Workshop on Public Administration Strategies That Help or Hinder Societal Harmony

Power, Public Administration and Poverty: An Enquiry into Implementation of Rural Employment Program in India

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The State vested with the political right to govern over the sovereign must engage in ensuring prosperity among its citizens. In a harmonious society this is achieved through provision of space to individuals and groups to co-exist with differences, such differences in skills and beliefs constituting the basis of private profit ensuring prosperity. This obligation, however, is difficult to discharge in practice. In nations, such as India, rural underdevelopment and the accompanying poverty of a large section of the population continue to be a blight on the narrative of development.

As part of the development planning exercise in India, the government has been carrying out direct poverty alleviation programs for over two decades now. The thrust of such programs has been generation of employment in rural areas through State financed public works construction programs that build up the rural physical infrastructure as well. We argue in this paper that the basic thrust of the program is misplaced. Rural unemployment and poverty is, at its roots, an outcome of deskilling of large parts of the rural population (even the rural elites) or devalorization of the skills that they might still possess (leading to a lack of markets to trade). Central to this process has been the shift of political power (of rule making) to the urban metropolis. In India it has taken the form of disempowerment of the local government that has lost rights to police, tax and engage in such other activities in its own jurisdiction. Strategic action is therefore beyond the ambit of the local government bodies. That has left even the rural elites to remain ‘agent mobilizers’ for a fundamentally centrist political undertaking. Rural skill building and nurturing institutions have therefore been left to lurch.

We take up in this paper the case of employment generation scheme in India (sponsored and financed mostly by the Central Government) – looking into rules (or norms) of the scheme, the process of rule-making and the implementation process at the field level (in one province of India) – involving local political elites, the local administration and the poor folks around whom the scheme is designed. The structure of the program, we argue, reflects the overall structure of State administration in India. Rule making remains the preserve of the Central bureaucracy, failing to reflect numerous local particularities. Norms are violated (or deviated) in practice and around such deviations a local macabre economy grows up. Lacking the glory of skills, the accumulation (and ensuing prosperity) of those who benefit from such arrangements fail to strike a chord of harmony. Skills and entrepreneurship take a back-seat. We argue that a reversal of these dynamics can be attained through re-empowerment of the local polity (which has partly been met by the recent changes strengthening Panchayats, the village level local government, by legitimizing it through an electoral process similar to that of the provincial and federal political bodies) and regenerating a discourse around skill formation and building institutions of skill generation and transfer. Trading on the strength of such skills would provide a sustainable escape out of poverty.

**Keywords:** Power, skills, public administration, poverty alleviation, rural employment generation programs
Introduction

State as the political sovereign, has a responsibility to ensure prosperity of the subjects. This prosperity is derived from the pursuit of private actions, driven by private motives. Differences in individual skills and beliefs constitute the bedrock of such private initiative and profits. Such differences, on the other hand, increase the possibility of loss of social harmony. The continuance of a State structure, over the long run, is therefore dependant on the twin objectives of preservation of harmony and provision of adequate space for the pursuit of private initiative of the individual. Public administration, as the arm of the State, is subject to this dichotomy as well. In countries, such as India, widespread poverty, particularly in rural areas constitute a threat to both the above objectives of public administration. Attempts at tackling the issue by the federal government (Central Government) through poverty alleviation programs financed by it and implemented through the public administration systems have not borne enough encouraging results. This paper attempts to search for reasons for such failures and in the process tentatively move towards a framework that provides a better understanding and a guide for action.

We argue specifically in this paper that this failure to deal with poverty is an outcome of a wedge between conceptual and actionable knowledge, a wedge that is perpetuated by the extant power structure. Conceptual knowledge is abstract and it inspires imagination. Knowledge claims flowing from abstract concepts generated in an elite discourse around conceptual knowledge leads to ‘norms’ and ‘rules’ that drive governance in the system – it leads to action. However, for the one weighed by powerlessness in being governed and lacking a strategy space, knowledge claims often get generated only in action – since an autonomous discourse in abstract knowledge is often lacking. Yet the sheer powerlessness of the authors of such knowledge claims generated in action leads to its non-celebration. It fails to get elevated. It might also wither away. Such actionable knowledge claims of the powerless often then gets manifested as something like an ‘unvoiced’ or an ‘unvoicable’ discourse, in macabre forms of subversion of ‘norms’ and ‘rules’ of the system that leads to a sense of failure in governance amongst those with power as well. Power, thus, brings actionable knowledge to the fore – but in two different forms. For the power-holder, it takes the form of a ‘deviation’ from norms and rules in the actionable domain through subversion by the powerless – revealing a gap between knowledge in the conceptual and actionable domain that is reluctantly (often tacitly) tolerated. For the powerless, on the other hand, actionable knowledge is living – negotiating on the ‘deviation’ is an existential requirement.

Central to our schema is the argument that knowledge gets generated and ‘actioned’ essentially within a context. These contexts are local and are different. They are often spatial (e.g rural-urban). Different strategic actors in different contexts, dwelling in what sociologists would call different ‘lifeworlds’, would have different incentives to act and often differences in beliefs and in skills. Yet, driven by the strategist’s desire to act (and govern) conceptual knowledge claim associated with power needs to take cognizance of multiplicities of contexts, since governance is often desired across overarching structures that span multiple contexts. The strategist and the associated knowledge claim then needs to seek to unravel and understand the ‘other’ over whom governance is sought – since the ‘other’ is important to strategy. It seeks to peek into ‘other’ contexts. While action and knowledge in the actionable domain is tied to the local context more firmly, conceptual knowledge seeks to break out to embrace ‘other’ contexts. This is a major source of tension.

The project of understanding the ‘other’, which is so important, is, however, analytically most problematic. This understanding often flows from abstract theories and concepts developed in ‘science’ (as in economics or development planning) within communities of experts, which then produces a conceptual knowledge claim and an actionable agenda. An actionable knowledge perspective would argue that this understanding also evolves through conflicts and through negotiations that actors undertake in course of an action. Multiple contexts, different lifeworlds and strategic actors dialogue at the interface of ‘contexts’ generated during practice. There is conflict and negotiation and often creation of new shared contexts and meanings. In the process, pre-conceived abstract concepts get redefined and reformulated - redefining conceptual knowledge claims as well. There is, therefore, a journey back and forth between conceptual (abstract) knowledge and the concrete actionable agenda.
But this process is neither smooth nor does it necessarily occur. A basic proposition of this paper is that this process is mediated by structures of power. The multiple actors in multiple contexts most often are located asymmetrically with respect to access to power, such as those placed at the centre and periphery of a centralized bureaucracy or those inside and outside a formal power structure. In most cases it is useful to visualize multiple actors as located in different tiers of a hierarchy of power. This difference in power has important connotations, for instance in terms of the meaning of ‘other’ to different actors, as between those who wield power and over whom power is wielded. Power alters the motivation of knowing the ‘other’. Power, moreover, is not an undifferentiated mass – it has many shades, many domains. Different actors also differ with respect to the domain over which they exercise power and this difference often shapes the contours of negotiations and exchanges that occur at the interface of contexts. The ‘folk elite’ at the periphery of a power structure for instance, may have the power to negotiate a local deal but might not have the power to influence a ‘scientific discourse’ (often in abstract terms) that occurs at the centre of the power structure. The different ‘contexts’ are therefore laden differentially with power. State and its administration is not homogeneous and differences between the tiers of administration are important. This difference often has a geographic or a spatial dimension as well, just as poverty has a spatial dimension in the form of difference in intensity, say, between the urban and rural poverty. Public administration therefore has connotations of spatial competition.

