

MGNREGA: A Driving Force of Empowerment of Women through Employment Generation

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is the flagship programme of the Government that directly touches lives of the poor and promotes inclusive growth. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), notified on September 7, 2005, marked a paradigm shift from the previous wage employment programmes with its rights-based approach that makes the Government legally accountable for providing employment to those who demand it. MGNREGA was launched on February 2, 2006 in 200 districts initially and expanded to cover all 614 districts across the country in rural areas. The Act aims at enhancing livelihood security of households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. MGNREGA is the first ever law internationally, that guarantees wage employment at an unprecedented scale. The primary objective of the Act is augmenting wage employment. Its auxiliary objective is strengthening natural resource management through works that address causes of chronic poverty like drought, deforestation and soil erosion and so encourage sustainable development. Further, MGNREGA by encouraging works on water harvesting, soil conservation, Irrigation, flood protection, afforestation and plantation, helps to insulate local community from adverse effects of climate change.

In a country where labour is the only economic asset, the provision of gain full employment for millions of people is a pre requisite for the fulfillment of other basic right, right to life, the right to food and the right education. In a rural milieu marked by stark inequality between the genders and cast whether it relates, to wage rate, employment, or empowerment or any other social, economic and political substantial gain. In India, rural women are extensively involved in arduous operations both in the domestic and agricultural sector. Studies reveal that women on an average spend 04 hours per day to fetch water, walk 07 km/day to gather fuel and majority of their remaining time in cooking and looking after children. Migration

of the males had compounded the problem further. Thus, women in rural India worked in drudgery and did not participate in the development and decision making process. To improve the situation of women third Millennium Development Goal [MDG] has included women's empowerment and promotion of Gender equality among the eight MDGs.

Mahatma Gandhi NREGA is basically an employment generation programme but when we go into its details we find the roots much deeper. It touches various other aspects of human. Alok Kumar is Associate Professor, Department of Economics, St. John's College, Agra and Shobha Sharma is Associate Professor, Department of Physics, St. John's College, Agra life one amongst them being social inclusion. India has faced the problem of discrimination in terms of gender, caste, creed, colour and financial status. Mahatma Gandhi NREGA by adopting Inclusive Participatory Growth is playing a major role in bringing the women of the society into the productive zone.

II. MGNREGA AND THE STATE OF CHHATTISGARH

Chhattisgarh, in ancient times was known as Dakshin-Kausal. It is one of the youngest states in the Indian Union. The state was formed on 1st Nov 2000 from the south eastern districts of erstwhile Madhya Pradesh. Chhattisgarh is landlocked by Uttar Pradesh in the north, east it is bound by Orissa & Jharkhand, in the south by Andhra Pradesh and in the west by jMadhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The state of Chhattisgarh has an area of 1,35,191 sq. km. and a population of 20.83 million. A majority of 16.65 million (i.e. 79.9%) live in rural areas. 31.8 per cent constitute Tribals and 11.6 per cent constitute Schedule Caste. This is a largest proportion of Tribals to total population existing in any state, besides north eastern state. There are 16 districts, 146 blocks, and 20378 villages. The State has population density of 154 per sq. km. The Gender Ratio in the State is 989, which is next only to Kerala.

Women in Chhattisgarh have enjoyed a kind of freedom denied to women elsewhere in the country. The relative freedom to women is evident in the local traditions and customs. Female literacy has

doubled in the last decade, and male literacy is higher than India's average. MGNREGA was implemented in the state of Chhattisgarh in three phases. The number of district covered phase- wise is:

Phase I - Eleven Districts (Bastar, Bilaspur, Dantewada, Dhamtari, Jashpur, Kanker, Kawardha, Korea, Raigarh, Rajnandagon, Surguja)

Phase II- Four Districts (Janjgir-Champa, Korba, Mahasamund, Raipur) and Phase III -One District (Durg).

MGNREGA has been a blessing to the people of Chhattisgarh as all sections of the society, whether SC, ST, physically challenged or from the general community has got gainful productive employment. The creations of productive assets have also helped the masses in number of ways. The villages have road connectivity and the water resources have developed. The employment potential created by MGNREGS has helped in development of land of IAY and marginalized families' household. The women who used to be without job have now become productive human resource and an important wage earner. Table-1 shows women representation in total labour employment. MGNREGA has generated cumulative employment of 120708285 person's days of which 54509210 (45.18%) persons days accounted to female employment and 36338342 (54.82%) persons days to male employment in 2011-12. The employment generated in 2012-13 till July 2012 was 48.61 per cent, which is higher than that of 2011-12. The increasing trend of employment of women shows that the women getting empowered and taking the lead in taking other responsibilities in the PRIs.

III. EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Women in generally related to perform the role of biological reproduction, where as they perform several other tasks, but often, they are not visible. It is their biology and their reproductive role that overwhelms their productive role of earning and meeting livelihood needs. Realizing this, third Millennium Development Goal [MDG] has included women's empowerment and promoting Gender equality among the eight MDGs. Women's empowerment is to give the power to act, participate, make decision, raise voice against social evils, and fight for right and above all make women conscious of their own rights and privileges and sensitize both men and women to recognize the potential of women. Women's empowerment is not just financial independence, nor access to education, or sexual freedom, or control over reproduction, but a combination of increasing their social, political, economic and spiritual strength, both individually and collectively, removing the obstacles that penalized and prevented women from being integrated into their respective societies. It further includes addressing the discrimination that exclude women from decision-making processes, not only for reasons of equality but

for the insights they could bring to the process - addressing marginalization by way of implementing equal pay for equal work, fair opportunities for career advancement and equal rights in the family. In the process, the women who chose to be mothers are to be protected, not penalized and those who find employment outside to realize economic empowerment should not have to feel guilty for not doing justice to the family by providing an enabling environment to take care of the children, doing the household activities, etc.

Social empowerment of women includes changes in the socialization process, without any discrimination on gender in day to day affairs, gender sensitization and inculcating a feeling of equality instead of subordination among women. On a rights perspective equal right to be born, equal literacy, equal education, equal employment, equal property right, equal participation in decision making at home, at work place, policy making, committees, politics, etc. are to be included. Political Empowerment of women should include equal participation and power to take decisions no subordination, no domination of men over women, recognition of work of both men and women as equals.

IV. STATUS OF WOMEN PRE-MGNREGS

In India, rural women are extensively involved in arduous operations both in the domestic and agricultural sector. The women are strongly linked to the natural resources and traditionally they have been using the natural resources for their livelihood. In villages, there has been large scale degradation of the productive resources, land, soil, water, forests etc. due to deforestation, population pressure, urban consumption pattern and industrialization. The impact has been on the state of women and studies reveal that women on an average spend 4 hrs/day to fetch water (Bundelkhand), walk 7 km/day to gather fuel (Orissa) and majority of their remaining time cooking and looking after children. Migration of the males had compounded the problem further. Thus, women in rural India worked in drudgery and did not participate in the development and decision making process.

V. STATUS OF WOMEN IN POST-MGNREGS

MGNREGS, a flagship program of the Government of India, has taken steps to generate wage employment and thereby empower women, so that they are not marginalized in the communities. As a result, MGNREGS has empowered women - economically, socially, culturally and politically.

VI. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN NREGS

Economic Empowerment of Women due to MGNREGS is reviewed from following angles: Employment Opportunity, Women as Wage Earner,

Wage Parity, Control rights of Women in Earning from MGNREGA, Financial Inclusion, Bargaining Power / Employment Opportunity. MGNREGA contains provisions which cater to the laudable objective of socio-economic empowerment of women with respect to wages and work opportunity. So far as women participation in MGNREGA in Chhattisgarh is concerned, the women participation rate in Chhattisgarh is 48.6 per cent in 2012-13 over, 45.2 per cent in 2011-12. The separate accounts of women have also been open in the State. In district Raipur the women participation rate is 49.5 per cent. The highest women participation rate is in Rajnandgaon (53.55%) and the lowest is in Sarguja in 2011-12, but in 2012-13 the participation rate is further showing an increasing trend. The participation rate of women is currently low owing to delayed wage payment. Still one fact is clear that some improvement has started owing to improvement in wage payment system and using time and motion study to determine the quantum of work per day.

A. Women as Wage Earner

The MGNREGS has helped in the women becoming wage earner. The wages earned contribute to the family income, which is used for clothing, nutrition and health care of the members. The MGNREGS employment of women has helped them to play a parity role in decision making.

B. Wage Parity

There is no gender discrimination with regard to minimum wage rate prevalent under MGNREGA in the state of Chhattisgarh and they are being paid equal wages for equal work. Keeping in view the anatomical features of rural folks of Chhattisgarh, productivity norms have been rationalized with relation to nature of soil, depth of digging, etc. for which clear norms exist in the State.

