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Jobs for the poor

CAG report points to lapses in NREGP

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Ever since launching the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme in 2006, the UPA coalition government has missed no opportunity to extol its virtues as the country's most significant welfare scheme. Now, it is facing no end of embarrassment as a preliminary report of the Comptroller and Auditor General, submitted this January, has pointed out glaring lacunae and lapses in the NREGP's functioning across the country.

The scope and purpose of the NREGP is at the heart of the National

and small dams all of which will become productive assets for the rural economy," says a senior advisor in the Planning Commission. He clarifies that the government's commitment through the NREGP "does not amount to an absolute or full fledged right-to-work, for even the relevant clause in the Constitution calls upon the state to provide full employment within the limits of its economic capacity". Instead, the NREGP seeks to create a standing policy mechanism whereby "all those desiring remunerative

senior cabinet minister belonging to Maharashtra, "We are faced with assembly elections this year and the prospects of general elections too. Naturally, we want to showcase the NREGP to every rural voter."

However, CAG report has thrown the proverbial spoke in the works. Its current findings are admittedly, preliminary' and the final version is awaited by the time of the forthcoming budget session of Parliament. The assessment has come after a six-month 'performance audit' of the NREGP carried out in 68 randomly selected districts from the 200 that were chosen for the first phase of the scheme. However, the selected districts are spread out over 26 states, and therefore can be considered to be reasonably representative of the functioning of the NREGP across the country.



Very few poor have sought jobs under the NREGP scheme

Common Minimum Programme of the UPA coalition, and made mandatory through parliamentary legislation in 2005. It seeks to provide guaranteed employment, at statutory minimum wages, of 100 days in every financial year to rural households with unemployed adult members prepared to do unskilled manual labour. "This simply means that millions of people in India's poorest villages will be given a chance to get short term unskilled jobs building village roads, schools and other buildings, ponds,

work, but enable to do so, will be provided by minimum wage employment under stipulated conditions."

With such an objective, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government sought to cover 200 districts of the country at the time of the NREGP's launch in 2006, and expanded it to cover another 130 districts in April 2007. Later last year, in September, the prime minister chaired a meeting which decided to cover the remaining 283 districts in the country under the NREGP ambit by April 2008. Says a

Key finding

The key finding of the CAG report is that the delivery of the NREGP has deteriorated significantly even as the programme has expanded. There are two aspects to this. First, an abysmally small portion of the poor people who have sought jobs under the NREGP have actually received employment. In the period April 2006 to March 2007, 10 per cent of all such applicants received minimum wage jobs. Between April 2007 to December 2007, the number of actual beneficiaries has dropped to just 3.3 per cent of total job-seekers registered under the scheme. Second, even within the beneficiaries, only a small minority received the full promised deal. Thus, the CAG's sample reported that the average employment per person under the scheme was 45 days in April 2006-March 2007, whereas this has dropped to just 38 days during April-December 2007. In addition, the CAG has reported the NREGP is afflicted with corruption and mis-utilisation of funds, as well as inefficiency and unreliable documentation in most of the districts covered by its study. The worst performance in this regard has come from the poorest states of Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. These are the very states that have the greatest need for a comprehensive