Knowledge and power, thus, remain enmeshed. A counter-claim of knowledge must not only deconstruct the dominant knowledge claim, but must also reclaim and reconfigure power. It is a strategic act. Reinterpretation of knowledge and reconfiguration of power proceeds simultaneously and this reclaiming is often important in creating the strategy space required for the valorization of the local (local skills, for instance). This also implies that a counter-claim to knowledge, which is counter-systemic, may fail to reinterpret because it fails to reconfigure power. The counter-discourse may fail to take root – to find a voice. The counter-discourse may also wither away. This is often associated with deskilling and withering of local skills. The dominant conceptual knowledge claim remains unchallenged in the discourse space. It may then continue to retain salience even though it fails to deliver, to govern. Apologists would then claim a ‘failure in implementation of a well-formulated strategy’. Such claims are widespread when discussing about bureaucratic failures in private corporations as well as State bureaucratic structures. We argue that there is nothing called an ‘implementation failure’. The slip lies actually in a knowledge claim that fails to perceive the ‘other’ adequately because of its inability to engage in a dialogue with the counter-discourse. A counter-claim to knowledge, authored by the ‘other’, fails to negotiate with the dominant claim in order to revise it – the ‘other’, however, most often retains a ‘stealthy’ freedom to engage in subversion (which is deemed illegitimate within the dominant knowledge claim) of the strategist’s desires. We have a failure of governance. For the governed, who is powerless, this stealthy freedom organized around a murky world of subversion is, however, the root of existence and strategizing.

This paper is our interpretational journey through the State bureaucracy that administers the rural employment generation scheme (through public works) sponsored by the Central Government in India (as consultants evaluating implementation of the project in selected areas in Bihar - one of the province in the country – during February-March 2004). We do not provide a ‘data-rich’, ‘objective’ account. As we will explain later, the process of information generation and processing is itself enmeshed in power conflicts – there are significant ‘noises’ in the data, which are not often referred to in studies where ‘data’, slightly removed from the murky ‘local’ context of its process of generation, attains a sanctity and scientificity. We reject much of structured data. We provide instead anecdotes, snippets of conversation, pieces of dialogue and some pieces of evidence (often mined from structured data sets, but interpreted accordingly) that we came across – our aim being to build up the discourse surrounding the scheme among officials in different layers of the bureaucracy and those outside the bureaucratic power structure – the ‘poor’ landless peasant around whom the scheme is designed. And we interpret the conflicting discourses surrounding the rules of the scheme and its numerous breaches in implementation; we interpret power, the limits to power and ‘folk life’s’ recalcitrant refusal to fully submit.

1 The areas we visited is indicated in Appendix 1
Section 1, which follow, provides a brief overview of poverty alleviation programs in India – in the process we also look into the structure of multi-tiered State administrative apparatus and the debates around location of power within different layers of State administration. Section 2 provides details (including ‘rules’ or ‘norms’ on which we concentrate) of the scheme and the role of different agencies involved in implementation. We also take a peek into the ‘folk world’ – the local government (bureaucrats), the local elite (who most often are the elected representatives in local government bodies) and the local poor in rural areas we visited to observe the scheme as it was being implemented. We confront multiple world-views, multiple lifeworlds with each other. And finally we conclude.

SECTION 1

Rural poverty has been a problem that development planning efforts in India had been trying to grapple with for a long time. From the 1970s onwards, direct poverty alleviation programs aimed at providing employment and consumption support for the lowest rungs of rural society began to be designed and sponsored by the Central Government. This was largely an outcome of increasing rural unrest and the realization that the process of large-scale industrialization was unlikely to lead to positive employment and income effects for a larger part of the rural population within a foreseeable future. Hence, direct programs of providing support to the rural poor were deemed important by the development elite. Rural public works cum employment generation programs are one form of such support programs. Its rationale, within the elite development discourse, lies in the seasonal nature of demand for agricultural labour and the resultant lack of employment and income generation opportunities during the lean agricultural season - a problem that is aggravated because there are few alternative employment options (for instance in rural industry) available locally. The problem is acute for the lowest rungs of rural society, who depend on subsistence level daily (or weekly) wage income (as agricultural labour) and do not have access to other rent generating assets. If rural public works programs can be undertaken during the lean season, it serves the dual purpose of improving rural infrastructure and generating wage employment to provide income and consumption support.

But, how would such a program be designed and how would it be financed and governed? That would take us to a short digression on the structure of the state bureaucratic apparatus in India and the historical debates surrounding the architecture and distribution of power between its multiple tiers. At the time of independence, India inherited the colonial administrative setup. While the ‘national’ and ‘provincial’ governments were legitimized through a democratic process of electoral contests (through universal adult suffrage), the ‘local government’ (in rural areas in particular) were not democratized. Autonomy of the ‘local government’ was thwarted and it was only in early 1990s that amendment (known as 73rd amendment) to the Constitution of India mandated the compulsory creation of the third tier of democratic government in India – the local Panchayat system in rural areas. The Panchayati Raj institutions envisaged in the 73rd Amendment consisted of a district level (called Zilla Parishad), a block level (called Block Samiti) and a village level (called Gram Panchayat) local government body. It was in the wake of this legislative move that Panchayat elections in Bihar were conducted in 2001 after a period of almost three decades. Local government in rural India has continued to be viewed as arms or agencies of superior (higher) tiers of government and has lacked autonomy and powers. Local government bodies lack financial resources (Rajaraman, 2003, Government of India, 2000), taxation rights and power to decide on utilization (and pricing) of several local resources.

