

Employment guarantee scheme must be free from political interferences

Revamping welfare schemes is a good idea, so changes in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, per se, are not objectionable. However, the way it is being done smacks of a desire to score political points. It begins with the name. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is proposed to be replaced with the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Grameen), or VB G RAM Priyanka Gandhi Vadra reacted with “Why are they removing Mahatma Gandhi’s name? He is considered the biggest Indian leader. Whenever such a name changes, a lot of expenditure happens in stationery and

paperwork.” More than that it makes the government a target for its detractors, which is increasingly coming under the influence of Gandhi haters. This does no good to the government under the Sangh Parivar, many of whose members have expressed admiration for Nathuram Godse. Enacted by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2005, the MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of work in villages. The Act has a provision for an unemployment allowance. “MGNREGA is bottom-up, people-centred, demand-driven, self-selecting and rights-based programme. It provides a legal guarantee for wage employment by providing allowances and compensation both in

cases of failure to provide work on demand and delays in payment of wages for work undertaken,” an official document says. The new Bill proposes several changes. It raises the 100-day guarantee to 125. Also, the scheme will no longer be demand-driven. Further, states will bear the financial burden partially. At present, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is entirely a Centrally-sponsored scheme—that is, the Centre provides 100 per cent of wages, while states take care of a small part of the expenses in hiring skilled labour and arranging materials. Under G Ram G, the Centre’s contribution will be limited to 60 per cent, whereas most states will have to spend 40 per cent. For

Northeastern and Himalayan states, this ratio will be 90:10. The new legislation proposes that work under the revamped scheme will not be available during the peak agricultural season. The government will rely on biometrics and geo-tagging for transparency. Non-availability of work during the peak agricultural season will be vehemently protested by the Left and civil society organisations. Communist leaders are no longer as powerful or influential as they were when the MNREGA came into being but Left-leaning NGOs and public intellectuals are still a force to reckon with.

The government will have a tough time tackling their resistance. At any rate, this provision privileges the interests of farmers over labour-

ers; it will be interesting to see how the BJP will face the criticism of being anti-poor. Besides, states, especially those under non-BJP parties, will be loath to share the burden of the rural employment guarantee scheme.

There are also states like Kerala, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Punjab, which face tremendous fiscal challenges, and it will be extremely difficult for them to finance the revamped scheme. Therefore, all stakeholders must try to sort out the matter in a spirit of cooperative federalism. The Centre should be willing to accept reasonable amendments to the proposed legislation, and states should rise above party and parochial interests to make the scheme better.

LETTERS

Use AI for maintaining peace

THIS has reference to your editorial ‘AI and militancy make a potent combination’ (Dec 16). It has aptly described about AI having become what it is today, which is comparable to the prevailing gun culture in the US and bullets fired by terrorists. People remain clueless about impending strikes at them. This free for all ready to use technology is fast becoming a peril to the peace-loving society due to phishing and cyberattacks. AI must be used in places where human involvement and vigil against the enemy are needed 24x7 throughout the year.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

Manekshaw was one of a kind

The opinion piece on Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw ‘Surrender or get wiped out’, Manekshaw’s ultimatum to Pak is a standout battle cry’ (THI Dec 16) rightly evokes a military mind where wit reinforced, rather than diluted, authority. Manekshaw’s genius lay in combining strategic patience with an unshakeable moral confidence. His famous ‘I’m always ready, sweetie’ was not banter but a declaration rooted in preparedness. Equally prescient was his warning that premature political orders, if issued, “may never be received,” a rare assertion of professional integrity in civil and military relations. His humour, often quoted, was forged in far harsher circumstances. The surrender of 93,000 Pakistani soldiers was not merely a battlefield triumph but an unprecedented strategic leverage. That such leverage failed to deliver a final settlement on Kashmir remains one of India’s costliest diplomatic omissions. Against this legacy, Pakistan’s present attempts to elevate General Munir to Manekshaw’s stature appear aspirational at best. After all, history, not rank or rhetoric, confers stature.

Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak

Name change or a game changer?

