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**Article (Published version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Corbridge, Stuart and Srivastava, Manoj (2013) Mapping the social order by fund flows: the political geography of employment assurance schemes in India. [Economy and Society](#), 42 (3). pp. 455-479. ISSN 1469-5766

DOI: [10.1080/03085147.2013.772758](https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2013.772758)

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Available in LSE Research Online: August 2014

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# Mapping the social order by fund flows: the political geography of employment assurance schemes in India

Stuart Corbridge and Manoj Srivastava

## Abstract

Economic growth in India has failed to reduce extreme income poverty or provide decent jobs as effectively as growth has done in East Asia. Mindful of a political threat from the labouring poor, successive governments have offered India's 'surplus populations' guaranteed work, first through the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) and more recently under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). This paper uses ethnographic and large-n datasets to examine how the EAS worked in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh; it also utilizes a preliminary dataset for NREGA in Madhya Pradesh. We show that understandings of the EAS were poor among intended beneficiaries in both states. We also show that the EAS did not work better for the rural poor in Madhya Pradesh than in Bihar, notwithstanding the existence of functioning *panchayati Raj* institutions in the former. Importantly, this calls into question aspects of a conventional decentralization agenda. Most significantly, the paper suggests that geographies of EAS fund flows illuminate the nature and workings of the local state. Distribution of EAS funds within districts and blocks is most uneven where allocative power is effectively monopolized by a regional political boss and/or is unchallenged by bureaucratic oversight mechanisms. We discuss how far the same problems might affect NREGA schemes notwithstanding the more effective information flows and accountability mechanisms that surround them.

Keywords: EAS; NREGA; mapping power; fund flows; labour.

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## Introduction

[T]here is a pattern, clearest in India, in which successful poverty-reducing agencies decline and are replaced by new successes, which then decline in turn. . . . Most of these big programmes started well. However, each gradually succumbs to rent-seeking by non-poor clients or administrators, or to rivalry from line ministries. Some programmes live on in attenuated form, but usually they are replaced by new schemes, also initially successful. New schemes attract public scrutiny; old schemes accumulate clients.

(Lipton, 1996, p. 2)

The Indian economy has grown every year since 1980–1 and annual per capita income growth in this period has on average been three times as high as it was in the 1970s. Significantly, however, while economic growth in India in the 1970s delivered the highest returns to rural labour, post-1980 growth has favoured the urban well to do. Petia Topolova estimates that between 1983 and 1993–4, ‘Distribution neutral growth would have generated a poverty decline in rural India that was 22 percent higher; in urban areas, the decline in poverty would have been 76 percent higher’ (2008, p. 8). India’s social structures of accumulation make it difficult for poor women and men – not least Muslims, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) – to access secure employment opportunities, especially when employment-generation rates have been much lower than expected (Corbridge *et al.*, 2013; Harriss-White, 2003). Lacking in human capital and immoveable assets, nearly 80 per cent of Indians continue to get by on less than \$2 a day.

Mindful that India’s dangerous (or ‘surplus’) classes need to be kept at bay (see Chatterjee, 2008; Li, 2010), and ever keen to signal the fact that economic reform has been coupled to significant attempts at subaltern self-improvement, successive governments in India have sought since 1993 to provide the country’s Below Poverty Line (BPL) households with assured employment in weak labour markets. When the Congress-led United Democratic Alliance (UDA) government removed a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition government from power in New Delhi in 2004 a lot was made of a supposed rural backlash against the urban strongholds of ‘Shining India’. The UDA government promptly signalled its commitment to the neglected rural majority by introducing its flagship anti-poverty initiative: the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005.<sup>1</sup>

For the very first time, it was argued, at least on a national basis (there were antecedents in the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme of the 1970s and 1980s), the Government of India sought to guarantee in law the right to work. The architects of NREGA made determined efforts to ensure that NREGA schemes did not suffer from the same high fund leakage rates that affected earlier employment assurance schemes. Since 2006, the payment of wages to NREGA workers has supposedly been through bank accounts and post offices (although this has not always happened in practice) and linked to

the prior issuance of job cards (Roy & Dey, 2009). Stealing from workers' wages has also been made difficult where social audits of NREGA funds have been effectively implemented by village mass meetings (*gram sabhas*). Importantly, too, workers have greater opportunities under NREGA than previous schemes to find out whether they are being cheated and by roughly how much. Unusually, the Government of India has endorsed the setting up of a scheme that can be expected to produce discontent among cheated workers. It did so in the belief that civil society actions from below are important in making government more responsive to the needs of poorer citizens.<sup>2</sup>

In short, there are good reasons to assume that NREGA has built into it important transparency and accountability mechanisms that were not available to the Employment Assurance Scheme, in key respects its major antecedent and from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s the largest anti-poverty scheme in rural India. The current Congress government has also invested in the scheme politically, in the pursuit of increased rural votes. But there are also substantial similarities between EAS and NREGA, and these should not be overlooked when intuitions are being advanced about the likely success or failure of the latter. Like NREGA, the EAS offered up to 100 days of paid labour to two adult householders presenting a demand for work to their elected local government officials (*sarpanchs*, *pradhans*, *mukhiyas*). The government's assurance of work functioned as a *de facto* employment guarantee, albeit there was no governing statute prior to NREGA. It also proposed that schemes built with EAS labour should be chosen by villagers themselves in open public meetings (*gram sabhas*), subject to sign off from higher authority. The EAS was the very model of a demand-driven development scheme and it took shape within a restructured system of democratic local government post-1993: what in India is called *panchayati Raj*.<sup>3</sup> Particularly in the centre and east of the country, where long-standing under-investment in state capacity has left schools without teachers and clinics without doctors, poor men and women were offered an assurance of off-season employment as the principal means of protecting them against extreme income poverty – and, possibly, against the temptations of organized left-wing politics.

It is too soon yet to assess the long-run effectiveness of NREGA. Solid academic studies of the scheme remain thin on the ground, although they are accumulating rapidly (see especially Banerjee & Saha, 2010; Drèze, 2010; Joshi, 2010; Khera, 2011; see also the interesting reports in *The Hindu* by Vidhya Subrahmaniam (2009a, 2009b) on corruption in NREGA schemes in Rajasthan). Given the strong similarities between NREGA and the EAS, however, and being mindful of Michael Lipton's commentary on 'scheme clientelism', we believe that a lot can still be learned about employment guarantees from studies of the EAS in central and eastern India in the 1990s and early 2000s. Accordingly, this paper considers the politics of employment assurance in two of India's poorest states: Bihar in 1999–2000, at a time when *panchayati Raj* institutions (PRIs) had not been re-activated in the state (local government functions instead were discharged by public officials), and Madhya