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2 There were 2,32,278 gram panchayats, 6022 block samitis and 535 zilla parishads in India in March 2003. The population per gram panchayat was around 3000, with wide variation between provinces. (Annual Report, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2002-03)

3 Own resources raised by Panchayats along with land revenue (which is levied by provincial governments but is transferred to panchayats) was just around 10% of the total resource flow from the Central Government in the SGRY scheme alone, testifying to the strangling fiscal dependence of local bodies on higher tiers of government.
While this centralized structure of the state apparatus was, in a sense, natural for the colonial administration with its driving desire to control from a distance – the fact that the developmental regime, post independence, inherited the same structure and retained the colonial legacy is somewhat strange. This decision was not, however, without debate and contest. There were at least two other alternatives and discourses in the country, even within the elite national leadership across the ideological spectrum, that contested the proposal for setting up a unitary state structure. One was Gandhiji’s proposal for strong local self government (gram swaraj) and his radical idea of power flowing from the bottom – the village level local government federating into provincial and national governments. The other was the draft of the Constitution for free India that MN Roy espoused which envisaged creation of networks of local people’s committees in villages, towns and cities to discharge the local level functions of government and to exercise control over local bureaucracy. Within the Gandhian vision, power over local resources in villages would have remained within the local government and the community. Higher tiers of State structure and civil society and large-scale industry organized around the federated power structures would then have negotiated for access to rural resources. It is through this process of dialogue that the village would have interacted with the city and the city with the village and in the process each would have known the ‘other’. Control and power over local resources would have enabled the local (rural) community and government to nurture a local discourse and create the required strategy space to valorize the local skills and resources. Multiple local discourses, several regional discourses and a national discourse would have populated a competitive discourse space. Imagination inspired by a local discourse would have found in power in the local political sphere a vehicle for action to shape local development trajectories. The local (rural), the provincial and the national tiers of State and civil society organized around it would have retained its own salience, but their apt roles would have been discovered through a process of continuing dialogue (and negotiations). Public administration in such a framework would be part of a process of spatial competition as well.

The centralization discourse, however, won the debate (politically) around the time that India attained independence and the Constitution and structure of the State was designed accordingly. What is ironical is that the centralization discourse found support from even radical political constituencies. BR Ambedkar, who represented the dalits (lower caste people who are socially and economically marginalized), for instance, argued against the empowerment of village panchayats, for he feared that the landed gentry of the upper castes would invariably dominate the dalits and local government institutions would be used to perpetuate the exploitation of lower caste people and the poor. (See Bandyopadhyay et.al., 2003) The ‘modern’ State and its local representatives – the local administration, thus became powerful in the name of protecting the interests of the lowest sections of rural society from exploitation by the ‘local elite’. A centralized ‘modern’ State structure was created with the local bodies being mere implementation agencies of rural development programs of ‘national’ or ‘provincial’ governments. This centralized structure of the state apparatus meant that rural development schemes will also have that bias, in terms of distribution of rights to decision making between various tiers of the government. More importantly, perhaps, the possibility of cultivation of multiplicities of ‘local’ discourses gets short-circuited. For instance, studies on rural development that could generate a local discourse (on development) would mostly be either carried out or intermediated (and financed) by central agencies. A local discourse, for being ‘voiced’ (and legitimized), would then require elevation through an intermediary at a higher level. This, however, reduces power around the ‘local’ discourse and stifles it. The local (or rural) and the national, therefore, began to constitute two different ‘contexts’ laden differentially with power. Power over the local (resources) was usurped by the national. Local (rural) development began to be defined and directed within a discourse of the development elite and actions of the developmental administration (bureaucracy).

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4 Our assignment, for instance, came from the Central Government though the geographical ambit of the study was a small part of a province (our institute is located in a neighboring province). The terms of enquiry that defined the broad parameters of the study were set by the Central agency. A question that came to us was why such studies and projects are not organized by local governments (say panchayats) to give voice to and build up a local discourse.
SECTION 2

Our enquiry and interpretation is organized around the rural employment generation scheme - Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (henceforth, SGRY). Funded and administered by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, it was the major source of financial flow from the Central Government to local government bodies for rural development activities. The scheme was launched in August 2001 with an ambitious target of generating 1 billion mandays of employment in rural areas of the country and was under operation till 2004. More than half of the allocation was in the form of food grains (5 million tones of grains – rice and wheat - worth Rs.50 billion) to be supplied from the stocks of Food Corporation of India (FCI), the parastatal agency responsible for procurement and distribution of foodgrains through the public distribution system. It was implemented by the three-tier panchayat bodies with resources shared between the three levels of local bodies. Yet after two years of operation of the scheme, there were a few disturbing observations. Resources allocated in the scheme, particularly grains, were not utilized fully. This was one of the main points of enquiry in our research assignment. As a senior bureaucrat in the Ministry of Rural Development put it –

‘……there are many problems in implementation of the scheme, particularly with the local government; they are inept. They are not being able to utilize the resources provided. The Ministry is very prompt in releasing funds, if the reports from the implementing agencies are in order’.

But why are reports not in order – we were left wondering!

I. THE MANAGEMENT CONTROL SYSTEM

We first look into the broad contours of management control systems used for monitoring at different levels in the scheme. Figure in Appendix 2 captures the different agencies involved – the flow of funds and the generation and flow of information. It differentiates between what we call ‘hard’ information (in bold), which are firm figures, and ‘soft’ information (in italics), which are more in the nature of estimates often arrived at using ‘rule of thumb’ norms.

The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India is at the apex of the control system and is the principal source of fund for the project. Fund and food grain allocations were made every year to each district on the basis of identified parameters of backwardness of the district like population below official poverty income level, population of marginalized castes and tribes etc. The actual release of funds, however, depended on submission of reports to the Ministry (which also provides data to the Ministry) and utilization of past allocation of resources. Funds were released directly to DRDA, who disbursed it to implementing Panchayati Raj bodies based on project plans.

II. GUIDELINES PROVIDED BY CENTRAL GOVERNMENT FOR THE SCHEME: LABOUR INTENSITY

The flow of funds from Central Government to local panchayat bodies is accompanied by a set of conditions that form the guidelines of the scheme, which the implementing agencies have to follow. Although there were several such guidelines, we only discuss one of them. It is around this ‘norm’ (guideline) and its deviation that we organize our attempt at interpretation. The scheme is envisaged primarily as a wage employment generation program, with creation of durable rural infrastructure and public assets as an additional purpose behind the scheme. Given the very nature of the scheme,

5 With a change in the political party in power in the Central Government, the rural employment scheme was launched under a new name in 2004. The structure, however, remains largely unchanged.

6 According to revised budgetary estimates for the Ministry in 2002-03, out of a total allocation of Rs.183.76 billion, the allocation for SGRY was almost Rs.90 billion. (Government of India, 2003)

7 DRDA refers to district rural development agency formed to coordinate all rural development schemes at the district level to ensure smooth implementation.
therefore, it tries to reach the lowest rungs of rural society, where the demand for wage employment is high. Hence, the guidelines emphasize that labour intensive works are to be taken up primarily in the scheme. Although no specify indicative/normative wage-to-material ratio is specified for works in the scheme, the implicit wage-to-material ratio is quite high given the allocation pattern of funds and food grains in the program.

