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MUKHERJEE: It is the 14th of July, 2009. I am with Mr. Anup Mukerji, the Development Commissioner for the government of Bihar. Mr. Mukerji, could I ask you to introduce yourself and briefly tell us about how you've been involved in the reform efforts in the Bihar government?

MUKERJI: *I am Anup Mukerji. I belong to the Indian Administrative Service. This service— we keep on working both in the state and in the center, so I was at the center until 2006, March. Meanwhile, in November 2005, there was a new government in Bihar, and they sought my willingness to return, and I thought it was a good opportunity to work under a good government in Bihar, which is one of the poorest states of India, and to serve the people of Bihar. So I returned. I joined as Principal Secretary, Rural Development, in May 2006.*

             I had made two requests: one was to put me in any development department and not any regulatory department, and the second request was to let me work in that post, whatever it was, in the development sector for three years. So I was there until the end of May 2009. So it was slightly over three years.

MUKHERJEE: Then what you brought you to the post of Development Commissioner?

MUKERJI: *This of course is government's decision. They look at seniority; they look at the suitability, and then they make these appointments. So it is not our choice; we are posted as per the decision of the government.*

MUKHERJEE: In your role as Development Commissioner, what are the responsibilities that you are fulfilling right now for the government?

MUKERJI: *This is coordinating the overall development efforts of all the development departments, which include urban development, Rural Development, social welfare, health, infrastructure. There is an empowered body called the State Investment Promotion Board, so the Development Commissioner heads that. And he heads a number of other committees related to development and related to encouraging investment: direct investment, investment in infrastructure, even private sector investment in whatever sectors. It could be industry; it could be agribusiness processing, etc.*

MUKHERJEE: All right, Sir. Since you've come into this position recently, we'll focus more on your time from the beginning in the Rural Development Department. So what would you say were the major issues or challenges that you faced when you came into that position?

MUKERJI: *Rural Development, the department basically looks at anti-poverty programs. Bihar is one of the poorest states of India in terms of poverty: the below-poverty-line level. We are second only to Orissa; Orissa is the poorest state. Bihar is the second poorest. But our population density is so high that, in terms of numbers, our below-poverty-line population is huge. So Rural Development focuses on programs for the rural, what we call BPL, below-poverty-line population.*

             *What do you do if a person is poor? One is to try and give him employment. In Indian terms, the basic approach is (*roti, kapda and makaan*), food, clothing and shelter. So for food, this Rural Employment Guarantee Program was there.*

Shelter: we have a program called Indira Awaas Yojana, _where BPL population—they were earlier given 25,000 rupees, now 35,000 rupees to build a house, one room tenement. For more sustainable livelihood promotion, there is a program called_ Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana, _SGSY. It translates to self-employment with the help of microfinance. So wage employment, housing, and self-employment. These were the three major programs in that department._

The challenge was that all these three programs are centrally-sponsored schemes. That is the central government gives funds, and we have to give proportionate state share and then implement that. So if we can implement those programs better, then we get more funding from the center. So it was a challenge for one to step up the level of implementation of those programs. Second, to ensure—an even bigger challenge was to ensure that the money reached the target beneficiaries rather than being siphoned off. Then make sure the beneficiaries also utilize that money.

In the first year of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, out of Bihar's 38 districts, 23 were taken up under the central scheme. The remaining 15, the state government took up using its own funds under an identical scheme. Then under the Indira Awaas Yojana, _where they used to give 25,000 rupees for housing, the challenge was how to make sure that that money reached them. There used to be earlier a system of cash disbursement in camps, then individual checks. There was a lot of corruption in the program. So that was the second challenge. The third was how to implement the self-employment program in a meaningful way, so that it just wasn't looked at as another government dole._

I could go on and on, but specifically about the Indira Awaas, _the rural housing program. Since you're interested in what the reform agenda was, the objective was to reduce corruption, make systems more transparent. So the center had given guidelines that from the BPL list—. Sorry, one more thing I should mention. The central government from 2002 itself wanted to make a BPL list. That is, survey the families in the villages. There were thirteen indicators, and we were supposed to give them marks under that. The poorest family would get zero; the richest family would get four. So each of these indicators had a scale of zero to four. So theoretically, that range of the total score could vary from zero to 52. Normally, the minimum would be about five marks and the maximum could be 52._

Since being BPL has a lot of cash inflows attached to it, there is a clamor to be included in that. The central government, based on the Planning Commission's advice, had fixed limit which the state government thinks is arbitrary. That limit was about 73 lakhs; that is 7.3 million. I'll talk in term of lakhs and crores, if you don't mind.