Pradesh (MP), a state where, under the leadership of Chief Minister Digvijay Singh (1993–2003), democratic localism was put on a pedestal in this same period and offered up to the rest of India as a successful example of participatory self-governance. The paper utilizes large official datasets and ethnographic fieldwork in two different political settings to examine how the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) worked in practice and to test whether democratic self-governance led to improved pro-poor outcomes. It also presents some preliminary findings on NREGA in MP in 2009. Most significantly, the paper follows the money. It proposes that the local state – and state-society interactions – in central and eastern India can usefully be understood through a political geography of scheme fund flows.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The second section reviews our fieldwork, major datasets and working assumptions. The third section outlines the main provisions of the EAS and follows the reported flow of funds from New Delhi and Patna/Bhopal to our field sites. The fourth section reports on the workings and local understandings of the EAS in our field localities. We note that the main provisions of the EAS were poorly understood in both Bihar and MP, notwithstanding clear differences in political regime types. We also show how EAS schemes were diverted from employment provision to expensive road-building projects (not all of which were disapproved of by local people). In the fifth section we show how EAS performance levels reflected differences in political competition and bureaucratic oversight far more than the presence or absence of PRIs. In the two field sites dominated by high-level political bosses (Rewa District in MP and Vaishali in Bihar), levels of social and spatial exclusion from EAS schemes were far greater than in tribal districts where bureaucrats were less intimidated by political oligarchs (Mandla in MP and Ranchi in Bihar-Jharkhand). We provide detailed figures on EAS spending across different blocks and *panchayats* within these districts to demonstrate the connections between political regime types and the workings of India's pre-eminent anti-poverty scheme in the 1990s and early 2000s. We also suggest that an apparently more equitable distribution of NREGA funds in Rewa in 2009 may be as much a consequence of a change in the local political order as it is a result of improved accountability mechanisms (although we accept this finding must remain provisional). Finally, in the sixth section, we suggest that maps of EAS spending in Bihar and MP serve as accurate pointers both to geographies of local power and to the intensity of local political competition. We also consider whether and how pro-poor outcomes can be better engineered by NREGA schemes that might contest the classic logics of scheme clientelism or imperfect political markets.

### **Fieldwork, data and methods**

Research on the EAS in Bihar was carried out in 1999–2001 as part of a larger project that sought to understand how poor people see and engage the state in

eastern India. Four modes of governance were studied: development (proxied by the EAS), empowerment (primary education), social protection (resort to law or other conflict resolution mechanisms) and disciplinary (police, forest guards, Border Security personnel, etc.). Multi-scalar fieldwork was conducted in three districts/blocks/*panchayats*, each of which was chosen to exemplify a different political regime type. In Bidupur Block, Vaishali District, north Bihar, political competition was confined within a general framework of dominance by members of the Yadav community. The Yadavs are an officially designated Other Backward Caste (OBC) that at the time supplied the main political leader of Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav (notwithstanding that his wife, Rabri Devi, was nominally the Chief Minister of the State), and the *de facto* political boss of Bidupur Block, Bhola Babu, a local member of the Legislative Council. Sahar Block in Bhojpur District, then in central Bihar, was chosen for its long-standing history of counter-state actions by organized labour and some parts of the peasantry. It remains a hotbed of Maoism. Finally, Murhu Block in Ranchi District, then in south Bihar (post-15 November 2000, part of the new State of Jharkhand), is an area where locally dominant *adivasi* (tribal) populations have sought to keep the state at bay (Shah, 2010). Levels of social stratification are lower than in central and northern Bihar and gender relations more symmetrical. At the time of fieldwork PRIs had not been activated in Bihar, notwithstanding the provisions of the 1993 legislation. Anti-poverty schemes such as the EAS, which are 80 per cent funded by New Delhi, had to be operated by local government officials, especially *panchayat sewaks* and block development officers (BDOs). They effectively played the part of elected representatives.<sup>4</sup>

The main results of the Bihar EAS studies have already been published (Corbridge *et al.*, 2005), along with a detailed account of our field methods (Corbridge *et al.*, 2003). Work was carried out over a fourteen-month period, including by field assistants who lived in villages in each of the research blocks/districts. The *panchayat* field sites were also visited by the authors, who in addition worked at block, district and state levels to record more than 160 taped interviews in three languages with key informants: contractors, government officials, politicians, teachers, lawyers, journalists, labourers, trade unionists, social workers and so on (parallel work was carried out in two field localities in West Bengal: in Midnapore and Malda Districts). Throughout, the detailed workings of the EAS were understood to provide a constructive and in key respects comprehensive way of understanding what Joel Migdal (2001) has called 'the trenches' of the everyday state.

Fieldwork in MP was carried out in 2003 and 2009. Greater use was made there of published data on the EAS, which was in operation in parts of the state from 1993 to 2003. Data were also collected on the early workings of NREGA. Three field sites were selected in MP, in part to furnish useful comparisons with the Bihar field sites. Unlike in Bihar, PRIs were well established throughout the period of the EAS; indeed, the state has been seen as a beacon of local self-government in India (Melo *et al.*, 2012). Rewa District is more

classically 'feudal' than Vaishali District in Bihar, but in key respects it offers a good point of comparison. In Bidupur Block, the local BDO had complained to us that '[e]very Yadav in this area bosses around the Block Office as if he himself is Lalu Yadav'.<sup>5</sup> In Rewa, Srinivas Tiwari, at the time of the EAS the Brahmin Speaker of the MP Legislative Assembly, presented himself as a sort of 'Chief Minister' of Rewa, supposedly leaving the real Chief Minister of MP, Digvijay Singh, in charge of MP's 44 remaining districts. The 'White Tiger' of Rewa was widely thought to rule the district as his personal fiefdom. Rickshaw *wallahs* maintained that 'not even a fig tree swings here without the permission of Tiwari-ji!', and this largely proved to be the case when it came to the EAS.

Rewa and Vaishali Districts provide the main substantive comparison in this paper. Fieldwork in MP was also carried out, however, in Ghughri Block, Mandla District, which, like Murhu Block in Ranchi District, Bihar (Jharkhand), is predominantly an *adivasi* area, as well as in Manasa Block, Neemuch District. Neemuch is an imperfect counterpart to Bhojpur District in Bihar, lacking as it does a long history of Left political insurgencies. Nevertheless, 'feudal' social relations are largely absent from Neemuch, where the dominant social groups are entrepreneurial peasants from the Backward Caste Patel and Patidar communities. Unlike at our other research sites, both the Congress and the BJP, the two main contending parties in MP, have built operations that reach down to the village level, where they have contributed significantly to a process of empowerment among ordinary people.

Our studies of the EAS in MP and Bihar present a rare opportunity to test whether fundamental differences in local governance structures determine pro-poor outcomes in any meaningful way. Unlike in Bihar, to repeat, the EAS in MP worked throughout in political settings characterized formally by high levels of elected self-government. Even in Rewa District, as can be seen from Table 1, elected representatives in Raipur Block came as much from the region's historically subaltern populations (its Scheduled Castes and Tribes and Other Backward Castes (OBCs)) as from the General Caste communities which contributed the area's traditional landed elites. Most of these representatives were far better educated than their local peers: less than 19 per cent of *panchs* were illiterate, while as many as 50 per cent of district-level representatives from the block were graduates. (Experimental work in south India has suggested that education reduces the possibility that an elected politician will use power opportunistically: Besley *et al.*, 2004). In Ghughri Block, Mandla District, elected representatives are drawn overwhelmingly from the ST population, as would be expected, while in Manasa Block, Neemuch District, it is the OBC Patels and Patidars that mainly occupy elected office. Here too educational levels of elected officials are higher than would be found today in the counterpart field localities in Bihar and Jharkhand.