When the scheme was started, the annual fund allocation for the scheme was around Rs.50 billion, while food grain allocation was around 5 million tonnes. At least 5 kg of grains were to be provided per manday, with the remaining part of the minimum wage (the relevant minimum wage rate in Bihar being Rs.58 per day) being provided as cash payment – with an additional stipulation that 25% of the minimum wage must be paid in cash. Given the ratio of cash and food grain allocation and other stipulations (along with the valuation norms adopted in Bihar; i.e. Rs.5.67 per kg for rice), the implicit wage:non-wage ratio for works in the scheme comes to around 3:1 for equal utilization of both the fund and food grain component of the allocation under the scheme.8

This implicit ratio, moreover, is binding in the sense that non-adherence has costs for the local government bodies that implement the scheme. If the utilization rate of food grain allotment is low, which would be a natural outcome of taking up works with a higher non-wage or material component; it would lead to lower allotment of both food grains as well as a pro-rata reduction in fund allocation for the next year.9 Fund/cash allocation is fungible (so that it can be spent on cash component of wage or on material), while allocation of grains can only be utilized to pay for wages, unless (illegal) diversion is allowed (i.e. the allocated grain is sold in open market and the cash realization utilized for procurement of material). Since the local government bodies are almost totally dependent on Central government fund flow to carry out local development activities (which is its mandate), the guidelines create incentives forcing local implementing agencies to follow the implicit wage:non-wage ratio while selecting works in the scheme. In this sense, the guideline on carrying out labour intensive works is an important control measure as well. It is a ‘norm’, a ‘rule’ in the action domain of those responsible for planning and executing the scheme in the Ministry.

III. The deviation and its interpretation...

However, our analysis of projects taken up in the four districts we visited shows that labour intensity (wage:non-wage ratio) of projects taken up under the scheme should be far lower than the implicit norms. We analyzed in detail projects taken up in the scheme in all four districts from the consolidated list available with DRDA’s office. Here, we present information on Bhojpur district only – since the patterns were quite similar across the four districts.10 Broadly, most projects taken up in the scheme would involve

8 Suppose Bihar receives Rs10X million of funds and X/1000 million tonnes of food grains (fund and food grain being divided among States in the same pro-rata basis), value of the grain being around Rs.6X million. At the beneficiary level, valuing rice at Rs.5.67 (plus 4% sales tax and 1% market tax in some districts), would mean that around half of wage compensation is in the form of grains so that along with Rs.6X million worth of grain an equal amount of funds are required to pay cash wage. So, Rs.12X million out of 16X million (of total fund and grain allocation) is the wage component, giving a wage/material ratio of 3:1

9 The Central allocation in the scheme is released in two installments each year. The second installment is released if 60% of total available funds during that year (includes unutilized funds of last year and current year’s first installment) is utilized. In addition 75% of the first installment of food grain allocation has to be lifted and 60% of lifted grain (along with the balance) has to be distributed. Otherwise, the allocation of grains is reduced and along with that fund allocation is reduced proportionately as well.

10 There were around 500 projects implemented through the Block Samithi and around 100 projects through the Zilla Parishad between 2001-03. The projects included construction of rural link roads (mud roads with brick soling), school buildings and community halls (usually addition of a room or two in existing structures), concrete local drainage systems, concrete culverts and pools, concrete sheds (chabutra), construction of pucca houses (awas), construction of mud roads (kuccha), cleaning and deepening of ponds or other water storage structures – roughly in
around 10-15% of project expense as wage payment. Thus, from the analysis of the project list, it appears that the wage/non-wage ratio should be far lower than the implicit ratio that the scheme envisages. The norm or rule of taking up labour intensive projects under the scheme that the Central Government stipulates is thus violated in implementation. The ‘norm’ fails in action. The deviation now needs to be interpreted.

Low levels of foodgrain utilization also become understandable – for grains are not fungible (as easily as funds) and have to be used to pay wages alone. While the local level implementing and monitoring agencies, i.e. the elected local bodies and the bureaucrats at the district and block level, can be reprimanded for not adhering to the norms (can also be interpreted as a failure to discharge their duties), in our opinion this deviation is a reflection of deeper conflicts that needs to be understood. Interestingly, guidelines for the scheme also indicate that the process of selection of works should be participatory and projects that satisfy ‘felt needs’ of the local community needs to be taken up by local bodies. The ‘local community’, however, is not homogeneous in terms of economic, social or political power of different groups. While, labour intensive works create more employment options (per rupee of total expenditure) for the lowest strata, particularly landless labourers, the rural elite may be more interested in taking up more material/capital intensive development works that make roads motorable, or create other ‘public assets’ that can be leveraged upon. What is a ‘felt need’ of the rural community then and how does it find an expression?

This deviation from the norms needs to be interpreted. We enquired deeper into the records (documentation; referred to locally as the measurement book or MB) of a few sample works (or projects). Most projects showed a fairly high wage-material ratio consistent with the implicit wage ratio (that we argued about earlier) and a large roster of labourers who were employed temporarily in projects taken up under the scheme. The authenticity of the documentation process and the data generated therein was, therefore, suspect. We discuss this issue in greater detail when we look more closely into the local monitoring arrangements – the relation between local bureaucrats, elected representatives of local bodies and the rural poor.

We posed this problem – the material intensive nature of most projects (the local debate is couched in terms of *kuccha* and *pucca* works) to the labourers whom we met (and who had worked in the projects), the local elite (the elected representatives) and the local bureaucrats (the regulators). Some of the typical responses are as follows:

**Elected representative (Gram Pradhan):**

‘We plan projects that have a wage:material ratio of around 2:1, so that lot of employment is generated. We want the scheme to allocate more funds and less grains – we require more funds to carry out development (pucca) works.’

order of their importance in terms of number of projects taken up. Except the last two types of projects, others are primarily material/capital intensive. Most of the projects are, moreover, small (in terms of cost) and involves temporary employment generation for short periods (maybe a month).

Independent estimates provided by engineers shows that labour (wage) component in these projects cannot be more than 10-15% (with the construction technology that is normally adopted). In most cases it should be even lower. *Kuccha* roads and cleaning of ponds etc. is more labour intensive (50% to 70% of cost would be on wages), in contrast. However, the share of these types of projects is very small. Out of 500 schemes at Block Samithi level, we could locate only 35 kuccha road construction projects (which did not have the phrase ‘brick-soling’ in the project title), and around 20 projects of cleaning or deepening of ponds. These projects are, moreover, smaller in terms of project cost. The average project cost estimate of the 35 katcha road projects is around Rs.35,000, while the average estimate of all projects put together is roughly around Rs.120,000. It would be safe to say that expenditure on labour intensive projects was less than even 5% of total approved expenditure in projects at Block Samithi level. The calculations for Zilla Parishad projects are also similar.
Wage labourer:

'We want more employment opportunities – more projects will help us; we want more roads to be built in the village. It increases connectivity – helps all of us.'

Local bureaucrat:

'Pucca works are much better since it creates durable assets that the community as a whole benefits from. Though kuccha works generate more employment in the short run, they are also prone to greater leakages (and misappropriation of funds) and are far more difficult to monitor.'

We interpret the responses as evidence of cross-class agreement (at the local level) on the need for material intensive works such as all-weather roads within the rural milieu. The reason for such preference, however, varies – the bureaucrat wants easier monitoring ability, the wage labourer wants more employment and the elected representatives want more development. Although more labour intensive works would benefit wage labourers much more, we did not find any similar articulation about more labour intensive works either from Panchayat members or even the wage labourers. This is not to argue, however, that no scope for such projects exists. The possibility of such projects is not yet discovered or articulated within the local discourse.