C. Control Rights of Women in Earning From MGNREGS:

The women workers are becoming economically empowered due to MGNREGS. They get the wages through the system of bank account payments or through post office, which gives them the control right on their earning. Women now earn equally so they have also started taking interest as to how their earning is to be utilized.

D. Financial Inclusion

'No frill bank account' was opened for the payment of MGNREGS wages. This increased transparency in payments and also encouraged the habit of thrift and savings. This has had the greatest impact on women workers for whom financial independence was a dream.

The indebtedness analysis based on secondary data shows that 100 per cent of workers had bank accounts from among the registered workers and about 100 per

cent of wage payment is through accounts (Bank/Post Office). Separate accounts are also being opened in the name of women workers.

"To visit a Bank was beyond our expectations. MGNREGS has not only led us to a bank, but now we are also to save something out of our wages and we have come to visit a Bank. We are very much grateful to MGNREGS scheme which has totally changed our life style..."

E. Bargaining Power

The bargaining power of women workers have improved due to MGNREGS projects. The average wage rate in the agriculture sector also went up towards minimum wages. Previously, women workers were poorly paid. Now with MGNREGS, the general wages for women has increased to Rs 120/- in all types of work.

The total household income has also increased as now women are able to work in MGNREGS scheme during lean agricultural season and undertake agriculture activity during agricultural period.

F. Social Empowerment of Women

Social empowerment of women cannot be quantitatively measured but the impact of it can be qualitatively felt. The important qualitative changes are in the form of changed attitude to work, social acceptability, happiness and contentment. Social empowerment of women due to MGNREGS is reviewed from following angles. y". Social Interaction 'Women Participation In Social Audit, Participation In Decision Making, Dignity of Labour, Worksite Management, Impact on Education & Health Sectors, Social Interaction. MGNREGS has brought social interaction between different social groups and have also brought interaction between men and women. They now work shoulder to shoulder to earn their dignified living. The social dogmas which restricted the genders to work together have gone out. The caste divide has also ended, which is a great advantage of MGNREGS.

G. Women Participation in Social Audit

Women participation in social audit is being encouraged by the government but it has not gained much ground. Formation of social audit team is lacking and so is the women participation in social audit.

H. Participation in Decision Making

The women workers are being encouraged to participate in decision taking. They have started participating in the process. In the panel, 4 to 5 women workers are now being kept to take decision regarding the project planning. In the shelf of work, mate selection is also being encouraged from among the women. About 50 per cent of the works are managed by the women as per Govt. Feedback. The formation

of Self Help Groups and Participation of women at the Panchayat level as elected members has given them strength to highlight the issues which are prime for social wellbeing.

I. Dignity of Labour

Through implementation of the scheme in the right earnest, the status of the workers improved and dignity of labour was ensured. For the first time the worker could demand work and get his dues in a time bound and transparent manner. This has transformed the relationship between the work provider and the worker from that of a master servant relationship to one of an employer and an employee. Ensuring dignity of labour has probably been one of the most important outcomes of MGNREGS.

J. Worksite Management

Ensuring the rights of the worker being the focus of this programme, Worksite Management becomes an essential component. It was emphasized from the beginning that worksite management is not an ancillary item, but as important as correct measurement of work and accurate payments. It was seen as key to ensuring labour retention and especially crucial to inclusion and participation of women labourers. It is mandatory for every worksite in the district to have provision for rest- shed, safe drinking water, first aid and other facilities. This has mainly had an impact on women and marginalized job seekers in two ways. Firstly, better worksite facilities increase their participation and retain them in the workforce. Secondly, pregnant women, differently-abled persons and aged jobseekers who may not necessarily get a good outturn on a piece rate basis are engaged in such works (providing water, maintenance of creche etc.) and hence are able to get a daily minimum wage while retaining dignity of labour.

The most surprising thing is that these work site facilities are lacking, due to this, pregnant women, women with young children and elderly women are unable to take employment even if they want.

K. Impact on Education

It is a well known fact that increasing incomes of the poor lead to better retention rates in schools and a greater chance of continued education for children. The observation in Chhattisgarh showed a positive impact on education. The data from the field shows that there has been a substantial reduction in dropout rates in primary schools in the district. The MGNREGS has ensured employment to the poor in rural India. The "Stop Dams", "Link Roads" and "Forestry" have generated employment, which has increased the income of the family. Further, the time that women spend on the chores of water collection, fuel collection, fodder collection has been reduced.