**Table 1** Social background of PRI representatives: MP field sites

	SC	ST	OBC	General	Total
Raipur Block, Rewa (total <i>panchayats</i> = 99)					
Panch	396 (25.00%)	99 (6.25%)	495 (31.25%)	594 (37.50%)	1584 (100.0%)
Sarpanch	13 (13.13%)	13 (13.13%)	41 (41.42%)	32 (32.32%)	99 (100.0%)
Block ( <i>janpad</i> ) representatives	4 (16.00%)	3 (12.00%)	7 (28.00%)	11 (44.00%)	25 (100.0%)
District <i>panchayat</i> representatives	6 (18.75%)	5 (15.63%)	10 (31.25%)	11 (34.38%)	32 (100.0%)
Total for Raipur, Rewa	419 (24.08%)	120 (6.90%)	553 (31.78%)	648 (37.24%)	1740 (100.0%)
Ghughri Block, Mandla (total <i>panchayats</i> = 44)					
Panch	0 (0.00%)	484 (73.33%)	176 (26.67%)	0 (0.00%)	660 (100.0%)
Sarpanch	1 (2.22%)	39 (86.67%)	5 (11.11%)	0 (0.00%)	45* (100.0%)
Block ( <i>janpad</i> ) representatives	0 (0.00%)	13 (86.67%)	2 (13.13%)	0 (0.00%)	15 (100.0%)
District <i>panchayat</i> representatives	Data not available				
Total for Ghughri, Mandla	1 (0.14%)	536 (74.44%)	183 (25.42%)	0 (0.00%)	720 (100.0%)
Manasa Block, Neemuch (total <i>panchayats</i> = 74)					
Panch	74 (6.67%)	0 (0.00%)	1036 (93.33%)	0 (0.00%)	1110 (100.0%)
Sarpanch	10 (13.33%)	5 (6.67%)	50 (66.67%)	10 (13.33%)	75** (100.0%)
Block ( <i>janpad</i> ) representatives	3 (12.00%)	2 (8.00%)	6 (24.00%)	14 (56.00%)	25 (100.0%)
District <i>panchayat</i> representatives	Data not available				
Total for Manasa, Neemuch	87 (7.19%)	7 (0.58%)	1092 (90.25%)	24 (1.98%)	1210 (100.0%)

Source: Primary field data

\*In Garaiya Pand *panchayat* a re-election was held so the number of *sarpanchs* is 45, against 44 *panchayats*. \*\*Kanjarda *panchayat* had two re-elections. Hence, the number of *sarpanchs* is 76, against a total of 74 *panchayats*.

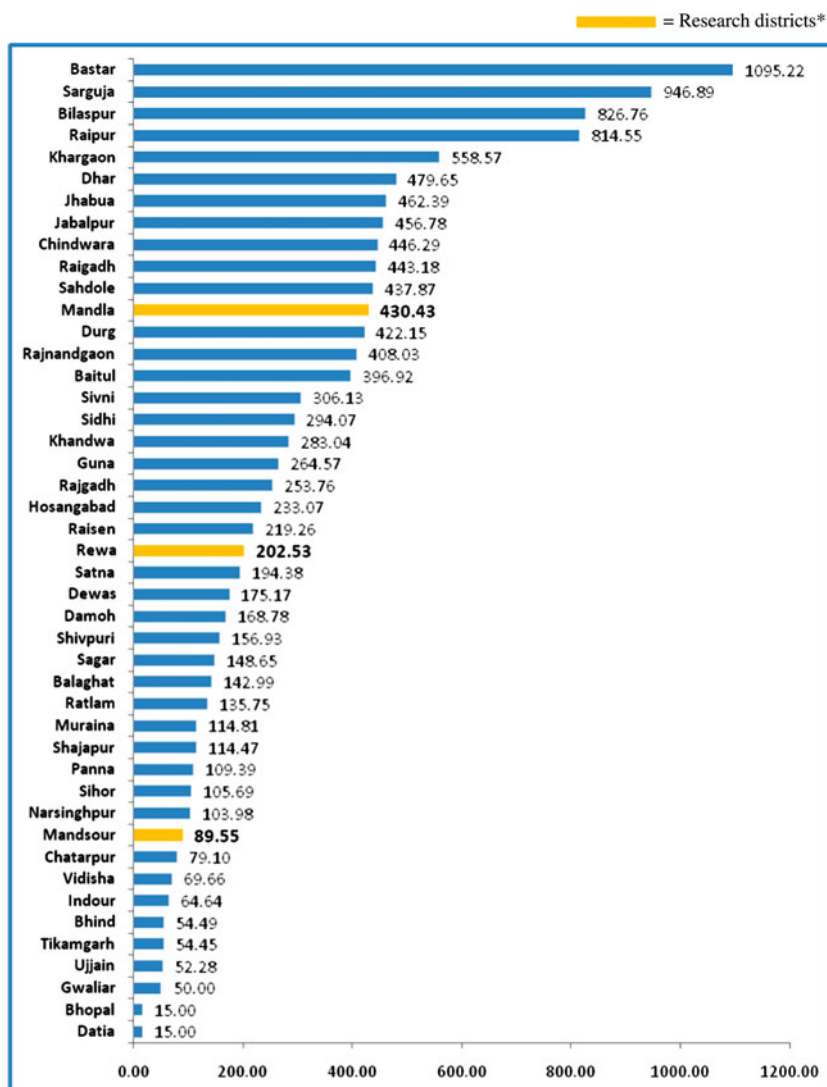


### The EAS: design and flows of funds to the field

The EAS was inaugurated on 2 October, 1993. It was first confined to 1778 blocks in 261 districts that were defined as drought-prone, desert, tribal or hill areas. During 1994–5 it was extended to 409 blocks having large concentrations of *adivasis* and 256 blocks in flood-prone zones, until finally, in 1997–8, all 5448 rural blocks of the country were made EAS operational. As previously noted, it was by some way the most important poverty-alleviation programme in India from *c.* 1993–2003, a period which broadly overlapped with the first 10 years of pro-market economic reforms.

The EAS manual set out the following design principles: The primary objective of the EAS is to offer 100 days assured employment in the lean season(s) for a maximum of two labourers from each registered rural household. Its secondary objective is to strengthen the infrastructural development of a village through the creation of durable assets. The manual also decrees that the EAS will be demand-led in two senses: first, if a minimum of 20 (but in special circumstances 10) labourers from registered households demand employment, the state is obliged to start a suitable employment-generating project within 15 days of the demand and within five kilometres of the householders' residences; second, projects are to be selected in the first instance in village open meetings. Resource-wise, EAS funds are to be made available until demand for work is exhausted (within the scheme's rules), with funding shared by centre and state governments on an 80:20 basis.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the manual suggests that at least 60 per cent of EAS funds should be spent on labour, which in turn implied, it proposed, an illustrative sectoral distribution of resources something like this: water and soil conservation including afforestation and agro-horticulture — 40 per cent; minor irrigation works — 20 per cent; link roads — 20 per cent; primary school and *anganwadi* (child care) buildings — 20 per cent.