MUKHERJEE: Sure.

MUKERJI: _When we did our survey, the number of families went up from the census figure of about—the rural families went from about 1.24 crores, to 1.98 crores. One of the main reasons being that in the census, the average family size was about 6— I think it was 6.01 or 6.16, but in our survey it came down to about 4.3, 4.38. People wanted to split families, because two families can access benefits separately. There was pressure, there has been of course some inaccuracy; we can't say it is absolutely correct, but under the field circumstances, I think it is not_

too bad a survey. It was very transparent because earlier surveys, they were never published. Under this government, we were able to publish them not once, but twice. The first time we went to publish them, we found they were in English with only the total scores mentioned, not even the name of the head of the family, not even his or her parentage. So that people who didn't know who was that actual person. There could be two people of the same name with different parents. So all these things were then—in our first round, it was the first time people were getting to see the list. There were massive crowds.

Then we had a second round where we made it in Hindi, gave detail, breakup of all the indicators, so that then people could give objections. So that process took a long time. In fact, we went through it in two or three iterations, and finally in January last year, in 2008, we came out with the final list. Based on this list, we then made a list of BPL persons who were homeless or had very poor housing, let us say, thatched houses or maybe flimsy mud houses; they would be entitled to the housing. This was in order of poverty; the poorest were on top.

So this became a list that as per this list now, field-level officials have no discretion. They have to go as per that list. If in that list it is found that someone owns a real house, that is, a house that is cement, concrete, a good house, then that person is struck off. But otherwise, we have to go as per that list. So neither does the local representative have any discretion, nor does the block-level official have any discretion. So one attempt was to remove discretion, make it automatic, make it transparent; so this was one step. [End of Tape1]

MUKHERJEE: Start again?

MUKERJI: _Yes. Then the second was how to make sure the money reached them. As was mentioned earlier, earlier it was distributed in cash. Cash is subject to a lot of leakage. There were complaints that out of 25,000 rupees, 5,000 would be taken away. So then an attempt in between had been to give individual checks. Even that is not satisfactory. So with the new government, the moment we broached it to the Chief Minister, he readily agreed that instead of individual checks, we will then give a consolidated check or an advice to the local bank, open accounts of those beneficiaries in the bank, and transfer the money directly into the account, so there is no interface between the government official and the beneficiary for this purpose of payment._

There will be an interface when we get those beneficiaries to go to the banks and open their accounts, give their photographs, but the money transaction is without any interface. That improved things a lot. People always try and find ways to get around these rules, these systems, so there were complaints, but the number came down drastically.

Second was that in these bank accounts, they were issued passbooks with photographs. Earlier, there used to be a requirement by the banks that identified the beneficiary, but if the photograph is already pasted on that under the banking norms which are called customer norms, KYC (know your customer), there is no need to again identify that person. So he doesn't have to bring along someone else who would have earlier acted as a go-between, as an intermediary and taken money from him. This has improved a lot. There are still isolated complaints. That is because of the very unequal structure in rural society in

Bihar, the power structure, the economic structure, the social structure; it is very unequal. But it is very isolated now. So that was a significant improvement.

Earlier also we used to distribute the money in small and several installments. Each time the fellow would have to go, the beneficiary would have to come to the block and run around people. So the Chief Minister took the decision that you just give it in two installments. The first installment, earlier it used to be say 10, 5; he said give 24 and 1. The moment the people found 24,000 in their accounts, they were confident enough to start building. 25,000 rupees, or today 35,000 rupees, is not enough to build a single room of the proper design, of the proper specifications, so what people do is they are, a lot of them are migrant labor. When they work outside, their savings they add to this, and then they complete their house.

So this improved things a lot. Then in wage employment, sometime after a year-and-a-half experience, it is again something which in the field is difficult to monitor, and there were complaints of over-measurement, false attendance in the wage roles, what we call master roles, and payment to the wrong people. So this again was a matter of concern. I remember the date precisely. On January 17, 2007, one evening during discussions, the chief minister expressed his concern and said that we must find a way to make these wage roles or attendance roles or muster roles foolproof. So then we started a search.

