarantee need not be tied up with the notion of unskilled manual fieldwork or even manual work per se of the kind explicitly stated in the Draft Bill. The idea is to provide employment at a certain minimum wage to all those who are poor by self-selection. Given the physical, social and cultural limitations working against women in the labour market, there is a strong case for orienting employment guarantee to suit the needs and conditions of poor women in rural India. However, the success of an employment guarantee linked to the progressive enhancement of human development - via the formation and strengthening of physical and human capital – would depend on the design and implementation of projects at the local level, especially at the village and block levels. This calls for qualified labour (skilled/educated labour), which could possibly be limited by the provision for non-wage costs that is currently specified. Given the complementarities of qualified and non-qualified labour in this programme for proper planning of projects, it is important to ensure the supply of such qualified labour at the local level. One way out is to open up this opportunity to the educated unemployed in the villages by offering the same wage rate as those participating in the employment guarantee per se. The difference between a normative wage rate and the actual wages paid may be treated as the contribution of such educated labour to the employment guarantee programme. Such wages may be paid from the funds allocated to Panchayats. It is well known that in most states such allocation of plan funds without tying them with projects are not made. A

beginning could be made to introduce this system that would go a long way to strengthen the Panchayat Raj. Mistakes are bound to be there that could be corrected through a process of 'learning by doing'. In fact, when Village Panchayats in Kerala were given plan funds to undertake local development projects, the design and preparation of such projects were initially undertaken with the help of qualified personnel who gave their time and effort on a purely voluntary basis. Such examples are plenty as evidenced by the functioning of a number of people's development organisations and initiatives in several parts of the country. One should not discount the social space that exists for social service – collective rationality that seeks to maximise social welfare – in the country.

Towards Creating a Labour Bank in Every Village Panchayat

Although the success of EG should be judged in the long run by the progressive decline in demand for such employment, it is highly unrealistic to expect such a situation in the foreseeable future. An orderly EG programme will therefore remain a necessity in the Indian context. One of the ways of handling such a situation with appropriate planning and implementation at the local level is to move towards creating a Labour Bank in every Village Panchayat. Such a Labour Bank will have the facility for the unemployed seeking work under EG to 'deposit' their available days for work in every season or year with all relevant information such as gender, age, educational background, skill, and so on. On the basis of such information appropriate employment programmes could be designed and implemented in an orderly fashion. Some of it could be tailored to the existing programmes so that the 'additionality' of employment, as mentioned before, would contribute to its better functioning or implementation. Seasonality as a factor is likely to come about as a prominent feature of the demand for employment and this could be linked to the nature and manner of creating physical capital in the countryside. The concept of a Labour Bank at the Village Panchayat level would help energise the working of the Panchayat institutions.

By Way of Conclusion

It is my view that such a widening of the scope of EG will have the following advantages:

1. Employment guarantee, in the Indian context, cannot be divorced from the issue of payment of an appropriate wage rate that should help poor households to cross the Poverty Line. Further, EG should not be viewed and designed as a 'stand alone' one but as part of a larger package linked to the objective of human development, especially of the poor.
2. It will widen the range of employment generating activities beyond manual fieldwork of a particular kind. Some work like housekeeping in schools and primary health centres is indeed manual work but not manual fieldwork but taking care of children need not necessarily fit into a view of manual work.
3. Such a widening of the horizon of work will be much more gender-friendly in that a number of young women with some education (say 8 to 12 years) from poor

households may find work that they will be able to access than otherwise for a variety of reasons.

4. By focusing on strengthening and/or development of public and collective goods at the local level, the EG will come to enjoy a wide base of support than otherwise since its linkage with social sector will be seen as beneficial to the entire community.
5. A conscious plan to widen the linkages of EG at the local level could be taken up as an 'additionality' to the existing schemes and projects including those that are known as poverty alleviation programmes such as housing, drinking water and sanitation.
6. Both in terms of work participation, gainful employment and ability to accept new employment opportunities, women are at a disadvantage for a variety of well-known reasons. An EG that is consciously linked to a variety of activities will give them a gainful employment which will have a positive impact on their status both within and outside the household.
7. By not confining the EG to the poor households (i.e. those who come under the officially determined Poverty Line), all those who need work will have the opportunity to seek and access it. This will definitely reduce the cost of enforcement including selection of 'one individual seeking work per poor household'. The minimum wage rate should act as a self-limiting one in a self-selection system.

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