

MGNREGA: A Route to Rural Employment and Gender Equality



Kamaljeet Kaur
Assistant Professor
Deptt.of Sociology,
Akal Degree College,
Mastuana, Sangrur

Abstract

The present paper attempts to understand the world's first mega make-work scheme MGNREGA and the way this right-based scheme has brought a transformation in the lives of those who live in rural areas. The paper also traces the background of various rural wage employment schemes launched after the independence of the country to end chronic poverty that grips rural households. The paper also explains how MGNREGA subsumes all the positive features of various rural employment schemes besides providing economic security for a minimum for 100 days to rural households. The contribution of MGNREGA in the creation of durable and quality assets for sustainable livelihood is also one of the thrust areas of the research paper and it explores how the creation of assets addresses the issue of poverty that otherwise stalks rural households during natural disasters or economic slump. The paper also seeks to analyse the ways in which the successful implementation of this programme has helped women improve their socio-economic status besides achieving gender parity, though in small measures. The paper also explores the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the effective implementation of the scheme.

Keywords: Gender Parity, Durable Assets, Sustainable livelihood et al.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is the world's largest make-work programme that promises to provide employment to the rural folk to alleviate poverty and also to ensure them a sustainable livelihood. More than 60% population of India lives in villages and it largely depends upon agriculture to sustain their life.

A big chunk of this mass is plagued by poverty. This very large proportion of rural population is chiefly engaged in farm labour or manual labour to contend with chronic poverty that afflicts them from ages. This highly vulnerable class of unskilled workers depends mainly on wages they earn through various unskilled activities. A host of unpredictable factors like natural disasters or personal health issues further aggravate the problems of this class and sometimes throw them in deep crisis.

Wage employment programmes such as road construction, irrigation infrastructure, reforestation soil conservation etc. come to the aid of unskilled manual workers and provide them with income to sustain themselves during critical times. This is mainly because, these programmes lead to the creation of durable assets which, in turn, generate sustainable livelihood for them.

Aim of the Study

The Aim of the Research paper is to study the Relevance of a employment guarantee scheme MNREGA. The Study tries to show the ways in which the scheme has resulted in economic and social empowerment of the common people of India.

Background of Rural Wage Employment Programmes

The need to provide and supplement the existing livelihood sources in rural areas was recognized early in the independent India. A host of programmes offering wage employment on public works on minimum wages were started. These included: Rural Manpower Programme (RMP 1960-61), Crash Scheme for Rural Employment (CRSE 1971-72), Drought Prone Area Programme (1972), Small farmers Development Agency (SFDA) and Marginal Farmers & Agricultural Labour Scheme (MF &AL). All these wage centric programmes which were started to provide income to the unskilled force were translated into full-fledged wage-employment programme in 1977 in the form of Food for Work Programme (FWP). In 1980's, Food for Work Programme was further given the shape of various schemes viz: The National Rural Employment Programme, Rural Landless Employment Guarantee

Programme, and Jawahar Rozgar Yojana and Employment Assurance Scheme. However, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana was merged with a rural infrastructure programme which was later merged with Sampurna Grameen Rozgar Yojana in 2001-02. It was again merged with another scheme i.e National Food for Work in 2005. All these wage employment programmes were self –targeting. Their main objective was to provide livelihood security to a huge force of unskilled workers. The other aim of all these wage employment programmes was to create durable assets so that economic hardships of the unskilled classes could be mitigated during. The other chief purpose of all these programmes was to provide food for work to the unskilled force so that this vulnerable group of people could be pulled out of vicious cycle of chronic poverty. It is also an established fact that these programmes provided the much needed economic security to the rural unskilled manual workers. But, all these programmes were plagued by a host of problems. Since these programmes were not backed by a legal framework, they often failed to yield the desired results. Secondly, all these wage centric programmes did not guarantee employment. To overcome these hurdles, the Government of Maharashtra formulated the Maharashtra Guarantee Scheme and Maharashtra Guarantee Act, 1977. The aim of this act was to provide wage employment to those who demanded it. The programme was a great success as it ensured a guaranteed employment to unskilled manual labour. Emboldened by the success, the central government enacted the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005. In the beginning it was named NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act).

But it was rechristened as MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) in 2009. This act is the most significant piece of legislation for several reasons. For the first time in the history of free India, the rural folk are not only just given a development programme but a regime of rights. It also ensures a legal guarantee to wage employment. It aims to build up durable assets to overcome hardships faced by rural households during natural disasters like earthquake, flood, drought etc.

MGNREGA thus becomes the first right – based programme which subsumes all the positive features of various wage employment programme. This programme ensures 100 days of wage employment in every financial year to every rural household whose adults volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Under this programme, the Panchayati Raj institutions have too been vested with the responsibility of planning, implementation and supervision of activities taken under the scheme.