The "Girl child" was kept home from school to help in domestic chores, but is now encouraged to attend school.

L. Impact on Health

The health of the women was strongly affected by carrying water for long distance, up steep terrains etc. they suffered from depression, backache, headache, spinal injuries, obstructed birth, leading to high mother and infant mortality. Further, the level of self hygiene is very low and hence they were exposed to communicable diseases. A "Clean Water" tank built through the MGNREGS scheme has reduced these risks and helped in the improvement of health.

M. Social Parity

Women's access to economic resources in terms of income and property ownership was unequal. There was a gender gap in the earnings and often was a cause of social disparity. MGNREGS, by ensuring equal wage has helped to achieve social parity in terms of Income and status.

N. Social Climate

Gender inequality was a major factor contributing to violence against women, disaster situations etc. the women and girls were often not equipped to handle adverse situations due to less female mobility and illiteracy. The women and girls are victims of sexual harassment and domestic violence, particularly when they are left alone at home. The MGNREGS has reduced these incidents as most of the women go out for work and the girls are encouraged to go to school.

O. Self Esteem and Confidence

The MGNREGS was implemented to give livelihood to the poor families. The survey reveals that in some schemes the enrolment of the women is higher. The "Woman" earns the wages for 100 days in a dignified manner without being harassed by contractors, etc. There is a definite rise in the confidence and self esteem of the women. They are vocal and also conscious of their rights. (Job cards, wage rate, days of work etc.) The place of the women in the house and society has changed and in some cases the woman is "Pradhan", and safeguards the interest of the other women. This has brought out the quality of "Leadership" amongst the women especially those from the backward sectors. The inclusion of "Women" as the "Mate" and "RojgarSahayak" has also given confidence to the women. A physically disabled or differently abled woman had no place in the society. The MGNREGS has ensured employment to them in the softer areas, thus ensuring some-employment to the women.

P. Enhancement of Knowledge

The MGNREGS generate employment in different sectors. The main identified schemes are

related to land works, forestry programs, fisheries, agriculture, floriculture, horticulture, irrigation etc. when a woman is employed in these schemes she gains knowledge, about the various things and soon exercises her opinion in decision taking regarding choice of plans.

Q. Cultural Climate

Women are the custodians of the cultural wealth. The MGNREGS has gone a long way in saving the "Cultural Climate" from degrading. The employment of women has generated small groups and network of women from different segments of the society. Interaction at the work-site, journey to and from, visit to the bank / Post Office, etc. has been very beneficial to the women at large. They enjoy and celebrate small events and also transfer the folk arts and culture to each other.

R. Indirect Benefits

MGNREGS has helped in development of Water bodies, Check Dams, Link Roads etc. which has proved to be a boon for women and to the village community at large. The time saved in bringing water, traversing on un-even roads, to get things of personal needs was a distant dream, which MGNREGS has made a reality. The women are now able to get their personal need fulfilled as vendor visit their village. The general disposition of women and children reflect good health and give a satisfied appearance.

S. Challenges

The status of women has certainly improved; they can be further empowerment if following steps are taken-

- The worksite facilities are lacking, owing to which child bearing women and women with infants do not come for work under MGNREGS.
- The formation of SHG's is lacking and there is absence in the management of productive assets created under MGNREGS.

- The question of women participation in social audit does not arise as there is no Social Audit.
- The delay in wage payments sometimes makes the women dependent on local sahuikars. These sahuikars are able to exploit them as they give advance /loan to them.
- The problem of Non availability of Bank/Post office near to village also involves loss of time and money.
- It was also observe that RojgarSahayak was not able to complete the Job Cards & Muster Roll in time.

MGNREGS was not envisaged as a women's empowerment programme, yet, MGNREGS has brought economic and social empowerment of women. The opportunity, taken by a large number of women indicates a preference for "Government Work" which provides dignity and higher wages than available. MGNREGS has certainly empowered women workers Economically and Socially. Some "Gender-Neutral Measures" such as increase in participation of women in planning and social audits of MGNREGA implementation, better worksite facilities, proper payment of wages, planning of works in phases, speedy grievance redressal etc. will encourage women to demand more work under MGNREGS.

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