Overall, Rs 114.6 billion (roughly US\$3.3 billion) was made available by the Government of India and all sub-national states for EAS projects during 1993–8, of which just over Rs 13.6 billion and Rs 11.1 billion reached MP and Bihar, respectively. Almost two billion work days were generated with these funds (CAG Report, 2000). Within MP, EAS resources were reportedly distributed as shown in Figure 1. According to official records, which, of course, are not always to be trusted and which we tried to cross-check in the field, EAS funds totalling Rs 27.44 million, Rs 22.88 million and Rs 16.45 million were funnelled to Raipur, Ghughri and Manasa blocks respectively during this period. Funds were then allocated across *panchayats* to execute EAS schemes. Tracking the fund flow down to our research *panchayats*, it was found that Rs 299,000 came to Delhi *panchayat* (Rewa) for one road scheme, Rs 300,000 to Ramhepur (Mandla District) for one road scheme, and Rs 350,000 to Sandiya (Neemuch District) for two drainage schemes (Rs 300,000) and one road scheme.



**Figure 1** District-wise distribution of EAS funds in Madhya Pradesh (1994–8) (figures in millions)

*Source:* Department of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development, MP (1996, 1997, 1997–2002)

*Notes*

From 1994 to 1998 Dindori was part of Mandla District. Neemuch was part of Mandsaur District until 1999–2000. Undivided Mandsaur had eight blocks, including three blocks of Neemuch districts. During this period (1994–8), EAS funds shown here were invested by Mandsaur District to blocks of Neemuch. After formation of Neemuch as a separate district in 2000–1, Neemuch operated independently with its three blocks.

### How was the EAS understood in Bihar and MP?

Previously reported work from Bihar established that EAS schemes were often delivered on the ground without any of the programme's statutory provisions being acted upon and in the face of widespread ignorance of or misunderstandings about the rights-based and participatory nature of the scheme. Aggregating across our three research *panchayats* (Korendehri in Bhojpur, Mahil in Ranchi and Dhubauli in Vaishali) we found that close to 91 per cent of poor villagers had not heard of the EAS by name, and that no-one at all was aware of its rights-based guarantee of employment (Corbridge *et al.*, 2005, ch. 4). Naturally, *gram sabhas* were not held to select the projects that were paid for by EAS funds and run by contractors selected in theory by government officials. Interestingly, EAS job cards had been provided to a small number of poor villagers in Dhubauli, but none of the recipients understood how they might use the cards specifically to access EAS work. Again, this is not surprising since the SC labourers who did receive cards had been sent them by clients of a prominent SC politician, Ramvilas Paswan, with the express aim of helping them to get jobs in a nearby railway works (Paswan at the time was the national Railways Minister). In fact, no-one in our Vaishali field site gained work on local EAS schemes: work was performed there but diverted by contractors to outside labourers, who were cheaper or considered easier to manage. Meanwhile, in Korendehri and Mahil *panchayats*, about one quarter of poor villagers had gained work on EAS projects, even though the vast majority of these people were unaware that the work they had gained (and which we were able to check independently) was EAS work.

But what of MP, which at the time was a beacon of democratic local activism, at least according to its Chief Minister and a growing number of academics and journalists: surely things would be better there? Depressingly, this was not the case. Starting first with our small-n samples, Table 2 shows that levels of awareness about the EAS were barely any better in MP than in Bihar, democratic self-government notwithstanding, while the distribution of job cards was no more conducted in an appropriate manner than was the holding of village open meetings.

As in Bihar, however, a dismal level of awareness in MP about the statutory provisions of the EAS did not mean that people were unaware of EAS projects executed in their areas. People were far more aware of EAS projects than of the smaller schemes provided for by the Jawahar Rozgar Yajna (JRY: food for work) programme. In Delhi *panchayat*, a 1.5 km road from Delhi to Mohgarh village costing Rs 2.99 *lakhs* (one *lakh* = 100,000) had clearly been executed on the ground: everybody pointed to it in the field, although not without veiled comments about corruption in its delivery. Similarly, in Ramhepur and Sandiya *panchayats* a number of respondents recognized EAS projects from the official lists that we shared with them. In MP, road projects were preferred in two research blocks, notwithstanding official guidance to the contrary in the EAS manual. As in Bihar, too, road projects were largely metalled (*pucca*), which made

**Table 2** Awareness of EAS in Madhya Pradesh field sites by function and provision of job cards

	Delhi (Rewa)		Ramhepur (Mandla)		Sandiya (Neemuch)	
	Poor (N = 39)	Non- poor (N = 11)	Poor (N = 39)	Non- poor (N = 11)	Poor (N = 36)	Non- poor (N = 10)
Not heard of EAS	74.36%	63.64%	87.18%	72.73%	66.67%	60.00%
Heard of EAS	25.64%	36.36%	12.82%	27.27%	33.33%	40.00%
100 days employment	2.56%	9.09%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
For employment of labourers (days not known)	5.13%	9.09%	2.56%	9.09%	2.78%	10.00%
Construction of roads, ponds, etc.	2.56%	0.00%	5.13%	9.09%	0.00%	0.00%
Employment to poor, medicines, etc.	0.00%	9.09%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Only heard the name	15.38%	9.09%	5.13%	9.09%	30.56%	30.00%
Grand total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Job card provided	5.13%	0.00%	2.56%	0.00%	2.78%	0.00%
Job card received, but didn't get employment	5.13%	0.00%	2.56%	0.00%	2.78%	0.00%
No job card provided	94.87%	100.00%	97.44%	100.00%	97.22%	100.00%
Grand total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

*Source:* Primary field data

sense locally in terms of durability in the rainy season; they were also favoured by EAS contractors on account of their being resource expensive and suitably open to inflated invoices and other rake-offs (as we shall see shortly). In consequence, and the EAS notwithstanding, poor people faced with a lack of work in the off-season still had to migrate to find paid employment.

### The political geography of the EAS

These findings raise important questions about why elected PRI members in MP did equally badly or in some respects even worse than their bureaucratic counterparts in Bihar. They also prompt a more immediate line of enquiry.

Given that a large number of EAS projects were executed on the ground, what can we learn about local politics on a larger spatial scale by looking at the geographical distribution of EAS-funded projects across the research blocks and districts?

To address this question, we collected data for 1451 EAS projects covering 1487 *panchayats* in all 21 blocks of the three research districts. In Mandla District, we have data on 677 projects amounting to Rs 242.02 million over a period of seven years in nine blocks and 472 *panchayats*. In Rewa district, we have records for 463 EAS projects amounting to Rs 230.35 million over a period of six years in nine blocks and 801 *panchayats*, and in Neemuch 311 EAS projects amounting to Rs 47.13 million over a period of four years in three blocks and 214 *panchayats*.