MGNREGA thus strengthens the democratic system at the grass root level. It gives greater power to local bodies. MGNREGA is thus the first programme that promises to fulfill the constitutional obligation to both spread and strengthen democracy at the village level. It is the first ever law in the world that guarantees compulsory wage employment in the rural areas to address the causes of chronic poverty like deforestation, drought and soil erosion. The act permits the creation of durable assets so that the

employment generation is sustainable, eco and human friendly. The act covered 200 districts in its first phase till February. It was extended to all the rural districts of the country in phases. This programme has provided employment to 4.16 crore households through about 70 lakh works with more than 141 person days of employment. The average wage rate per day has also increased from Rs 65 in 2006-07 to about 115 in 2011-12.

Major Achievements of MGNREGA

1. Since the inception of this rural employment programme, around Rs 1,29,000 crores have been disbursed directly as wage to rural households till FY2012-13.
2. Since 2008, about five crore households have been provided with employment
3. 1348 crore person –days employment has been generated
4. 51% SC/ST accounts for total person-days has been generated
5. Women account for 47% of total person –days generated
6. Around 146 works have been executed since the inception of the programme
7. Average wage per person –day has gone up by 81%
8. MGNREGA has helped stopp distress migration of workers
9. MGNREGA has led to financial inclusion of the workers.

MGNREGA and Employment Generation

MGNREGA has given a big push to employment generation in rural areas. In 2012-13, 4.16 crore households were provided employment and 141 crore person-days of employment was generated during this period. Besides, this programme has also increased the work participation of SC/ST and other marginalized groups. The participation of SC/ST stands at 38% while the participation of women belonging to marginalized group has too undergone a drastic change. It stands at 53%. The work participation of those who belong to the lower strata of the society has brought a change in their socio-economic status. It has helped put an end to social discrimination to a great extent.

MGNREGA has strengthened natural resource base in a big way. In the year 2012-13, out of 70 lakhs works that were undertaken under this programme, 60% was aimed at water conservation, 12% for the provision of irrigation facility on land, 17% for rural connectivity and 8% for land development. This programme has led to the financial inclusion of the labour class also. Around 8.54 crore bank and post office accounts were opened to deposit the wages directly into the respective accounts of the beneficiaries.

Works under MGNREGA

MGNREGA has been able to bring a drastic change in the rural areas and the lives of villagers simply for undertaking pro- rural initiatives. Under this programme, the whole emphasis is put on creating durable and quality assets. Dr. Mihir Shah committee expanded the list of the permissible works under in 2012 with an intent to build up durable and quality assets for sustainable livelihood. The list is exhaustive. It includes

1. Vermi-composting
2. Liquid-bio-manures
3. Polutry Shelter
4. Goat Shelter
5. Construction of Pucca floor, urine tank and fodder trough for cattle
6. Fisheries in seasonal water bodies on public land
7. Fish dying yards
8. School toilet units
9. Anganwadi toilets
10. Solid and liquid waste management
11. Springshed development
12. Dugout farm ponds
13. Contour trenches
14. Contour bunds
15. Boulder checks
16. Construction of Anganwadi centres
17. Construction of playfields

These permissible works under the programme has almost ensured a 100 day employment to the rural folk for their sustainable livelihood. It has also caused a significant increase in monthly per capita consumption expenditure of rural household. This has a directly impacted the health of the rural folk. Since MGNREGA has reduced the gender wage discrimination, it has had a positive impact on the socio-economic status of women. Most of assigned works under MGNREGA are "Green" and "Decent", it has helped protect eco-system and bio-diversity. This programme has also curbed distress migration.

MGNREGA and Gender Equality

There are two key achievements of MGNREGA. First, it has led to the creation of durable assets which in turn has ensured sustainable rural livelihood. Secondly, this programme has brought a significant shift in the socio-economic status of the marginalized unskilled manual workers, particularly women. As more than 33% women have got work under MGNREGA, it has addressed gender inequality in the rural areas to a considerable extent. Recent studies in Odhisa have revealed that the percentage of women labourers has gone up from 33% to 37.39% after the introduction of MGNREGA scheme. Even the United nation agency has appreciated the scheme for reversing inequality. "Such robust social protection and employment programmes... reduce poverty and reverse inequality," the United Nation agency said in its progress report on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), citing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The other reports too support the scheme for its role in ending gender discrimination. India ranks amongst the bottom ten in the world in terms of participation of women in world economy and in corporate sector. Men are paid \$ 3698 and women \$ 1185 for the same work. A huge disparity exists in the corporate world in terms of wages between men and women. One can easily guess the wage differential in the other sectors, especially in unorganized sector where unskilled workers are engaged. However, MGNREGA has ensured equal wages to men and women and has tried to address the issue of wage differentials. The two most important wage employment activities in the rural area have been agriculture and construction.

Table 1 given below depicts wage differentials of men and women. It can be noticed that average wages (outside MGNREGA) of women were low as compared to wages of men in most of the states across India except Bihar (rural and urban), Jammu & Kashmir (rural) and Punjab (urban). In rural areas, women were paid maximum wages in J&K (Rs335.82) followed by Bihar (Rs. 271.76), Himachal Pradesh (Rs.227.78), Kerala(Rs 227.78) and Haryana (Rs202.04). Minimum wages in rural areas were given to women in Andhra Pradesh (Rs93.84), Assam (Rs 95.00) and West Bengal (Rs927.29). In brief, average wages for women in urban areas were Rs 308.79. The corresponding figures for men in urban areas are Rs377.16. Figures, thus clearly reveal that women workers in rural areas got half the amount (Rs155.87) as wages of what their counterparts got in the urban areas (Rs 308.79).