Right now, many of the people in Bihar's population—the last census, 53% illiteracy. So a lot of people just give their thumbprints then sign on that attendance sheet. Then we scouted around, and one solution was biometric attendance roll or an electronic muster roll. So a project called E-Muster started. It has now been renamed as E-Shakti (E-Power). The basic concept is that any person who comes to work—they are given a card, a contact list, a smartcard with a small RFID (radio-frequency identification) chip inside so it will not get worn out by repeatedly putting it in any machine. That RFID chip has—we are taking all ten fingers, and then at the back end, these fingers are compared with the universe of fingers of everyone, and even so far ,we have not come across any duplication, but there is indeed de-duplication software called Automated Fingerprint Identification Software (AFIS).

So this person comes with that smartcard, which has the fingerprints, puts it into a hand-held device which is on the worksite. Then that person has to put the fingerprint—it could be a thumb, but if the thumb for example is damaged, then it can be any other finger. That machine has that capability. It compares the person's thumbprint with that stored in that smartcard; it validates the person and it records. Now to give the person who comes a degree of satisfaction, comfort, there is also a slip of paper like when we go to the ATM (automated teller machine) we get it, but whereas ATM the printout is on thermal paper, this is on ordinary paper because thermal paper vanishes. An illiterate person in a village might be a bit suspicious that look, here is the government program, and I'm getting this wage slip, but it has vanished after three days, and all sorts of rumors get started. They're quite gullible sometimes. That is the reason we have kept it, as I said, on ordinary paper.

At the end of the week, that scheme is measured. The measurements are fed into the computer in the block, and this electronic muster roll is then also fed into the computer. The computer calculates the work done in terms of volume of work

done. Then we all fed in the number of man-days an individual has worked, and then that formula itself, from that it prints out an advice as to who should get how much. That advice is sent to the bank and credited to that person's account.

In any of these wage schemes, there are three points where you can fudge records: one is the attendance, second is measurement, third is payment to the correct person. So we've taken care of the first. For the second, that is the measurement of the work done, today there is no economically viable solution in terms of technology. The third one we're addressing—we've already had a dialogue with the banks, and very soon, I think by the end of August or maybe September, we are going to have an agreement with the banks that they will treat this as a debit card. They will have a business correspondent, yes, a bank's business correspondent model, where a business correspondent will go to the village, to that particular area, habitation, along with a hand-held device, and similarly, just as they used it to identify themselves, they will use it on this machine to identify themselves, and they will get paid whatever amount they want to withdraw. This transaction will also be electronically recorded. So it will be doorstep banking. This is being tied up.

So if we tie up the two ends, that is correct attendance and correct payment, there will be very little incentive to fudge the measurement. So this is another innovation. This is something that is the chief minister's brainchild again. The moment we suggested this solution to him, he was very excited. The proof of concept has already been done as far as attendance is concerned. We have implemented three projects using this attendance. As I said, the debit card business will follow.

The other steps that we took to improve service delivery in the rural areas is that our field machinery over the years has got run down and the strength is only about 40-50% of what it should be. So there are efforts at recruitment. Recruitment again is something problematic, but we were able to use computerized evaluation, what are called OMR sheets to conduct exams for—it was about 1.8 lakh candidates, and ultimately for various categories, we were able to appoint 12,500 without any corruption, without any scandal. So I think this was another step forward, and these people are deployed in NREG (National Rural Employment Guarantee) works.

Third, training, we have been emphasizing training. The block level officials, the head of the block offices—we have 534 blocks of which 300 were sent in batches, small batches of forty, to Hyderabad, the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD), and they went for six-day training. If nothing else, at least the exposure to Andhra Pradesh, which has done very well in many rural development programs, the exposure to NIRD, which is a very nice campus; they came back very much benefited from that.

Then IT is going to be a major edge to any office functioning. So this we've also done on the outsourcing model, because just giving computers to people who have never seen computers before, it would have been damaged very quickly, and issues of maintenance, operation, etc. So each block, I think four private companies were given about a hundred blocks, contiguous blocks each, some more, some less. Each block was to have two computers, UPS (uninterruptible power supply), diesel-generating set—because the power situation is very bad in Bihar—a printer, scanner—so, complete two units and one operator. The service

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provider was giving one operator; one operator we had appointed under our NREG computerized selection. That in the course of time will result in a cultural change in the working of a block.