The responses of different groups also reveal how they are placed within the overall power structure. The elected representative, as the person responsible for implementation of the project (and adherence to norms) demonstrates that norms are followed, documents are maintained and that is important because it is well maintained documents and timely reports that bring in fresh resources (the next year’s allocation). Serendipity, however, finds an expression in the fervent demand for greater allocation of funds, rather than grains – it is a cautious expression of a demand for more material intensive works. This demand has to be cautious, while an impression (or a signal) that ‘norms’ are followed has to be given out. The local discourse that argued for more material intensive projects fails to contest the ‘norm’ or the knowledge claim that drove the formulation of the norm. This ‘local’ discourse lacks legitimacy at the ‘national’ level. A Gram Pradhan (head of a gram panchayat) we met, however, was much more forthright. He said that –

‘All elected representatives have to deviate from the norms of the scheme, because otherwise you cannot carry out any development work. So, breaking the rule is commonplace – but local villagers know who is ‘honest’ and breaks rules to carry out work in a proper way and who is ‘dishonest’ and breaks it to derive private benefits’.

The context matters – the ‘local’ and the ‘national’ are separate. As outsiders to the local context information about the credibility and honesty of village leaders, built up over long periods of interaction within a small community, was not easily observable to us (as visiting researchers). The documents or the records, however, were far more intelligible or understandable as information sources to us (and the

In Bhatwara Gram Panchayat of Korha Block in Katihar district, the construction of brick-soled 10-feet wide roads in the village connecting fields inside the village with the highway increased accessibility of the village. Banana is a major plantation crop in the village, which is also exported outside the State and the road links helped villagers ease supply constraints, since trucks could enter the village directly. The demand for these roads, moreover, was a long-standing issue and the villagers had pleaded with the MLA/MP of the region for getting money for the project for a long time (without much effect).

For example, Kuccha works easily get washed away during heavy rains and floods which is commonplace in Bihar.
bureaucrats at the national level) – but does that provide relevant information to judge. The documented information looks at all deviation from norms in the same light – the ‘honest’ and the ‘dishonest’, so easily distinguishable within the local context with its ‘rich’ information, appears quite similar to a ‘distant’ observer (like a bureaucrat at the national level) using documented information as a tool to understand. In a way, it fails to reveal the ‘strategic intent’ of the actors – the rural leaders in this case. Context has a spatial, a geographical sense – the ‘local’ and the ‘national’, therefore, differ.

The point to be made, however, is that projects are selected through Gram Panchayat or other elected representative local bodies and are in that sense an expression of ‘revealed felt needs’ of the ‘heterogeneous’ rural community and those ‘revealed felt needs’, in many cases, might be weighed more towards the interests of more powerful sections of rural society. Although the guidelines specify that ‘felt need’ works should be taken up – the stringent conditionality on required labour intensity of the works actually gives short-shrift to the expression of community needs. Deviation from the ‘norms’ is therefore ‘the norm’ in action – within the local context. Is this legitimate? Within the structure of the scheme – clearly it is not. However, within the local context it is not so easy to answer that. The rural areas we visited were characterized by lack of all-weather motorable roads and many other ‘civic amenities’ (or public assets) that are common within an urban milieu and are often a ‘symbol’ of development so that a lack of that is perceived as ‘backwardness’. The rural elite, therefore, strives to overcome this lack of development – and to develop – for the rural elite is also most closely linked (among rural classes) with the urban milieu and also aspires probably most for an urban-centred upward mobility. The local, probably, does not have any more an autonomous discourse on development – the symbols of development that are imagined are borrowed from the urban-centred discourse – and those images are powerful as they assert themselves by their absence in the local (rural) milieu. Dreams (within the local) are framed in icons and motifs borrowed from the ‘national’. In the discourse space, the separation of the context between ‘local’ and ‘national’ blurs. The discourse space, in other words, lacks contesting claimants.

IV. Monitoring systems and agencies

We now shift to the actionable domain again, where deviation from the (rules) of the scheme is commonplace. It is important, therefore, to understand the monitoring systems and agencies involved in implementation of the scheme – to find how they interface with each other, how they engage in conflicts, how norms are subverted and how the wedge between the conceptual and actionable knowledge domain is reconciled. In our schema, this is most important, for it is the site of ‘action’, of implementation and the perceived failure in implementation and governance. It provides the window to look into the ‘folk-world’ of the ‘local’ in action.

As appendix 2 shows, there are two stages of the monitoring process – a pre-project stage (of approval) and a post-project stage of ensuring compliance with documentation requirements that affects flow of resources in subsequent periods. Two sets of agencies are involved in the process of implementation - the elected local bodies and the district and block level administration. The role of the two sets of agencies is quite different within the implementation mechanism of the scheme. While the elected bodies are responsible for selection of works to be undertaken and the actual project implementation, the

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13 In Rampur Urf Rahimpur Gram Panchayat in Parwatta block of Khagaria district the construction of a ‘chabutra’ was one of the works in our sample. Although the Muster Roll for the work showed several mandays of employment generation, the Panchayat Pramukh (who had a wide reputation for being a very honest and active person) was quite forthright in telling us that only 5 persons were involved in the construction, all of them being semi-skilled workers – masons from outside the village. According to him, the Gram Sevak maintains the Muster Rolls for the purpose of official records and it was not his concern.
administration gives technical as well as administrative (pre-project) approval, including approval of project cost estimates. Administration is also responsible for post-implementation monitoring, i.e. documentation of proper records (the Master Rolls of labourers and Measurement Book) and post-project inspection to ensure that the project has been carried out satisfactorily. There is thus a two-stage monitoring mechanism.

The local administration along with the elected representatives of local government bodies, in a sense, represents the ‘local elite’ – located between the ‘national’ (or higher tiers of State apparatus) and the rural commoner, including the wage labourer around whom the scheme is conceived. It is through this ‘local elite’ that the rural commoner often connects with the ‘national’ – the ‘local elite’ plays an important role of information intermediary.

The ‘lifeworld’ of the two segments of the ‘local elite’, so to say, are different, however. The local political class acquires power and position through a process of local electoral contest and cultivation of a local following amongst the ‘rural commoner’ would be an important part of his/her strategic world. It must therefore look inward towards the local. It, however, would also aspire to upward mobility within the political party set-up – to move to positions of provincial and national leadership and other such important organizational roles. And this would normally set up complex dynamics and multiple strategic possibilities. While the local political leaders would try to leverage their ‘local support base’ to achieve upward mobility within their own organizational setup, they would also try to draw support and resources into the local community, to the extent that this ability to bring resources determine the outcome of local political contests and their continued survival in positions of power. It is this ability to mobilize the local population (in an electoral context) and link it to larger (national or regional) political processes (and parties) that gives the local political class its power, albeit only as an ‘agent mobilizer’; but it is this that gives them the power to often negotiate with higher tiers of political leadership or the bureaucracy in the actionable domain.