Table 1
Average Wage/Salary Earnings Per Day (2009-10)

State	Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Andhra Pradesh	198.31	93.84	341.63	248.05
Assam	248.31	95.00	391.19	380.92
Bihar	252.59	271.76	338.31	500.75
Gujarat	187.02	178.08	306.58	221.35
Haryana	299.11	202.04	316.91	330.10
Himachal Pradesh	360.08	227.78	487.56	435.70
J & K	328.11	335.82	379.61	321.86
Karnataka	195.08	112.60	414.95	293.37
Kerala	290.79	213.29	450.76	320.61
Madhya Pradesh	154.03	138.15	325.15	230.33
Maharashtra	293.76	164.51	439.30	391.71
Orissa	293.87	151.72	358.89	238.48
Punjab	263.01	136.72	342.35	374.49
Rajasthan	261.55	112.99	347.42	317.85
Tamil Nadu	256.49	166.47	319.60	277.23
Uttar Pradesh	235.60	148.11	360.29	285.54
West Bangal	180.21	97.29	391.77	277.08
All India	249.15	155.87	377.16	308.79

Source: NSSO 66th Round (July 2009- June 2010)

Wage discrimination has declined after the implementation of MGNREGA. Secondly, increase in employment opportunity under MGNREGA for women has helped address the issue of gender differentials and variability.

Table 2
Wage Employment under MGNREGA

	FY 2014-15	FY 2013-14	FY 2012-13	FY 2011-12
Total Number of Districts	645	644	636	635
Total Number of Villages	778134	778134	778134	778133
Total Number of Blocks	6601	6576	6568	6378

Source: www.nrega.nic.in.

Table 3
Participation of Men and Women in MGNREGA

Percentage of Men/ Women under MGNREGA	2014-15	2013-14	2012-13
Men	48.66	52.06	52.93
Women	51.34	47.94	47.07

Source: www.nrega.nic.in

Table 2 shows that the total number of district, village and blocks under MGNREGA scheme has increased. This has directly increased the job opportunities for women.

Table 3 shows that the participation of women in MGNREGA has increased to 51.34% in financial year 2014-15 from 47.07% in financial year 2012-13. The data also clearly shows that MGNREGA has provided more employment to women instead of men. This has helped address the problem of gender inequality and economic backwardness of women.

MGNREGA has worked very well in Punjab. The participation of women under MGNREGA was around 60 percent, and the percentage of women person days under MGNREGA was 53% in Punjab. This has helped women gain a strong foothold and achieve gender parity. The participation of women under the scheme in Haryana is 41.7%. A comparative analysis further reveals that the highest percentage of women employed under MGNREGA in Punjab stands at 71% whereas it is just 23% in Haryana.

This clearly shows that the scheme works well in Punjab but a lot needs to be done in the state of Haryana to make it more women friendly to bring about gender equality.

MGNREGA and Technology

MGNREGA – the largest make work programme has achieved tremendous success due to effective monitoring of the implementation of the scheme. Technology has aided immensely in the of spread awareness about the scheme. It has helped mitigate unnecessary delay in payment of wages to workers. Through e-FMS (electronic fund management system), wages are directly credited into the respective Banks/P.O accounts. With the objective of introducing transparency and to tackle rampant corruption, e-MMS (electronic muster management) system has been introduced to capture worksite attendance of the workers through mobile based applications. The programme has proved to be a great success in the state of Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Aadhar cards are too being used to transfer payments directly into the Banks/P.O accounts of beneficiaries. In the financial year 2015-

16, Rs 25,000 crore has been given to the beneficiaries under this scheme via DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer).

Research Methodology used

Analytical and comparative study methods are used to explore the role of MGNREGA in providing employment to rural households and also in bringing about gender equality.

Findings

1. MGNREGA is a right based programme
2. MGNREGA is a self- targeting programme
3. MGNREGA has led to the creation of durable and quality assets
4. MGNREGA has helped achieve women emancipation in the rural areas, though in small measures

Conclusion

It can be logically concluded that MGNREGA has brought a great transformation in the socio-economic status of the rural households by ensuring at least a 100 day work to a rural workers who volunteer to work. MGNREGA has reduced ended gender discrimination also. This programme has strengthened democracy at grass root level besides building up a corpus of durable and quality assets in rural India.

References

1. The Economic World, Volume.2, No.1, June 2015
2. Shah, Mihir (2007) Employment Guarantee, Civil society and Indian democracies, Economic and Political weekly, 17th November
3. NSSO 66th Round (July 09-June 2010). CSO, Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, GoI
4. www.Nrega.Nic.In 2013-14
5. The Hindustan Times, May 11, 2016
6. Rural.nic.in ; GoI Annual Report, Chapter -2; FY 2012-13
7. Rebecca, Holmes; Nidhi, Sadana and Saswatee, Rath. (2011). An opportunity for change? Gender Analysis of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Project Briefing No.53