The third thing that we did: it is difficult for people to repeatedly come to government offices to get their work done. So there was this concept of a Gram Vikaas Shivir *which means in panchayat, we hold a camp where all the block functionaries, whether it is revenue, development, supply, whatever, they all go there, camp for a day. This is throughout the state and as per a roster, so each week, there is a camp, this one day camp is in a different panchayat, and in a span of fifteen to thirty weeks, depending on the number of panchayats in a block, the entire block is covered with these camps. The objective of these camps is people come and get their work done to the extent possible. For the success of each camp, there has to be some prior preparation.*

The local, the panchayat-level functionary has to collect the applications, make records, make inquiries. Supervisors have to come in advance and make inquiries. The day of the camp, these decisions are taken in front of everyone. So this transparency adds to the quality of a correct decision. Like if someone wants what is called mutation of land—if I have bought a piece of land, or if I have inherited a piece of land, and I want the record of rights for that particular plot to be made in my name, I make an application.

Now if this is done in an office, people can make false applications and get other people's land entered in their names and this causes a lot of land disputes. But in front of all the village, if a decision is taken, people will tell you yes, this is his and this is not his. So these Gram Vikaas Shevas *then MIS (management information systems) we have been stressing district and block level, made formats, used these computers also, so that gradually approach of quantification of results, measurement, analysis of monthly reports—that has to catch on.*

MUKHERJEE: Sir, if I may ask a question about the capacity lower down. You mentioned that there used to be a lot of corruption in the delivery of rural services. You countered that partly through technology and partly through training. I was wondering if you made any efforts to actually change attitudes over the long term with people, and if you faced any resistance from people who would have otherwise benefited from the previous system?

MUKERJI: *Unfortunately, we do not have a state training institution. Earlier Bihar, when Bihar and Jharkhand were one state, we had an institution in, Ranchi which is now with Jharkhand, so we do not have a state rural development training institution. That is another thing on our program: we must set up one year. We have taken time on setting it up deliberately, because we just don't want another average government institution where there is no motivation in the training. This is one of the most important things: how to change people's mindsets. Make it delivery-oriented rather than power-oriented. So in that we have not unfortunately been able to make much headway. It is one of the priorities.*

You had another, second part of your question?

MUKHERJEE: Did you face any resistance?

MUKERJI: *Resistance, yes. When we implemented the new NREG (National Rural Employment Guarantee) procedures, some people said that this scheme is going to flop because even when we changed the systems in Indira Awaas Yojana rural housing scheme, there will be no incentive left for anyone, so you'll find that no work is being done. There has been resistance in some places, in some panchayats people refuse to take up any work. Then notices were issued that this is an act, under law you have to give this. Things have improved, but I will not say that corruption has stopped; it is still there, very much there. This* E-Shakti *project, with the biometrics smartcard, it is still in its infancy. We have just issued about a thousand cards. Once it is there throughout the state, it will make a very significant difference especially in all beneficiary-oriented schemes where we are paying money to individuals. However, that is in the future.*

MUKHERJEE: Sir, initially I'm sure given the record of previous administrations in this area, the rural area, there must have been a lot of indifference among the public toward any new initiatives from the public. Did you take any specific steps to build popular support for the reforms that you were planning?

MUKERJI: *After this present government has come, the public has been very supportive and they're looking forward to new initiatives. They're not indifferent. In fact, earlier we used to find that whenever there were conferences on serious issues, there would be a large number of individuals, volunteer organizations, civil society organizations participating. People wanted change. People were crying for change. So the change of government helped them, and the response was very positive.*

                      So here also people are welcoming all this. It is the vested interests who are benefiting from the earlier lack of systems or earlier defective systems. They are opposing it. For example, we asked, at least in Patna district, the blocks to issue certificates using these computers. Software has been given. This cuts out as part of our office staff and part of the touts. So in some places, that is a distance to implementing it. It requires closer monitoring by our district officials. There is resistance, but not from the public; they're happy.