The position of local administration is slightly different. Local administrators belong either to ‘national’ or ‘provincial’ cadres of the State bureaucratic apparatus. Broadly, their role is to act as agents of the higher tiers of government within the local government setup – to ensure, in a way, that resources (that are provided by higher tiers of government for local development) are utilized and schemes implemented following the norms (and rules). The career path of the administrators is up the administrative hierarchy to ‘provincial’ or ‘national’ administrative roles, for the local (rural) administrative positions are at the lowest rungs of the bureaucratic hierarchy. For the purpose of this paper, two observations stand out. Firstly, the elected political class is structurally more linked to the ‘rural commoner’ – for cultivating a following within the local community is strategically important to their continued survival. They are ‘locked-in’ to the rural milieu more strongly and would, therefore, have a greater incentive to articulate the local community interest even if that means negotiating a deviation from the norms (or rules) set by higher tier bureaucracy. This places the ‘rural commoner’ in a strange position – they might, in fact, be ‘nearer’ in terms of sharing the ‘lifeworld’ and the context with the local political class (who are often their local oppressors) than the administration – the local representative of the ‘modern’ developmental State. The administrative world of ‘rules’, ‘norms’ and ‘schemes’ are far from the ‘lifeworld’ of the ‘rural commoner’. An incident we witnessed probably brings it out quite eloquently.

A rural commoner came to meet a BDO (Block Development Officer, who heads the block administration), while we were in his office, to get his signature (of attestation) on his photograph affixed to an application. We reproduce the dialogue.

*Rural commoner: Sir (saab), can I get your signature on my photo?*
BDO: Has the Gram Pradhan signed it?

Rural commoner: He told that your signature will be enough.

BDO: Whose photo is this? Go and get the Pradhan’s signature on the reverse side of the photo.

…the BDO gave a cursory glance at the application form and the photo and threw it away, castigating the rural commoner for his foolishness. We managed to take a peek at the photograph – it was that person’s photo clearly – but one taken some years (maybe 5 years) back so that he looked just a bit different. That was power revealed. The Gram Pradhan is much closer, perhaps, to the world of the rural commoner. Probably, the Pradhan will also tell him a few things, give him some advice. He will probably also utilize his services for this favour (if this is a favour!). But the point is that the rural commoner can at least get into an alliance with the Pradhan, uneven though the terms of that alliance are!

The administration, on the other hand, is a sort of ‘guardian of the norms’ and yet they have to strike alliances with the local community, often the leaders in the local community, in order to ‘act’, enmeshed as they are within the local political economy. In course of our interaction with elected representatives as well as administrative officials it was clear that the relation between the two arms of the local government machinery has not been too smooth. This conflict is important to us since it defines the nature of local alliances and negotiations that accompany the ‘murky’ process of implementation of the scheme. To some of the details of that process we now turn.

The primary data source (documentation) about projects in the scheme is the Measurement Book (called MB in the scheme parlance). It contains details of all approvals related to the project (including the technical approval provided by the engineering staff in the local administration), account of expenses on materials purchased as well as on wages paid to labourers. A Master Roll of labourers who worked in the project is also maintained along with the MB. While the payment for material expenses is made through the bank, providing traceability to the transaction, wage payments are made in cash to those who worked, usually on the site of work on a daily or weekly basis. The wage payment transaction is far more difficult to verify (ex-post) regarding the authenticity of the transaction itself, since it does not leave a trace. The random sample of (around 50) measurement books that we studied in detail had well documented records. The share of wages in total project cost was more than 50% on average. This was, as we argued earlier, an overestimate, since most of the projects were material intensive. We felt that the wage component of the project was being inflated and given that wage payments were in cash (and the associated problem of verifiability), it might not be too difficult to forge data. What is of concern, however, is the fact that figures on employment generation that are available at the ‘provincial’ and

14 The last Panchayat elections in Bihar were held in late 1970s, after which the same elected representatives continued to hold office. After the 73rd amendment and the drive towards strengthening local governments in early 1990s, the ‘old’ panchayat bodies were dismantled in mid-1990s. Elections, however, were held only in 2001. In the intervening period full powers shifted to the administrative wing – and as a Mukhia put it – ‘that period was the golden period for many local level administrative officials in Bihar’. Post panchayat elections, therefore, the elected bodies had to reclaim powers. In Khagaria district, for instance, Zilla Parishad claimed that they did not have access to records pertaining to Zilla Parishad works till August 2002.

15 We tried cross-checking with random samples of labourers indicated in the Master Rolls, but that did not prove too effective. To reach the village ‘commoner’ we often had to take the support of the local leaders. In many cases we were told that a particular person has gone out to work and we had no way to verify the claim. The roving sociologist’s methods are not quite adequate.
‘national’ level through a process of aggregation of local level data, are actually gross overestimates. Yet this data, published in government publications, is often used in several studies, oblivious to issues of its authenticity.

But how is this data fudging allowed? The need to tamper with data arises partly from the diverging interests of the implementers (the local political class) whose ‘revealed felt needs’ are biased towards material intensive projects while the norms of the project as determined by the central government are different. The local elite, therefore, must seek and negotiate a deviation from the ‘rules’, paving the way for a local level exchange between the administration (the local guardian of the ‘rules’) and the local political class. Extra-legal rents are generated leading to leakage of resources. Project costs are inflated and these extra expenses probably find a representation in documentation as inflated expenses on wages as well. In areas we visited, anecdotal stories of (extra-legal) commissions extracted by personnel in local administration for providing approvals to projects were widespread – the ‘commoner’ around the administrative offices often provided those anecdotes. The commissions (or ‘cuts’ as they called it) are standardized. The organization of the local exchange and the ‘informal rules’ that organize the local exchange around deviation (from norms) is therefore very important for ‘action’ and implementation of the projects. It is only when the ‘informal rules’ are under contest that conflicts break out – our feeling was that well-governed areas had a stable pattern of these local exchanges that made the process of implementation effective. Several respondents shared this feeling. Forging of successful local alliances, therefore, constitute the cornerstone of implementation and action.

V. Interpreting multiple contexts, conflicts and its resolution

We reproduce snippets of conversation that we had with the District Magistrates (who heads the district administration) in course of our interviews.

‘Poverty alleviation programs like SGRY have degenerated into a patronage dispensation mechanism for the political class – the primacy of generation of wage employment, which is the spirit of the scheme, has never been internalized by the local bodies.’

‘The Central Government fixes too many rules, wants too many monitoring and conformance reports. The district administration does hardly have any powers to act in an entrepreneurial way.’

‘Schemes like SGRY have lot of problems – nowadays these people do not even inform me about what is happening.’

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16 In one district DRDA office, staff responsible for sending annual reports to the central government used ‘rule of thumb’ (derived from the norms of the scheme) to arrive at the figure of employment generated at the district level. The lower bodies, blocks and panchayats do not send any data on employment generated in that district.