The distribution of EAS resources within MP districts is heavily skewed, albeit in varying degrees. In Rewa, Gangev Block received Rs 325.95 *lakhs* over four years, compared to Hanumana Block's Rs 222.06 *lakhs* over six years.<sup>7</sup> Similarly in Mandla, where every block had received EAS funds for the whole seven years, the highest amount of Rs 428.00 *lakhs* went to Mandla Block, whereas Mawai received only Rs. 166.80 *lakhs*. Neemuch also showed an asymmetry in fund distribution, though not as sharply as the other districts. Far more significantly, a number of *panchayats* had received absolutely no EAS funds. In our research districts, the highest level of exclusion was found in Rewa, where 66.30 per cent of *panchayats* had not received EAS funds. In Mandla District, 35.17 per cent of *panchayats* had received nothing. The number of *panchayats* excluded or covered by EAS funds also varied from block to block. (Although our data for Bihar are less robust than for MP, Bidupur Block in Vaishali appears to have the highest exclusion level, with 73 per cent of its villages untouched by EAS funds; Tribal Murhu Block shows less exclusion – 44.20 per cent – while 45 per cent of Sahar villages received no benefit from EAS.)

It is possible that skewness of this sort reflects some underlying objective factors, such as the population size of different blocks or local consistency with stated EAS criteria. We would not expect an entirely even distribution of EAS funds across either blocks or districts in Bihar or MP. To make our findings more robust, sensitivity tests were performed for eight parameters that might be thought to explain or influence the distribution of EAS resources, including: population size; size of SC and ST population; means of livelihood; house type; and education level. We use the corrected data from these tests in the analysis which follows of EAS spending in Rewa and Mandla Districts (and their pairs in Bihar/Jharkhand: Vaishali and Ranchi).<sup>8</sup>

#### *Rewa and Vaishali districts*

Table 3 presents our corrected data for Rewa District. Controlling for eight possible sources of skewness does not affect our initial interpretation of EAS

**Table 3** Distribution of lifetime EAS funds in blocks of Rewa District, MP (corrected deviations from expected levels)

Parameters	Gangev	Naigadhi	Rewa	Mauganj	Raipur	Jawa	Sirmour	Tyonthar	Hanumana
Total population	45.06	32.11	14.86	16.57	9.33	- 8.77	- 17.71	- 29.60	- 36.41
House type	44.42	28.24	18.26	14.51	9.97	- 7.48	- 18.35	- 26.66	- 37.63
Education up to Class 10	49.98	30.02	13.72	16.35	7.84	- 7.58	- 16.97	- 28.14	- 37.75
Means of livelihood	47.69	30.65	20.38	17.30	9.32	- 12.39	- 15.22	- 30.07	- 38.85
Landholding	40.61	36.80	7.94	16.70	2.71	- 11.03	- 18.72	- 25.30	- 30.87
Receives assistance	53.05	30.79	20.78	10.34	5.12	- 14.31	- 15.18	- 17.51	- 41.38
Labour force	41.36	36.30	16.68	18.80	22.42	- 13.05	- 19.50	- 26.79	- 40.93
Migration	37.20	39.37	40.93	12.71	- 14.34	- 14.16	- 13.19	- 16.07	- 38.34
Overall average	44.92	33.04	19.19	15.41	6.55	- 11.10	- 16.86	- 25.02	- 37.77

Source: Primary field data and Department of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development (1997–2002)

spending in the district at the block level. Clearly, Gangev Block is the most privileged, having received on average about 45 per cent more resources than it merited along any of the eight listed parameters. Likewise, the concentration of EAS funds in Gangev and a few other blocks came at the cost of people in the remaining four blocks, which had an average negative percentage adjusted deviation ranging from  $-37.8$  per cent to  $-11.1$  per cent. Just as Gangev was the most privileged block, Hanumana is the most deprived.

The distribution of EAS funds was even more uneven within our research block, Raipur. Roughly 70 per cent of the total amount was taken by just 17 of 99 *panchayats*. Additionally, each *panchayat* in this group was repeatedly the recipient of a number of schemes in different years, always amounting to more than Rs 5 lakhs, and in Ukata-kanchanpur reaching as much as Rs. 2.4 million. Yet 56 of 99 *panchayats* in this block were entirely deprived of EAS resources.

Table 4 identifies five distinct groups of *panchayats* in Raipur, the first of which comprises four *panchayats* that received at least six times their due. Had Ukata-kanchanapur received funds in accordance with the average effect of the eight adjustment parameters, the total would have been no more than Rs 1.9 lakhs, as opposed to the Rs 23.74 lakhs it actually received. Interestingly, in three of these four *panchayats*, women were listed as *sarpanchs*, which at first glance provides grist for those who believe that female local officials perform better than their male counterparts (Beaman *et al.*, 2009). Sadly, we discovered that in all three cases it was the husband of the *sarpanch* who called the shots. For example, PT was the *sarpanch* of Delhi *panchayat* during the period of fieldwork.<sup>9</sup> It was clear, however, that her husband, UKT, a powerful Brahmin landlord, was not only the *de facto* but in most key respects the *de jure sarpanch*. PT lived in the district headquarter town 35 kilometres away from the village, mainly to ensure a good education for the couple's children. UKT managed the business of the *panchayat* in the open, conducting meetings, signing proceedings and drawing money from the bank. Nobody minded; even government banks honoured checks signed by him where he had faked his wife's signature or simply added his own.

To understand how these political geographies of the EAS were created we have to step back from official datasets. In the field, we first gained a sense of what was happening episodically and inductively. We asked, for example, about how an EAS project of Rs.7.74 lakhs was brought to Hinauti *panchayat*. Why did this *panchayat* get more than four times its due?

Mrs GS was the *de jure sarpanch* during 1994–9, but her husband NS was the *de facto sarpanch*. In a frank interview he revealed that he had initially prepared a check dam project for Rs 2.97 lakhs and sent it upwards to the district via the block for approval (under the then prevalent rules, a *panchayat* was authorized to take up construction work for projects valued at Rs 3 lakhs or less). A senior *janpad* (block) *panchayat* representative opposed to NS did not want the scheme to go to him. He coerced a junior engineer in the block to inflate the estimate to Rs 4.5 lakhs, thus bringing the execution under control