MUKHERJEE: At your level, have you taken any steps to counter that resistance, by say stronger monitoring of your district-level officials?

MUKERJI: *We have monthly meetings with them and there are reporting formats and each time, every month we analyze it before the meeting, rank the districts, comment specifically on what are the defects in the reporting systems. Some people, I think maybe 80% of our district officials, not the DMs (district magistrates), but our programs are implemented through the deputy development commissioners. They are under the DMs, but they look basically at development programs.*

MUKHERJEE: The DMs are the district magistrates?

MUKERJI: *Yes, the district magistrates. They are the district leaders, but under them for development we have this DDC (deputy development commissioner). So I would say that 80% of them do not understand quantitative figures, quantitative data, and they cannot analyze it. So we help them to understand what they're reporting. Initially the reports, some of them were ridiculous figures, randomly going up, going down. When we got them to start comparing what they reported*

earlier, what they were now reporting, explaining why it is defective, now they've got the hang, so they have started understanding it, also.

Another initiative that has been taken similar to Indira Awaas Yojana *is that NREG payments are now mandated to be made through post offices and bank accounts. No more cash payments. So that again, there was resistance to that. Again, we've just been hammering people, then the district officials in turn have been warning those people who are making cash payment, and from say 20% payment from accounts, when I left the department, it was above 90%. So a lot of improvement in that.*

MUKHERJEE: So your point about the reporting formats and how they didn't understand, that's often a problem that is encountered in other places as well, which is that you want to change an institution, but the only source of information that you have to change that institution is a reporting unit within that same institution. So you mentioned one way of sort of showing them the way. That's partly a problem of ignorance, but there might also be a problem of reliability of the data in terms of other interests playing a factor. Did you take any steps to address this?

MUKERJI: Reliability of data is an issue; it remains a problem. That is why we were trying to push this to the next level. Right now, we were monitoring the districts. We want the districts similarly to push this to the blocks. The BDO (block development officer) and the block program officer for NREGS, they should monitor and analyze their own performance. Similarly at the panchayat level. This will take time. The software is available. Training we need. Then at the panchayat level, new common service centers are being rolled out. That is one computer kiosk privately operated and owned in each panchayat.

Once that takes off then we want people in the panchayat to be able to visit this kiosk, informatics kiosk, and know what is happening in that panchayat. That is the real way to get things done. Because any amount of top-down monitoring in such a vast program, we have 40,000 villages, we have 8463 panchayats. That is where in NRGE at least 50% of the money is being spent, and there is no way that either the district or the state can really effectively monitor what is happening.

There might be about 80,000 schemes. But once it is broken up into the local level, if I'm a villager in a panchayat, and I can see the list of schemes, and then I know this is actually being done, this is not being done. I can take my local PRI representative as well as the panchayat secretary to task. So ultimately we have to head to that. But right now it is quite far away.

MUKHERJEE: So in terms of incentives, you mentioned that you ranked the districts before every monthly meeting. Did you feel that that had an impact on their performance?

MUKERJI: Yes. Initially, the DDC started waking up. Then we started sending it o the district magistrates. So suddenly a district magistrate sees that out of 38, my district is at position 37. So the district magistrate would then summon the DDC: why is this so? The DDC would try and explain there is some problem with figures. Then they would say that then you sort out the problem of figures with the Rural Development Department. Then once in a while we would also speak and tell them that look this is, how we are analyzing it. So we built up a set of indicators

for each program, simple indicators which people could understand, which were not so much open to manipulation. There is manipulation in the reporting; certain ratios can always be skewed if you change either the numerator or the denominator.

So this has helped. But I think there is a lot, much more to be done. We require a cultural change, and that will take time.

MUKHERJEE: So it seems that to implement all this, you must have had a fairly good team of individuals around you in your office here. Not here, but at the Rural Development Department. How did you go about finding those individuals to work with you? Did you select them—?