17 Inspite of detailed monitoring, including project-wise technical and administrative approval for cost estimates of each project, cost inflation, it is generally agreed, is fairly widespread. In a ‘brick-soled mud road’ construction project undertaken by Korha Block Samithi (in Katihar district) in Binodpur Panchayat in 2001-02 (scheme no.4), a cost estimate of Rs.5,51,400 was approved for constructing a 3000 ft. long and 8 ft. wide road. According to independent estimates cost per 100 ft. of brick-soled road construction would be around Rs.11,000-12,000. It implies that cost inflation in approved project cost was more than 50%.

18 In East Champaran district, Zilla Parishad members claimed that the District Engineer is available only one day in the week and to obtain his signature is a very difficult and costly process.
The three snippets represent various faces of the local administration – a sense of disgust at the local political elites’ hijacking of the scheme for their own strategic benefits thwarting the intent of the central government in extending benefits to the ‘rural commoner’, a sense of being constrained by too many centralized rules to ‘act’ locally and a sense of loss of control and a failure of governance that must exist since the informal local (illegal) exchanges that form the concrete basis of ‘action’ undermines the administrative heritage. The conflicting faces exist simultaneously. Yet, is it not legitimate for the local political elite to cultivate their support base within the community using patronage dispensation as a tool, so as to succeed in the local electoral contests? Why does this strategic imperative have to take the form of a failure of governance? Can’t the strategic imperative of the local political elite be tapped for governance? Imaginative strategy making is precisely about tapping this difference for governance – the differing strategic imperatives may not necessarily be a path to anarchy.

As we moved through the process of design and implementation of the scheme, we encountered multiple ‘lifeworlds’ and contexts that generated different knowledge claims. We alluded to differences in ‘contexts’ at multiple levels. The ‘national’ and the ‘local’ are spatially separated contexts laden differentially with power, which leads to differences in incentives to act in the domain of action. Within the ‘local context’, the local administrator (bureaucrat), the political elite and the rural commoner are placed differentially, especially with regard to how they are linked (or not linked) to higher tiers of bureaucratic/political setup. This defines another level of contextual difference. The actors in the multiple local contexts, however, share the locale – in space and time, with the rural commoner being most tightly tied and the bureaucrat most weakly to the ‘local’. These contextual differences between actors lead to different incentives and differences in how they perceive the scheme under discussion and how they act. Implementation (or action) requires, however, an alliance between different local actors. The local political elite utilizes resources obtained through the scheme to realize local development objectives framed in an urban-centred discourse (with development images and icons that are borrowed from the urban milieu), while at the same time cultivating a local following through patronage dispensation that can be leveraged both in local electoral contests as well as in negotiating with higher tiers of the political establishment. And the rural poor – the commoner – also participates; for this alliance, that provides favoured access to wage employment during periods of crisis (the non-cultivating season), is extremely essential for their survival.\(^{19}\) For the local administration, documentation is the most important aspect as it ensures a continued resource flow. It also ensures that the role of the local administration as ‘guardians of the norms’ is fulfilled – at least on documented records, which is what is visible and makes sense from a distance far removed from the locale of generation of those documents. Each actor, therefore, understands the ‘other’ and it is through this understanding that the alliance can be forged and action can proceed. Multiple contexts, therefore, negotiate at the interface – the task of understanding the ‘other’, which is often a cornerstone of strategizing, is accomplished in the domain of action. The alliance, however, is forged on a ‘deviation’ from the ‘norm’ set by the central bureaucracy. The knowledge generated in the actionable domain and the reaching out to ‘other’ contexts that occur in the process has a somewhat tragic dimension. This knowledge claim, based on a ‘deviation’ (and often on illegal deals) can hardly be celebrated for it is macabre – it is an unvoiced knowledge claim; it is probably unvoiceable as well. While we looked into actors in the local context so far, the question as to why the ‘national’ tolerates or how it reconciles this deviation remains. So we turn next to the ‘national’.

The central government looks at poverty as a problem to be tackled, partly through generation of wage employment. The elite development discourse recognizes a need to provide consumption support to the lowest rungs of rural society – this recognition is often couched in terms of a right to food or employment.

\(^{19}\) The total budgeted amount for SGRY amounts to around Rs.0.2 million per gram panchayat per year and an equal amount of grain. Given reasonable estimates of leakages (30%) and a wage component of 20% (at daily wage of Rs.60), employment generation would be around 500-1000 mandays a year in a gram panchayat with average population of around 3000.
And a neo-classical choice of technique argument would clearly be looking at creating labour intensive assets in the rural milieu, since that would utilize the factor of production most abundantly available. The conceptual knowledge claim, therefore, propounds the relevance of such types of schemes as we are discussing. In the actionable domain it leads to the ‘norms’. However, design of such a scheme must first enter the budgetary allocation process for the central government – concerns in the actionable domain get raised in this allocation decision, where the scheme has to compete with other uses of financial (budgetary) resources. ‘Cost of generating employment’ becomes an important parameter of decision making. A labour intensive works program not only benefits wage labourers more, it also reduces the financial cost (for the central government) of providing a unit (rupee) of wage income in rural areas. A substantial creation of wage employment opportunities can then be achieved at a ‘realistic’ cost to the central government. Implementation and monitoring of the scheme then focuses on utilization of funds and resources and on proper documentation. The norms flowing from the conceptual domain, therefore, find an expression in satisfying the pragmatic pressures created in the budgetary allocation process. The actionable domain, within what we are calling the ‘national context’, finds the conceptual claim pragmatic. The actionable domain has other concerns as well. The local and the national are linked in the political sphere. We argued that the local political elite is often the agent mobilizer – it is this ‘power’ that provides the local political elite the ability to negotiate around ‘deviations’ at the local level. The scheme thus acts as a patronage dispensation mechanism, not only at the local level, but also probably at the interface of the national and the local. It serves the important purpose of political mobilization in electoral contests. Within the actionable domain, therefore, the local and the national do interact across contexts – yet there is a certain sense of tragedy.

The knowledge generated in the actionable domain through negotiation at the interface of contexts is rich and valuable – it is on such knowledge that the system functions, action occurs. Yet this knowledge also bears the tragedy of the macabre. It fails to revise the conceptual knowledge claims. It also fails to find expression in a discourse that inspires – a discourse where alliances can be struck on celebration, instead of ‘deviation’. This we argue is because of lack of power of the local in two different senses of the term. The local, as we argued lacks power over the material domain – importantly over several local resources and has to perforce depend on a stream of grants. The local also lacks an autonomous discourse that could have lent a voice to local concerns. The local dreams in borrowed motifs, images. The local elite, therefore, aspires to similar development symbols (that leads to capital intensive projects), which however does not find an expression in the elite discourse of development science at the ‘national’ level. It is this failure to nurture a local discourse, to act as a counter and contest a ‘national’ discourse (or even a universal discourse, as in say development science) that is a more important face of the lack of local power. Power has many shades and in important ways the local lacks power – even the power of the local political elite has a certain sense of futility. It is the power of a mere agent mobilizer – a power that can hardly lead to imaginative flights of conceptualization or strategizing.