**Table 4** Concentration of lifetime EAS funds in 99 *panchayats* of Raipur Block, Rewa District

Panchayats of Rewa	Average % deviation of parameters	Actual EAS amount	% of amount against block total	Sarpanch (1994–5) (with education level)
Group 1: very high % deviation (over 500%); 4 panchayats	932.06	76.81	27.99	
Ukatha-Kanchanpur	1199.40	23.74	8.65	Mrs R (12th, General-Brahman)
Sursa Khurd	905.99	17.34	6.32	Mrs DA (12th, ST)
Padariya	831.07	20.22	7.37	Mrs PN (Literate, SC)
Bheeta	791.79	15.50	5.65	Mr R (12th, SC)
Group 2: high % deviation (100% to 500%); 13 panchayats	298.95	114.82	41.85	
Kuiya Khurd	437.07	9.63	3.51	Mr RP (8th, OBC)
Pathraha	414.45	10.60	3.86	Mr R S (12th, SC)
Budhiya	388.17	8.21	2.99	Mr RS (10th, General-Kshatriya)
Amawa	379.67	10.60	3.86	Mr LP (9th, OBC)
Sonaura	339.23	8.66	3.16	Mr MP (MA, OBC)
Patauta	308.44	8.56	3.12	Mr AS (5th, General-Kshatriya)
Hinauti	308.11	11.34	4.13	Mrs GS (BA, General-Kshatriya)
Kharahari	305.34	9.61	3.50	Mrs M (5th, OBC)
Bakchhera	253.31	8.56	3.12	Mr GPT (MA, General-Brahman)
Mahasuaa 516	251.83	8.56	3.12	Mr TS (PhD, General-Kshatriya)
Raura	249.51	7.92	2.89	Mr H (B.Sc., General-Brahman)



**Table 4** (*Continued*)

Panchayats of Rewa	Average % deviation of parameters	Actual EAS amount	% of amount against block total	Sarpanch (1994–5) (with education level)
Umari	147.61	7.49	2.73	Mr GPA (General-Brahman)
Barehi	103.62	5.05	1.84	Mr JP (8th, OBC)
Group 3: medium % deviation (0.01% to 100%): 16 panchayats	37.60	56.27	20.51	
Group 4: negative % deviation (– 0.01% to – 99.99%), 10 panchayats	– 34.11	26.49	9.65	
Group 5: no amount (56 panchayats)	– 100.00	0.00	0.00	

*Source:* Primary field data

of the block *panchayat* (blocks were authorized to execute works up to a value of Rs 5 *lakhs*). When NS became aware of this, he used his contacts with engineers at the district level to get the estimate further inflated to Rs 7.74 *lakhs*, thus requiring district-level approval (for projects between Rs 5 *lakhs* and Rs1 million). NS said he was happy to lose control of the project so long as his rival did too. The district finally awarded the project to the Water Resources Department and to a contractor close to the then Member of Parliament of Rewa, Sunder Lal Tiwari, the son of the political boss of Rewa, Srinivas Tiwari. However, NS remained powerful in his area as the *de facto sarpanch*. When the contractor started work, NS deliberately created obstacles for the contractor in the expectation of a bribe, which duly materialized to the value of Rs 50,000. NS also disclosed that the actual cost of the EAS construction work was about Rs 2.5 *lakhs*. After his cut, the remaining Rs 4.74 *lakhs* were reportedly pocketed by the contractor, engineers and officials of the district technical agency and, of course, the MP and some of his henchmen.

We also learned that that the family of Mrs R, the *sarpanch* of highly favoured Ukata-kanchanpur, had strong links with Mrs T, who was the chairman of the district council responsible for approving local EAS projects Mrs T was also a strong political ally and protégé of Srinivas Tiwari. Even as Mrs T followed the diktats of Srinivas Tiwari in sanctioning EAS projects, she

apparently did not forget to extract her own pay-off. A tribal ex-*sarpanch*, BK of Tatiara *panchayat*, had proudly shown us a one-kilometre-long approach road costing Rs 2.99 *lakhs*, constructed under the EAS in 1998–9. He said that Mrs T had demanded Rs 15,000 for this project. He claimed that he had paid the commission through her broker, a school teacher, before obtaining project approval.

Finally, consider this response from a very active ex-*sarpanch* in one of the 56 *panchayats* which had not received any funding under EAS. Like several other respondents he told us that in the period from 1993 to 2003 almost all local MPs and MLAs came from the Brahman and Rajput Forward Castes. Only *sarpanchs* with connections to this political class (and plenty of money) could get EAS projects.<sup>10</sup> This was additionally confirmed by another insider, SP, the *panchayat* secretary of Silpari, who suggested that since Silpari *panchayat* was dominated by Backward Castes, this worked against it when the Forward Caste MLAs and MPs controlled the flow of EAS resources from the district level downwards. This prompted us to find out whether Backward Caste-dominated *panchayats* were generally excluded or not. We found that twenty-seven out of fifty-six *panchayats* which did not get any EAS fund were headed by *sarpanchs* from the Patel (OBC) community alone – more than twice what we would have expected. *Panchayats* with Forward Castes *sarpanchs* were by a long way the least excluded from EAS funds. The biggest losers, of course, were the labourers for whom the EAS was supposedly designed. They suffered from extraordinarily high leakage rates on the EAS projects which were commissioned – as well as from the simple absence of EAS projects in politically disenfranchised *panchayats*.<sup>11</sup>

What we were observing in all these cases was the power of high-level politicians to push resources down to their preferred areas and clients, and the machinations and networking of individual *sarpanchs*. Srinivas Tiwari was undoubtedly the key player in Rewa. This was confirmed not only by interviews with politicians, PRI representatives, officers and ordinary villagers, but also by what happened to the geography of NREGA spending in Rewa once Tiwari lost his seat as the local MLA in the 2003 elections. During the time that Tiwari was an MLA (1990–2003), EAS and other funds flowed disproportionately to his supporters, notably in Gangev Block, which forms the major part of his Mangawan constituency. After his removal from power, however, which occurred just two years before the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme was inaugurated, Gangev received 97 per cent of its expected NREGA entitlement from 2006–2008, way down on its ‘plus 44 per cent’ shares during the EAS years. Set against this, Jawa Block, in the Sirmaur legislative constituency, which had received only 76 per cent of the average EAS amount, jumped to a 107 per cent share of expected NREGA funds. It now benefited from political representation at the MLA level as well as from better accountability mechanisms in the scheme itself. (Happily, the degree of bias in the geography of NREGA fund allocations had not, by the time of

fieldwork in 2009, reached the levels that characterized the EAS regime under Srinivas Tiwari.)

Interestingly, the story of the EAS in Rewa was mirrored in Vashaili District, Bihar. Six of 24 *panchayats* in Bidupur were entirely cut off from EAS funds. This may appear small beer against the exclusion of 56 out of 99 *panchayats* in Raipur in Rewa. However, *panchayats* in Bihar are about six times larger than in Rewa, so a truly comparative view would suggest that just over 70 per cent of villages were excluded in Bidupur against 57 per cent in Raipur. The capture of 74.09 per cent of EAS funds by just 10 per cent of villages in Bidupur is very similar to the capture rate in Raipur (79 per cent of funds in 21.21 per cent of *panchayats*).