MUKERJI: _Here unfortunately, we normally are not in a position to select the officials whom we work with. There are two approaches. One is to direct them all the time: you do this, you do that. But that is not sustainable. It is better—some people do require that, but it is better if repeatedly you encourage that person to work and think for himself or herself. We had a system that every Friday we would meet. There was a big board, a big white board behind my chair, and officer-wise it was listed out what is to be done. A big list used to be there. Each week, we used to review it amongst ourselves. So first time, let us say the first two or three months, they would not be prepared. Then they realized that no, they have to be prepared, so they would prepare a day in advance, come. If some action was pending, they would make sure. Here again in the Secretariat culture, it was that until the file is put up to the officer, the officer will not deal with it._

The message that we tried to give them, which did go through ultimately after about five, six months is that we had officers. We should not be subject to the whims of the office. If the person does not put up the file and that item of action is listed on this board it is an important activity, you jolly well call for that file. If the file is not forthcoming physically, go to the section, try and get it. If still that's not forthcoming then take against people. So we emphasize things like punctuality, discipline at least putting up things in time. If it was a complex issue I would not give my decision immediately. I would say, "Let's discuss it." We would get about twelve or thirteen officers; every Friday we would sit together, and I wouldn't give answers. So someone would give some answers, someone would give another answer, and then in the discussion normally the best answer would come out. Otherwise I would have to intervene.

We followed this approach in training also. Since we didn't have our own institute and we needed to sensitize all our 534 block development officers to these programs. What we did at the divisional level: we would have a one-day long workshop. These three plus certain administrative issues would be discussed. The presentation would be made by my officers followed by discussions. In Indian education, we have still—most of us are in that group where we didn't ask questions. The lecturer lectured and we took down notes.

So in these things, we changed that because if you keep talking at people they fall asleep. Nothing registers even if their eyes are open. So we made it interactive. Slideshows. The points were highlighted briefly, and before we came to the next slide we would very often pose a question. In these circumstances, what would you do? Initially they were all hesitant to speak because senior officers in the Secretariat have come; I used to attend them personally. They

were hesitant to say anything. Then we would throw at them, "All right, so there are no answers to this, we have to live with this problem?" Then one fellow would pipe up and say, "No, Sir, this can be done." Then someone else would say, "This can be done." They would criticize each other's solutions. At the end, five or six good solutions would come up. Then we would go to the next slide and say, "Look, what you are saying is correct, and these are some of the ways to do it."

*So a lot of interaction, a lot of thinking. People would stay awake. Then of course the usual thing after all this discussion was finished, we would make working groups to bring out any other issues. Some problems they would pose.
We would say, "All right, keep it for the working group." We'd give them about 45 minutes to an hour and then make the presentations with solutions. So this created a different approach to work and to learning. So that approach also in the Secretariat we followed. I would say that 80% of the officers did respond. So without having to change the team, they started performing.*

MUKHERJEE: So if you could think a little bit more about when you came into the job, the kind of talents that you would have looked for in individuals had you been able to select them, but you eventually ended up creating through these mechanisms, what would those talents be if you were to think of them?

MUKERJI: *Integrity is certainly there, one. Integrity has to be there. Second is commitment to deliver. That encompasses a lot of other things. One is I work hard to understand the program: I'm field oriented, outcome oriented, not just that, not input-oriented, not even output, but ultimately what delivery is taking place and openness to ideas. Let me listen to the other person's point of view. And a determination to stick to deadlines. All right, this has to be done, it has to be done. Whether I work one hour and get it done by twenty other people or whether I work twenty hours and do it myself. That has to be basically this.*

Integrity again means that apart from financial integrity also, by and large sticking to the rules. If the rules are an impediment, change the rules. But here the government, still we are a government which goes by record. There is a lot of paperwork. So do good work, but also keep the records straight, because we have audits, we have vigilance machinery. They come and look at the documents ultimately. So I might have taken an excellent decision, but if that is not backed by proper reasoning, that can be faulted. So these are the sort of things we kept emphasizing.

MUKHERJEE: You talked about the need for changing rules sometimes to fit new situations on the ground, and this has been particularly relevant in Bihar where a lot of the codes are even from pre-independence days. So did you yourself initiate any changes in these rules, and how did you go about them?

