

MGNREGA: Much More Than Just Employment Guarantee

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Abstract: *The world's largest employment guarantee programme Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which is one of the flagship programme of UPA-I and can be seen as an alternative livelihood opportunity and social security for rural poor households. The massive win of newly elected government in the general election of 2014 and with the series of negative comments for MGNREGA from the leaders of ruling party the future of the programme is considered to be under threat. This paper seeks to counter such negative comments with the numerous studies based on primary and secondary data from various states of India. The paper tries to show the success of the programme in addressing various social, political and economic core issues like unemployment, women empowerment, migration, labour market.*

Key Words: MGNREGA, Employment Generation, Assets Creation, Women Empowerment, Migration.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) later MGNREGA one of the flagship scheme of UPA-I was enacted by the parliament of India in 2005. In the first phase (2005-06) it was started in 200 most 'backward' districts of India. Another 130 districts were added in the second phase (2007-08) of the implementation of the programme by 2008-09 the programme was implemented in all districts of India. The largest employment guarantee programme, which has been seen as an alternative of agriculture to provide employment to the mass level to the rural population or the backbone of rural economy. The most popular flagship programme of UPA-I government has been seen under threat since the newly elected government came into power in general election of 2014. In the last three years of NDA rule there were series of statements made by the leaders of ruling party show their approach towards the employment guarantee programme. The delay in the wage payments and the latest government decision not to raise the daily wage are some major events which gave the reasons to understand the performance of the programme through numerous available studies from different parts of the country.

2. Genesis of MGNREGA:

The rising unemployment during 1920's forced western capitalist countries to introduce various unemployment insurances. The constitutions of 30 countries including 18 developing countries had incorporated the right to work and in 25 countries this right is specified as work guarantee. Indian Constitution has also mentioned about the right to work through Article 41 under the directive principles but it was not included under fundamental rights (Shah, 2004). The priority of policy framers in the early years of planning was to set up industries in urban areas to generate employment which was shifted to the agriculture after the massive droughts of 1960s results the Green Revolution which increased the agriculture production significantly in next Two decades. The impacts of Green Revolution could not be realized uniformly across the country, the dry lands, tribal and hilly areas were hardly influenced by the Green Revolution. The concentration of poverty has increased in certain areas and economic growth were increasing income disparity. The labour intensive programme with public investment provided the wage employment through investment in rain water harvesting and soil conservation. The improved water resources aimed at improving agriculture production, which could reduce dependency on the state sponsored wage employment programme. The investment in employment guarantee programme would be productive, boosting the growth rate of the economy. There was a need of employment guarantee programme which would be sustainable both in environmental and economic terms (Shah, 2004).

During the post liberalisation period, the unemployment and poverty were rising sharply. The only state in the country which has reduced poverty depth very substantially during the economic reforms period despite overall poverty rising a bit, is Maharashtra This reduction in poverty depth is undoubtedly the positive result of Maharashtra's long-standing employment guarantee scheme and is a good augury for the current National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 provided it is properly implemented. The significant impact of the employment guarantee programme was the genesis of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005.

3. EMPLOYMENT GENERATION:

The NREGA was launched to ensure 100 days of employment to the adult member of rural households. After one decade of the implementation of the programme it is necessary to know at what extent the programme is

successful in achieving its goal in terms of providing employment to the rural poor households. In the study based on secondary data 19 districts of West Bengal 85 percent of rural households were enrolled under the programme and 47 percent of the rural households participated in the programme. There are no special provisions for the SCs and STs Households even then more than 50 percent of total participants are from SC and ST households (Dey, 2016). The study of 2011 based on the available secondary data of three states Karnataka, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh suggests that out of total number of households registered under the programme 45.6 percent, 54.7 percent and 47.7 percent of households demanded the work in Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Andhra Pradesh respectively. Out of these the employment was offered at 92.2, 97.3 and 97.7 percent and at an average number of person days 49, 47 and 49 respectively in Karnataka, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh (Murthy and Indumati, 2011). Another study conducted in 12 blocks of six Maoist's affected districts of Chhattisgarh (Bastar and Dhamtari), Jharkhand (Khunti and Gumla) and Orissa (Malkangiri and Dhenkanal). The findings of the study show that the in each household average person days generated are from 39 to 55 days in four blocks of Bastar and Dhamtari of Chhattisgarh, 1-25 days in Jharkhand and 0-20 days in Orissa. The net household income in Chhattisgarh increased in the range of 16-23 percent in 2008-09 compared to 2005-06 period. This increase was in the range of 60-70 percent and 30-40 percent in Jharkhand and Orissa respectively (Banerjee & Saha, 2010).