THE decision of the Union Government to increase the guaranteed work to 125 days per rural household and focus on four areas like increasing rural connectivity, climate resilience, rural livelihood infrastructure and water security under the newly named rural employment guaranteed Act is a welcome move. But changing the name of the scheme introduced in 2005 by the UPA regime should have been avoided. The NDA government has been gradually reducing its budgetary allocation stating that the scheme had some loopholes. Although an increase to 125 days per household is good, it still falls short of the demand for 200 days work a year. The government should increase the wages and make the ratio of Union and States’ contribution to 9:1 instead of 6:4 as the financial status of most of the States are not good.

A G Rajmohan, Anantapur-515004

‘G RAM G’ brings no cheer

The proposed revised form of MGNREGA, which will be renamed as VB G RAM G Bill, has come up with unlimited promise, but limited guarantee. The nature of supply driven job provision instead of the erstwhile demand will result in cutting the size of resources to the needy people. The proposed ban on the works under the scheme during peak agricultural season would put job seekers at a disadvantageous position regarding their negotiations of daily wages. The minimising of central share from ninety percent to sixty percent for the scheme would burden cash strapped states further. Instead of strengthening the scheme, the Centre has come up with a weakened version when it is aiming for Viksit Bharath.

Dr D V G Sankara Rao, Srikulam

Name spree continues with G RAM G

THE Narendra Modi-led Union Government has decided to replace the world’s largest rural jobs programme MGNAREGA with Viksit Bharat Gurantee Rojgar Ajeevika Machine Gramin (VB- G RAM G) after earlier renaming Raj Bhavan and the PMO, among others. Though the renamed rural jobs programme is aimed at increasing the number days to 125 from 100, it has a paused provision for 60 days in a year. Further it changed the Centre and state ratio of financial commit from 90:10 to 60:40 and capped budget support. This implies that some States must shell from their coffers if they spend more than what is allotted to them. However, app-based attendance, Aadhar linked payments and geotagging workites are welcome as these become part of the law and can enhance transparency and accountability.

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Congress will return to power in 2028 as well: CM

BELAGAVI: Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Monday asserted that the Congress will return to power in Karnataka in 2028 with the people’s mandate, just as it did in 2023, and said the BJP would continue to remain in the Opposition.

Speaking in the Legislative Assembly at Suvarna Soukha while responding to questions raised by the Opposition, the Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said the Congress government enjoys the support of 140 MLAs and that there was no need for the Opposition to create unnecessary speculation.

Referring to a popular proverb, Siddaramaiah remarked that the role of the Opposition seemed to be adding salt to a burning wound. He said that despite repeated provocations, none of the ruling party legislators would be swayed. “The people have blessed me to serve as Chief Minister for five years. We have the strength of 140 MLAs, and the Opposition need not indulge in sour commentary,” he said. The Chief Minister said the Congress government clearly understands the pulse of the people. “Just as the people blessed us in 2023, they will do so again in 2028. The people of Karnataka will never bring the BJP to power,” he asserted.

Siddaramaiah alleged that although the BJP has ruled the state twice, it never came to power with a clear popular mandate.

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RAVULAPATI SEETARAMARAO

THE Supreme Court’s decision comes as a whiff of fresh air to the countless victims of cyber frauds. It is heartening that courts, when necessary, take responsible and appropriate decisions on key public issues — decisions that governments and police should be making — and even provide guidelines for their implementation. This is a wake-up call for those who uphold democracy and the separation of powers of their duty.

With “digital arrest scams” proliferating across the country, the Supreme Court’s directions to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for carrying out a comprehensive probe into such crimes and criminals — including seeking Interpol’s cooperation and tracing the origins — should be seen as a positive development in criminal justice prudence. The

Court also issued notices to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), directing it to use artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to investigate deep-rooted patterns of funds being moved through various banks in these crimes, so that proper inquiries can be conducted and perpetrators cannot escape. Referring to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, the Supreme Court ordered online intermediaries to cooperate with the CBI and asked them to collect and hand over data and information related to digital arrests to investigative agencies.

The court suggested that states and Union Territories not only set up coordination centers to thoroughly investigate cybercrime but also adopt plans to proactively prevent such offenses. The apex court also directed that the cyber-crime coordination centres be linked with law enforcement agencies so that cybercrimes can be taken up for investigation.