MUKERJI: *This, I told you about our schemes. We changed our internal processes. We were not a rule-making department of our own, but there were—in the Finance Department, there has been a very successful effort, so if you interview the finance secretary, he will tell you the Bihar financial rules. They were a stumbling block, and almost 80% or 90% of our files had to be referred to Finance for clearance. During president's rule, this was in the final lot. This was further consolidated after the present government came to power. I think now not more than 10% files have to be referred there. That helped a lot.*

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> *People were hesitant earlier to take decisions. If a decision was wrong, I'll be victimized. So there again, we kept emphasizing, take the decision, record it properly; you won't be victimized.*

MUKHERJEE: So we've spoken about some of the very successful schemes that you undertook in Rural Development. Could you cast your mind back and think about any initiatives that may have not been as successful that you may have proposed and that didn't see the light of day, or that you weren't able to deploy the manpower and the resources in time to make it successful?

MUKERJI: *This computerization of blocks. It isn't as successful as we have liked it to be. Two of the five private partners—they let us down. They resorted to unfair practices. They gave substandard equipment. They were not performing. So of course we took action against them. But that meant that those say 100 or 150 blocks which were attached to these two, they suffered. So it is a problem. The private sector is also looking for shortcuts, easy money, so we have to be careful.*

MUKHERJEE: So looking back, if you at that point could have done something differently, would it have been to not go the private way or would you have—?

MUKERJI: *No, I would have gone the private way, but I would have set much higher benchmarks in the technical qualification bid.*

MUKHERJEE: A lot of the programs that you administered in that department—.

MUKERJI: *Another thing, sorry to interrupt you: two or three other very promising initiatives which are still in the—one or two on the drawing board, the others are just taking off: the block office, I think 90% of the villagers go there, either to the panchayat or the block office. We have not given any attention to those offices. We are looking at the districts, we are looking at the state Secretariat. But since 90% of the people are really—the service delivery part is the block in the* panchayat*, we issued first an EOI, expression of interest, and then we invited RFPs (requests for proposals). I think three very good parties have been short-listed. We want business process reengineering or government process reengineering in the block office.*

> *So people study the workload of a BDO, what are the functions. BDO also includes the revenue official. Look at it as a comprehensive unit. What tasks should be shared, what tasks can be delegated? What tasks can be automated? When people are asking me what is the objective, I said customer delight. Now and I am professor. When I mentioned this to him, he said, "In the public service sector we don't talk of customer delight, we talk of customer satisfaction." I said I'm prepared to live with that. But the objective was that today, any citizen, whether that person is highly placed or is a poor person, you shudder to go to a government office. A government office is a place where work will not be done; you will become frustrated.*

> *So the objective is to change the civil service delivery point so that people who are going go with hope and they come out delighted. So let's see.*

MUKHERJEE: That's very nice. Just to go back to one of the questions I was talking, about which is a lot of the services that you delivered. In a kind of society like Bihar, where there is a lot of polarization along caste and things like that, when you try

to objectively deliver a service, there might be a sense in which one group feels that they may be systematically disadvantaged in the delivery of that service. Now, did you try in any way to dampen that effect in the work that you did?

MUKERJI: *No, I was, in fact, our work was only for the poor. So there was no way we could do anything for people who were not poor. I think people came to accept that.*

MUKHERJEE: But apart from the economic angle, did you try, were there any efforts to make sure that people from all social groups, in terms of caste or ethnicity, etc., were included in these programs?

MUKERJI: *Yes, you see the NRGE is all-inclusive. Anyone who wants to do manual work is welcome. So there is no caste division or any other division. And there are poor people in other castes also. So they came. All our programs—there are reservations that at least so much, normally it is about 40%, should go to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. So those we have to observe. In the rural housing, 60% is reserved for them. The remaining other castes can exist, providing they're poor.*

MUKHERJEE: Now I'd like you to just think about your role as a reformer, and we'll be done soon. Did you feel like you had the support of the government at all times in initiatives that you came up with and tried to implement?

MUKERJI: *I came back to Bihar bed I expected support, and I got that support. So that was a big source of satisfaction. Some places there was wrongdoing, we would make proposals, either police cases would be lodged or government officials would be suspended. So in those matters, we got full support.*

MUKHERJEE: Often it has been the case, even in other states of India, that there is a lot of interference in the day-to-day functioning of a senior official from all quarters. Were you able to function independently of that?

MUKERJI: *By and large, yes. Here transfers and postings are with the political executive, and people have different views on that. So that is something that is a given; we have to accept that, but after that, in terms of programs, etc., very little interference. People realize whom they are dealing with. If from the beginning we are firm but polite, people come to accept it, that all right, this person is doing what is correct and does not accept interference.*

MUKHERJEE: So you didn't feel the need to reach out to any outside individuals or groups to build support for your reforms, for example civil society or—?