Field-work in Bidupur unambiguously showed that the local strongman and member of the legislative council, Bhola Babu, a key protégé and ally of Lalu Yadav at the time of our research, controlled access to all EAS funds. Here too we found a story of huge cuts and commissions, and the conversion of such EAS spending as there was into a large-scale road-building project which sank funds into those of Bidupur's *panchayats* which provided political support to Bhola Babu. Bhola Babu was a hard-line Backward Caste politician, a strong supporter of Lalu Yadav and a fighter against Forward Caste dominance in Bihari society and politics. Srinivas Tiwari was in many respects the polar opposite: a well-heeled member of the local feudal elite and a lifelong supporter of a Congress Party that in MP had always been dominated by the Forward Castes. None of these differences mattered, however, when it came to their ability and willingness to control the distribution of EAS resources in constituencies where they faced no effective opposition (for general discussion of distorted political markets, see Keefer & Khemani, 2005). The existence of 1,500 to 1,600 elected representatives from all three tiers of *panchayati Raj* in Rewa District counted for nothing in the face of the power of Srinivas Tiwari. On the contrary, elected representatives, where they were successful in EAS terms, partnered with Tiwari to have their own bite at the cherry. The fact that Bhola Babu exercised a similar degree of power in Bidupur Block, Bihar, and achieved similar results for himself and his clients, suggests that the remedy in Bihar is unlikely to be found in the formal trappings of democratic self-governance, at least not in the short run.

#### *Mandla and Ranchi Districts*

The distribution of EAS funds was less distorted in the two tribal-dominated districts that we studied, Mandla and Ranchi. Our unadjusted figures reveal that Mandla Block received the highest amount of EAS funding (Rs 428 *lakhs*), followed by Nainpur and Bichiya Blocks (Rs 378 and Rs 317 *lakhs* respectively), all of which seemed consistent with local political realities. Mandla was represented by Devendra Tekam, an important cabinet minister in Digvijay Singh's government at that time. Nainpur seemed privileged because

the chairman of the district *panchayat*, Dinalal Taram, came from the block. He also represented the area as its MLA during the 1993–8 Assembly term. Once we adjusted the spending figures in line with our sensitivity analysis, however, it became clear that only two blocks in Mandla District (Niwas and Bijadandi, not Mandla or Nainpur) were significantly ‘privileged’ in EAS terms, and even in these cases the positive deviation of actual against predicted EAS spending was short of that recorded for Gangev Block in Rewa District (see Table 5).

Significantly, we found no evidence of obvious political clout in either Niwas or Bijadandi Blocks. Further, when we looked at the distribution of EAS projects within our research block, Ghughri, we found that only 32 per cent of *panchayats* were bereft of EAS funds (compared to 73 per cent in Raipur/Rewa). We did discover that a small group of six *panchayats* enjoyed on average EAS funding 2.5 times higher than expected on the basis of their underlying characteristics. In this case, though, it seemed that geography was to blame rather than concentrated political power. Four of the six most privileged *panchayats* are situated close to the block office: Gajraj, Ghughri (of course), Salwah and Naharbeli. Meanwhile, a number of the least privileged *panchayats* – for example, Devhara, Duladar, Neijhar, Chalni and Baniya – are situated far away from the block office in the eastern and southern extremes of the block. Ghughri, like other tribal blocks in MP, has hilly terrain and low population densities. Buses do not connect to all its areas. Even the research *panchayat*, Ramhepur, is off a bus route despite being only 15 kilometres from the block office. Unlike JRY funds, which reached every *panchayat*’s account, EAS funds came via the district and block (*janpad*) and *sarpanchs* were required to be in continuous touch with the block office about their proposals. Understandably, *sarpanchs* of distant *panchayats* were disadvantaged in this process (there was, however, no evidence of a similar ‘geography’ effect in Rewa/Raipur).

Does this mean that an entrenched system of cuts and commissions was absent from the EAS fund distribution process in Ghughri? The answer is more yes than no. Confirmed stories of corruption were difficult to obtain. People here did not open up easily on such matters, unlike in Rewa. Nevertheless, some surprising revelations were shared with us by the *panchayat* secretary of Ramhepur. When we suggested that JRY funds in Rewa were commonly being used as commissions to obtain EAS approvals, he said that no such practice was prevalent in Ramhepur or in other tribal areas. After being pressed, however, he said commissions were paid to high-ranking politicians, but with funds borrowed from money-lenders. Another ex-*panchayat* secretary confirmed this account.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, an ex-*sarpanch* of Dongarmandla *panchayat* told us that as a former policeman he could avoid paying commissions which generally ran to 20–25 per cent of the project cost.<sup>13</sup> A highly knowledgeable school teacher suggested that ‘a channel of *sarpanchs* exists in this region through which commissions are passed on to the top level for getting projects’.<sup>14</sup> Even the then district chairman, DT, conceded in a interview that, since a *sarpanch*’s election cost between Rs 10,000 and 20,000,

**Table 5** Distribution of lifetime EAS funds in blocks of Mandla District, MP (corrected deviations from expected levels)

Parameters	Niwas	Bijadandi	Mohgaon	Nainpur	Mandla	Ghughri	Narayanganj	Bichhiya	Mawai
Total population	30.43	27.37	15.12	9.21	9.54	- 4.35	- 13.21	- 22.52	- 31.77
House type	31.53	24.84	12.88	9.02	12.68	- 6.74	- 12.50	- 21.40	- 33.25
Education up to Class 10	31.52	25.12	13.72	9.15	11.19	- 6.33	- 14.46	- 20.80	- 32.31
Means of livelihood	35.42	26.47	9.75	10.84	13.42	- 6.68	- 14.35	- 21.58	- 34.64
Landholding	48.00	36.16	13.66	14.10	- 9.39	22.28	- 17.03	- 29.84	- 20.22
Preference of assistance	25.90	28.05	25.63	8.31	6.35	- 8.15	- 19.37	- 20.01	- 26.61
Labour force	25.72	21.82	9.02	12.72	7.53	2.14	- 12.25	- 23.25	- 28.94
Migration	13.05	- 0.68	17.45	23.17	37.81	- 0.30	- 27.57	- 18.57	- 38.70
Overall average	30.20	23.64	14.65	12.07	11.14	- 1.02	- 16.34	- 22.25	- 30.80

*Source:* Primary field data and Department of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development (1997–2002)

and that of a district member between Rs 50,000 and Rs 75,000 (1990s prices), these would need to be 'recouped'.<sup>15</sup>

The overall picture was one of gradually increasing cuts and commissions within a framework where EAS funds were still broadly distributed according to population shares. Additionally, if they wanted to, district magistrates and the chief executive officers of district *panchayats* could intervene to oversee the pattern of funds being shaped by the politicians and the PRI representatives. This was enormously difficult in districts such as Rewa, where politicians were aggressive in commanding development funds and avoiding bureaucratic oversight.

Significantly, too, our findings in Mandla were replicated in large degree in the *adivasi*-dominated Murhu Block of Ranchi District (erstwhile Bihar). Forty-four per cent of its 138 villages received no EAS funds, (compared to 31 per cent of Ghugri *panchayats*), and 17 per cent of Murhu's villages shared 63 per cent of total invested funds. However, the inter-*panchayat* distribution of funds in Murhu shows that all 24 *panchayats* received EAS projects. Again, this was testimony to the ability of the district-level officials to bargain with tribal politicians who were less well organized – as well as more plural – than their counterpart(s) in Bidupur.