A few days ago, under the leadership of Chief Justice Suryakant, the Supreme Court gave the CBI detailed guidelines on cybercrime—particularly digital arrests—sending a strong signal that tackling



these crimes is being treated as a high priority. The court identified three types of cyber scams. One involves online “digital arrests” where perpetrators, often targeting retired officers, pose as investigative agencies and extort their hard earned money and cause severe psychological distress. Although media reports show these offences are occurring across the country, they have not stopped and gullible people continue to fall prey. The Supreme Court specifically entrusted the CBI with the responsibility of apprehending those who run such scams and carrying out investigations.

Scammers are running another kind of cybercrime: luring victims with attractive-sounding investments, getting them to deposit large sums, and defrauding them under the guise of “advance tax” or other pretexts. Another widespread cyber-scam involves flooding WhatsApp with ads for supposed part-time jobs, using YouTube to offer “free tasks” for small payments to gain trust, then convincing victims to pay large amounts for “premium” tasks. Many people have encountered these scams. Victims often suffer in silence, not reporting to the police, and some become so distressed that they end their lives. The central government informed the Supreme Court in a note that cybercriminals have already swindled nearly Rs 30 billion. These fraudsters, posing as digital authorities, are extorting hard-earned

money, especially from the elderly. While we celebrate technological progress, fraud enabled by that same progress is increasing day by day. Many victims are left humiliated and ashamed, unable even to confide in family or close ones, and some have been driven to suicide. Investigating cyber-crimes is very difficult. Even though the Supreme Court has directed the CBI to take a direct role in probing these offences, the agency is bogged down with many different investigations, especially politically sensitive cases. Though it has a grand name, the CBI is struggling because it does not have adequate staff. The central and state governments keep assigning high-profile cases to the CBI, but it’s regrettable that when officers within the agency are identified as being problematic, proper action is not taken. Although the CBI is supposed to be an independent agency, it has no control over the recruitment of its personnel, and the central government does not seem concerned about that. The CBI takes officers on deputation from state police departments at various ranks. It appears the agency is even recruiting at the sub-inspector level for its work. But for higher-ranking positions, it inevitably relies on officers from

state and other police departments. Whatever importance an offence may have, handing over cases to the CBI has become routine for both state and central governments. The days when a CBI inquiry was regarded with respect are gone. In the past, CBI cases more often led to convictions; even if investigations were slow, they were conducted methodically.

Ironically, in the US, even the government fears the FBI. Here, however, the widespread charge is that the CBI has become a puppet of the ruling party at the Centre. Previously, despite delays, CBI results were something to be proud of. Now delays have increased, and the perception is that convictions are rare or merely symbolic.

Only if the CBI is truly independent and restructured across fronts can we expect it to solve modern crimes effectively. It is only when training and skills are provided to the agency that the Supreme Court orders can be implemented meaningfully. In this modern age we need systems that plan measures to produce decisive, visible results—not token actions. The CBI must be at the forefront of that effort.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

Saluting VNVK Sastry, a selfless supporter of adivasis



DR MADABHUSHI SRIDHAR

LITTLE boys and girls of a primary school in Nalgonda district once cried inconsolably when their beloved teacher, V N V K Sastry, was transferred. Refusing to accept the loss quietly, they walked nearly ten kilometres to the national highway and staged a protest until their voices were heard. Blessed indeed is the teacher who wins such young hearts.

That instinctive affection followed Dr Sastry wherever he went. A retired senior officer, social anthropologist, and lifelong fieldworker, he habitually won hearts through devotion to duty and an unshakeable concern for the people he served. Recalling their nearly five-decade-long association around 2020, senior journalist and former editor of The Hindu (Hyderabad), Dasu Keshav Rao, summed him up in simple terms: a man who never worked for files alone, but for people.

A full moon night in Srisaalam:

One incident narrated by Keshav Rao captures the essence of Dr Sastry’s life. On a full-moon night in December 1988, when he was heading the Chenchu Project, they were in the core area of the Srisaalam Tiger Sanctuary, where they were treated to welcome festivities that were organised by the Chenchu community. Earlier that day, they had visited

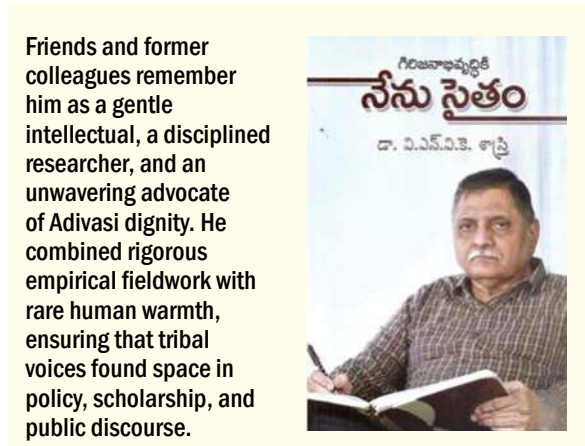
an ashram school where conditions were appalling. The warden was absent, as usual; children were being served rotten rice and tamarind water in the name of sambar. The fine rice meant for the children never reached the school.