MUKERJI: *No, that is one thing. Now that you mentioned it, that is one thing I tried and I did not succeed. I think civil society has a major role in improving the quality of implementation of all government programs. So right in the beginning—now Bihar is another problem. Even in civil society groups and NGOs, nongovernment organizations, 90% of them are fraud. So the challenge is how to sift that 10% which are good NGOs and get them to work and to help us accompany our programs.*

            In the beginning, I called some reputed NGOs and we had two rounds of discussions. I was trying to tell them that, "Look, please create a forum of reputed NGOs. You make certain parameters, yardsticks for appraising NGOs, form a

platform, and then accredit other NGOs. Like in the commercial sector you have accreditation agencies. Why can't you have an NGO-rating agency which you people administer, not the government. The moment government administers, we will be criticized. Some of our appraisal may be subjective, but if eminent NGOs come and do this, then there will be less resistance."

Ultimately, after two or three rounds, they came back and said no, government should do it; we are not going to do it. So then I gave up. But I think civil society involvement and all these programs will really improve the quality.

MUKHERJEE: Since you've left, or rather before you left, did you take any measures to sort of ensure the sustainability of the reforms that you—for example, this step that you mentioned that involved civil society. Even though your first attempt was not successful, did you try and institutionalize some sort of process that might make it happen in the future?

MUKERJI: *No, I think that we were not able to do anything. The way you can institutionalize: one is by instructions, guidelines. Those are there. The second is by changing officials at the Secretariat level. As I said, they started thinking and working in a different manner.*

MUKHERJEE: Could you reflect a little bit on aspects of your own background and management style that may have helped you succeed in places where others have not been as successful in initiating all these reforms in the Rural Development?

MUKERJI: *I think it is a desperate commitment to want to do something; that is the only thing that keeps you going. There is a lot of frustration, you have to put in very hard work, put in a lot of thought. There are obstacles initially. Most organizations are unwilling to change, so you have to persist. Background? I don't know. I think your family background counts a lot, what values parents have passed on. Exposure to rural India, as soon as we join service, we are exposed to field visits, developing a sympathy for the poor and the powerless. I think these things make a deep impact. Some of us accept it and get desensitized; some of us remain sensitive.*

MUKHERJEE: So it seems that you had a vision for where you wanted to take the work that you were doing and the communities that you were serving. Did you take any sense to articulate that vision to those around you and make it a sort of broad-based movement to aid your work?

MUKERJI: *Well, I articulated it to the officers who were working directly with me, and I used to tell them that at the end when all of us retire, our grandchildren, your grandchildren will ask you and me, "What did you do for Bihar?" You'll say that I wrote such brilliant notes in 100,000 files. Is that the answer you want to give? Or that you were able to change even the life of a single family. Many of them appreciated it. I tried to spread this among many of my colleagues also in the same service. There I am very disappointed; I didn't get the response that I wanted, that I was hoping for. They're good individuals, but a large number of us are indifferent. That's unfortunate.*

MUKHERJEE: Okay, Sir. Finally, as I mentioned in the beginning, our program is trying to develop a resource that helps leaders like you share your experiences with leaders in other places who are trying to build up institutions. So keeping that in

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mind, do you have anything else to add that we have not covered in this interaction so far?

MUKERJI: *I think one key thing is the right person in the right place. Individuals matter. Systems—especially when we are building up something. Select the right individual, see that's person's aptitude, put them in the right place. They will build up that institution. That momentum will keep going hopefully after that person leaves. But in government systems, we don't have that freedom. We have this mass of officers, you can transfer here or there, everywhere.*

I think institutions matter, and we need to continuously—I think that to top leadership's main function is to help each individual find the right slot. Some of us are good at regulatory work: policing, laying down the law, judicial work, quasi-judiciary work. Some of us want to go in for innovation, development, new ideas. Even if, I think another thing that many of us in positions of leadership should realize is that we cannot always lead the change. There are other more brilliant people who are far junior to us who want to do something; facilitate their performance. If we are just there to remove the roadblocks, they will perform very well.

MUKHERJEE: Thank you very much, Sir.