The context, therefore, matters. In the domain of action, actors within conflicting contexts negotiate, quite effectively, to arrive at a common ground for action – even though they are all enmeshed in their local contexts. Negotiation occurs at the interface of contexts – the ‘other’ is discovered. But the negotiation is subversive; yet that is what leads to ‘action’. In this macabre subversion we interpret an existential assertion of the disempowered ‘other’ world of folk-life. It is the moment of freedom. Yet it cannot lead to a flight of fancy – it has to contort, distort and convolute within itself. Such is the tragedy. The national elite discourse, however, continues. It does not have a contestant (from the local) in the discourse space – universalism continues to be celebrated. Norm and its deviation exist simultaneously. The norm, yet, is not redefined and renegotiated. The ‘other’ can be blamed for the ‘deviation’ and the norm can be

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20 Several studies have tried to compare different programs on the basis of cost of generation of employment. Such exercises are quite common now in view of the proposed legislation to guarantee work to every household in rural areas that is now under debate.
rationalized. The dominant knowledge claim can then reconcile to an implementation and governance failure and engage in a fruitless search for better administrative processes.

Conclusion

This paper was an interpretational journey through the process of implementation of the wage employment generation program (SGRY) designed and sponsored by the central government in India. The scheme was designed to provide wage employment support to the lowest strata of rural society during the lean agricultural season when demand for wage labour arising from other 'normal' (agriculture linked) rural economic activities is at its lowest, by taking up a program of rural public asset and infrastructure construction. The design of the program, in terms of 'norms' and 'rules' that governed implementation flowed out of a ‘knowledge claim’ – a perception about the rural reality shared by those who designed the program at the level of the central government. The paper took up a few such ‘norms’ as defined within the structure of the scheme and looked into how it was interpreted and often ‘breached’ at the level of implementation – on the field of ‘action’ by agencies responsible for implementation.

It is common to explain such phenomenon as cases of ‘implementation failure’ to be tackled through tightening of systems. But we argued that there is nothing called an ‘implementation failure’. Central to this argument is the claim that ‘context’ and the ‘lifeworld’ of actors and agencies placed at different tiers of the system differ – the planners in Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, the ‘local’ administration in the blocks and districts, the ‘local’ political class who are the elected representatives of Panchayat bodies that implement the projects and the wage labourer (or the rural commoner) dwell in different ‘worlds’. Their strategic imperatives differ. The multiple ‘contexts’ and the agents implicated therein, must therefore, negotiate - particularly, at the interface of contexts. In the actionable domain this negotiation occurs, but the negotiation is organized around ‘deviation’ from the norms. The norm fails to hold in implementation – in the ‘folk world’.

Yet the norm and its deviation continue to exist in simultaneity. The knowledge claim of this ‘other’ can exist only as a stealthy subversion. This subversion is an expression of a lack of harmony. The knowledge claim derived from the ‘folk world’ of action fails to negotiate with and redefine the dominant conceptual claim, because the folk-world lacks the power to negotiate and engage in strategic acts. This lack of power has two senses – a lack of power over the material domain and more importantly an inability to create and nurture an autonomous local discourse that can engage in a contest in the discourse space. This leads to deskilling or devalorization of local skills and institutions surrounding it. What would a redefined knowledge claim, an alternative structure of such interventions as SGRY, say, look like then? Though several possibilities can be imagined, we did not indulge in that in this paper. We did not pose a counter-knowledge claim. We merely confronted the multiple contexts (and the lifeworld woven around it) in an effort to seek out the process of implementation of a conceptual knowledge claim and how it encounters the actionable domain. A redefinition of the dominant knowledge claim, which is a more creative, imaginative project, will have to await the author – the political strategic actor who has to reconfigure power. It is out of that process of conflict – a reassertion of power of the ‘folk-world’ and recreation of a strategy space – that the redefinition of knowledge claim will occur and new possibilities of ‘action’ imagined. In that creative flight of fancy, the local discourse that will lend voice must be nurtured. The distant academic scholar can then undertake another interpretational journey – but one that will deal with variety (and maybe spatial competition) in the discourse space. Public administration and power of higher tiers of bureaucracy, in managing the interfaces of contexts, will then have to assume a different role – a role that is closer to that of a catalyst; a Gandhian catalyst perhaps.
References:


Rajaraman, Indira (2003): A fiscal domain for Panchayats, Oxford University Press, New Delhi
Appendix 1: District-wise Blocks and Panchayats selected for study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Bhojpur</th>
<th>East Champaran</th>
<th>Khagaria</th>
<th>Katihar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. of blocks</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jagdishpur, Charpokhri</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jagdishpur, Charpokhri</td>
<td>Jagdishpur, Charpokhri</td>
<td>Turkaulia, Areraj</td>
<td>Parwatta, Beldaur</td>
<td>Korha, Mansahi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Panchayats in selected blocks</strong></td>
<td>20 and 11 respectively</td>
<td>16 and 14 respectively</td>
<td>22 and 16 respectively</td>
<td>23 and 7 respectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chakwa &amp; Kanwra in Jagdishpur; Siyadih &amp; Mukundpur in Charpokhri</td>
<td>Chakwa &amp; Kanwra in Jagdishpur; Siyadih &amp; Mukundpur in Charpokhri</td>
<td>Jaisinghpur (East) &amp; Turkaulia (West) in Turkaulia; Raria &amp; Babnauli in Areraj</td>
<td>Rampur urf Rahimpur &amp; Gobindpur in Parwatta; Belagaon &amp; Bobil in Beldaur</td>
<td>Korha &amp; Bhatwara in Korha; Phulhara &amp; Mohanpur in Mansahi</td>
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APPENDIX 2: AGENCIES INVOLVED IN SGRY AND THEIR RELATIONS

Ministry of Rural Development
Government of India
(funds the scheme, sets guidelines)

Disbursement of funds as per district allocation
Allocation of grain pro-rata with funds
(Allocation depends on previous year’s utilization of both grains and funds)

DRDA

Progress Report after collation of
data from ZP and Block office for

District administration monitors utilization and status
(complete/incomplete) of projects

(Zilla Parishad
(formal role in project selection,
informal role in contractor selection)

Funds to be disbursed within 15 days of receipt by DRDA

Panchayat Samiti
(formal role in project selection, informal role in contractor selection)

BDO Office
(administrative supervision over block and Gram works,
projectwise technical & administrative approval at planning stage)

District Engineer or other staff
(maintains papers and monitors project, cheque paid in his/her name upon completion of work and records like MB etc)

Junior Engineer or other block office staff
(maintains papers and monitors project, cheque paid in his/her name upon completion of work and records like MB etc)

Reports on Gram Panchayat works

Utilization of funds, lifting & distribution of grains, employment generated etc.)

Contractor
(involvement informal)

Gram Panchayat
(formal role in project selection, informal role in contractor selection)

Report on Gram Panchayat works

Contractor
(maintains papers and
monitors project,
informal role in contractor selection)

Contractor
(involvement informal)

Contractor
(involvement informal)