Dr Sastry suspended the absentee warden on the spot and immediately arranged a proper meal—rice, curries, sambar and milk—something the children rarely got to toast. The following morning, as they were driving away, a group of men suddenly intercepted their vehicle, running and panting from a distant hamlet located beyond a hill.

Alarmed, they asked if something was wrong.

“Pani emi ledu saar. Meeru maa penta vacchaaru. Memu adiviki poyaamu. Choodaadaniki vacchaamu. Anthes saar.”

Nothing was wrong, they explained. They had only come to see and thank the officer who had visited their village.



Friends and former colleagues remember him as a gentle intellectual, a disciplined researcher, and an unwavering advocate of Adivasi dignity. He combined rigorous empirical fieldwork with rare human warmth, ensuring that tribal voices found space in policy, scholarship, and public discourse.

ties. Reflecting on the physical price of such commitment, he once remarked with characteristic humour:

“I earned malaria as a recurring deposit and amoebiasis as a fixed deposit—no regrets.”

Asked what “VNVK” stood for, he smiled and said, “I don’t know—perhaps Very Nice, Very Kind.”

20 years of service post-retirement:

Joining government service in the early 1970s, Dr Sastry served for 34 years in the Tribal Welfare Department of the Government of Andhra Pradesh, retiring in 2005 as Director of Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute (TCR&TI), Hyderabad.

His postings took him deep into the tribal belts of Warangal, Adilabad, Kurnool, and the erstwhile Khammam district, where he implemented complex welfare, education, forest rights, and rehabilitation programmes.

He held key positions across ITDAs, TCR&TI, TWREIS, and EPTRI Hyderabad.

Colleagues remember him as a deeply field-oriented officer whose work consistently placed tribal communities—not bureaucratic convenience—at the centre of administration.

lives of tribal communities. Equally vivid are memories of Prof Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf’s visit to Marlawai to perform the last rites of his wife, Betty, and the vibrant Kelsapur Jatra.

Indervelli killings:

Three officers from Hyderabad were among the first to reach Indervelli, where police had opened fire on protesting Gonds the previous evening, killing many and injuring several others. The administration was dazed and uncertain about the actual casualty figures. The three officers trekked through forests and hill-top habitations, braving scorching summer heat and humidity, to meet the injured and the families of the deceased.

Later, when the Collector, AK Goel, informed forest officials at Mancherla that the Indervelli toll was far higher than the officially stated figure—he did mention the actual number to Keshav Rao—it became clear how deeply the truth had been suppressed.

Mentor, adviser and advocate:

Even after retirement, Dr Sastry remained intellectually active and socially committed. For nearly two decades, he served as a freelance consultant and guest faculty, Institute of Tribal Development Studies, Hyderabad; contributed to NALSA Tribal Rights training modules for legal services authorities; expert investigator, Centre for Good Governance (World Bank land governance project); Course editor, PG Diploma in Tribal Development Management, NIRD; Member, National Expert Committees on Bauxite Mining (A.P) and Kolleru Lake Sanctuary; senior consultant, APARD and adviser for Andhra Pradesh Community Forest Management Project (World Bank).

His deep understanding of forest rights, land governance, and community institutions made him a sought-after expert across government agencies and academic institutions.

Friends and former colleagues remember him as a gentle intellectual, a disciplined researcher, and an unwavering advocate of Adivasi dignity. He combined rigorous empirical fieldwork with rare human warmth, ensuring that tribal voices found space in policy, scholarship, and public discourse.

His passing away leaves a profound void in anthropology, tribal welfare administration, and development studies. Yet his writings, training programmes, institutions, students, and the countless tribal families, whose lives he touched, stand as his enduring legacy.

(The writer is an ormer Central Information Commissioner, and presently Professor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)