## Conclusion

The EAS worked in MP very much as it worked in Bihar (and Jharkhand): badly from the point of view of informed public participation and variably when it came to the geography of EAS spending. The intended beneficiaries of EAS projects were poorly informed about the purposes of the EAS or indeed about their entitlement to register for paid employment from the scheme. This was true of all six research districts. Variations in scheme performance were mainly to be found in the geographies of EAS funding allocations. In this regard, the existence of functioning PRIs made very little difference to the way that the EAS worked on the ground, which is a depressing conclusion for proponents of a conventional good governance or decentralization agenda. What mattered more was the presence of effective political competition at the block and district levels. Where political power was more or less monopolized by one key actor – as in our Rewa and Vaishali field sites – the distribution of EAS funds was correspondingly funnelled to allies and clients of the regional political boss. Capture of EAS funds by people who should not have been scheme beneficiaries – well-connected contractors, some *sarpanchs/mukhiyas*, government officials and key local politicians – was also more extensive (and open) in these field sites than in our two *adivasi*-dominated field locations (Mandla and Ranchi). Bureaucratic oversight mechanisms were enabled in Mandla and Ranchi Districts in a way that they were not in Rewa and Vaishali.

The fact that EAS funds were controlled in some localities by a small number of political actors does not mean that the EAS failed to work there in all respects. Labourers suffer where false accounting and high leakage rates leave little money for paid employment on government schemes. Even in Rewa and Vaishali Districts, however, men and women were put to work on EAS projects (whether or not they knew they were working on EAS projects, and regardless of whether the labour was recruited locally), and durable roads and buildings were constructed with EAS funds to general community acclaim. It is possible, too, that schemes like EAS and NREGA contribute at the margin to lower food prices where agrarian productivity is improved. Governance regimes characterized by boss politics, clientelism and high rates of corruption – whether or not they sit within formally functioning PRIs – can still give rise to infrastructural benefits. That, after all, is part of the purpose of clientelism as a political system.

At the same time, the fact that the benefits of India's largest anti-poverty scheme were so poorly distributed both socially and geographically through the 1990s and early-2000s – we estimate that no more than 20 per cent of EAS funds ended up with registered labourers in any of our field sites – suggests that NREGA schemes will have to function in practice much as they are expected to in the Act's field manuals if they are genuinely to empower the poor. NREGA makes many of the same assumptions as did the EAS. It assumes that intended beneficiaries are well informed about the scheme, can translate their information into practical actions and demands (with or without the backing of law), and that the controllers of funds are either compelled to be honest (payments into bank accounts) and/or can be held to account (social audits). In some parts of India these assumptions might hold water. Early studies of NREGA schemes in Karnataka in Kerala give grounds for optimism, as of course does the nationwide campaign to raise awareness about NREGA ahead of its implementation (Khera, 2011). There is a considerable body of work in political science that supports the intuition that public service delivery works most effectively where citizens receive information about benefits in forms that are at once disaggregated and meaningful to them (Keefer & Khemani, 2004, p. 941; see also Besley & Burgess, 2002, on the importance of literacy and newspaper circulation).

In other parts of India, however, notably in Bihar and Jharkhand, but in our view in parts of MP as well, information flows about public services remain limited at best, while village meetings (*gram sabhas*) remain open to manipulation by locally powerful actors. The famous social audit of NREGA spending carried out by activists of the Mazdur Kisan Shakti Sanghatan (MKSS) in Bhilwara, Rajasthan (Subrahmaniam, 2009c) shows what can be done when enthusiasm and expertise are committed to the task, but it would be straining credibility to think that the Bhilwara audit is anything but exceptional. Just because fund flows can be better tracked now than 10 years ago, does not mean that they will be tracked openly, effectively and with empowering consequences. Careful empirical studies of NREGA schemes over

a period of several years will help determine whether (and by what degree) this is indeed the case. We need more information on fund flows, on days worked and by whom, on payments made and declared, and so on. On the plus side, the slow rebuilding of government capacity in Bihar under Nitish Kumar and the gradual erosion of the power bases of some regional political bosses in MP provide at least some further grounds for believing that NREGA schemes will deliver greater funds directly to the poor – and perhaps most of all to poor women – than was ever the case with the EAS.

### Acknowledgements

We are pleased to acknowledge funding from the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council (grant number R000237761) and Department for International Development (grant number CNTR 00 1553), while noting that we alone are responsible for the findings reported here. Fieldwork in Madhya Pradesh was supported by the Jamsetji Tata Trust, for which we are also grateful. We are grateful, too, to Alpa Shah and three external referees for comments on a first draft of this paper.

### Notes

- 1 Strictly, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, commonly pronounced in India as Manrega.
- 2 We take this observation directly from one of the referees for this paper, to whom we remain grateful. We should add that civil society actions are empowered by the government's maintenance of an elaborate NREGA website, which indexes an important link between NREGA and the Right to Information Act and movement in India.
- 3 In effect, the legislation enabled a third tier of government in India, below the federal (centre) and state levels. Regular elections populate local government at *gram panchayat*, block and district levels. At least one third of seats are reserved for women in these *panchayati* Raj institutions (PRIs), the proportion varying by state.
- 4 Bihar's solution was ingenious: a government circular notified all *panchayat sewaks*, the lowest level government staff posted in a block office assigned to a *panchayat*, to perform certain government duties as if they were *mukhiyas* (equivalent to *sarpanchs* in MP). Similarly, block development officers (BDOs) were notified to act as *pramukhs* (chairs of the block or *janpad panchayats*). By this means the government of Bihar maintained the conceit that, despite having no PRI elections, it still had 'functional equivalents' of *mukhiyas* and *pramukhs* and was qualified to receive central funds (see Department of Rural Development, Government of Bihar, 1993 and 1995).
- 5 Interview with Mr Rajnish, BDO Bidupur, 24 April 1999.
- 6 This commitment was watered down in practice after 2000.
- 7 At the time, \$1 = Rs 35, roughly.
- 8 Detailed test results available from the authors on request.
- 9 Names of respondents other than senior political or bureaucratic figures have been anonymized throughout.
- 10 Interview, LP, ex-*sarpanch* (1995–2000), Silpari, Rewa, 11 October 2009.



- 11 Based on interviews with SP, BJP leader, Delhi, Rewa, 4 October 2009; ShP, BJP leader, Kanti, Rewa, 5 October 2009; RSS, *ex-janpad* (block) member (2000–5), Delhi, Rewa, 6 October 2009; and RSK, *ex-panch* (Ward-14, 2000–5), Delhi, Rewa, 7 October 2009.
- 12 Interview with BM, *ex-panchayat* secretary, Ramhepur, Mandla, 3 October 2009.
- 13 Interview with PD, *ex-sarpanch* (1994–9), Dongarmandla, Mandla, 13 October 2009.
- 14 Interview, NP, teacher, Dongarmandla, Mandla, 14 October 2009.
- 15 The district chairmen and vice-chairmen of block *panchayats*, and the district *panchayat*, all *adivasis*, were found to have employed non-tribal staff from the district offices as their personal assistants. Non-tribal staff were preferred because of their ‘experience and expertise’ in helping their bosses make money in ways that could not easily be discovered in files and papers

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