4. ASSETS CREATION:

The nature of works included under the programme like water conservation, water harvesting, drought proofing, plantation, flood control, land development, micro irrigation work, renovation of traditional water bodies, rural connectivity is to ensure ecological balance which boosts the rural economy by increasing agriculture production and conservation of the environment. Several studies have been conducted in different parts of the country evaluating the efficiency of the assets created under the programme. Creation of productive assets has numerous impact on the rural economy, it will generate more livelihood which create new opportunity of labour market and these assets can also be seen as social protection (Hirway et al. 2006). Study conducted in 396 villages of 12 blocks of three districts Dhar, Jhabua and Rajgarh in Madhya Pradesh suggest that water conservation works under MGNREGA in individual lands or common lands both have a positive contribution to agriculture production. The assets created on common lands are not in good condition due to poor maintenance compared to the assets on private lands. The water conservation works helped in improving the ground water levels which improved the irrigation facility which further changes the cropping patterns (Mishra, 2011).

Another study was conducted in 2012-13 in total 41 villages of total six blocks in four district Medak (Andhra Pradesh), Chitradurga (Karnataka), Dhar(Madhya Pradesh) and Bhilwara (Rajasthan) of four states also suggests that there is an improvement in ground water level due to assets created under MGNREGA, which increased the irrigated land from the bore wells. The sharp increase was also observed in the lands irrigated by the surface water. The cropping pattern changed due to improved availability of water. Plantation works had significant impact in reducing soil erosion. Land development works have improved the soil fertility and agriculture production (Esteves et al., 2013). Sikkim, Mizoram, Karnataka spent most of their expenditure on drought proofing work. These works had a significant impact on improving water resources for the irrigation and it increases the size of irrigated area, which increases the agriculture production and income. Afforestation work increases the size of forest area which turns to increase the forest resources for the livelihood and income of rural poor households. (Haque, 2011).

5. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

Even after sharing half of the population across the world issues of women have always been given less priorities. The provisions of the programme like one-third reservation for women, employment provided within the 5 km of radius, equal wages for men and women and crèches for child caring played very important role in the unexpected participation of women in the programme. These provisions made MGNREGA, a gender sensitive programme. The livelihood opportunity within the village or panchayat opened new doors for the women to exercise their economic power in decision-making at household and community level.

Since its implementation, women of Andhra Pradesh have outperformed the men participation with 53.39 percent. Women have not only outperformed men in the participation, but in terms of total share of wage payment as well with 58 percent of total wage payment in the beginning three years of the implementation of the programme (Pellissery & Jalan, 2011). The study conducted in six northern states Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in 2008, shows that there is significant improvement in the women life after the implementation of MGNREGA. Women are getting equal wages under the scheme. They have ability to avoid vulnerable work with better employment opportunity under the programme (Khera et al, 2009). The official data of MGNREGA suggest that there is an increase in women participation over the period in the programme at national level. The country-wide women participation in the programme increases from 40.65 per cent in 2006-07 to 51.75 per cent in 2010 (till 2 December 2010). However, the performances of states in ensuring one-third women participation in the programme were not even. There are states like Andhra Pradesh (57 per cent), Himachal Pradesh (55.2 per cent), Kerala(90.1 per

cent), Rajasthan (68.5 per cent), and Tamil Nadu (76.7 per cent) which are successful in ensuring the minimum provision of one third women participation on the contrary there are states like Assam(23.2 per cent), Bihar(29.8 per cent), Jammu and Kashmir(10.8 per cent), Jharkhand (32.4 per cent), Lakshadweep (27.6 per cent) and West Bengal (31.2 per cent) could not able to ensure the minimum target as per the provision of the programme (Haque, 2011). Another study was conducted in three blocks of each four districts Dungarpur (Rajasthan), Gaya (Bihar), Kangra (Himachal Pradesh) and Ranchi (Jharkhand). The study tried to find out the effect of MGNREGA in women empowerment at household level and at the community level. The findings of the study suggests that the share of women employment to the total person days of household is 77.19 per cent. The shares of women's income from MGNREGA in total household's income are 78.79 percent (Dungarpur), 61.47 per cent (Gaya), 82.12 per cent (Kangra) and 67.38 per cent (Ranchi). The increasing contribution of women's income to the total household income has a significant impact on decision-making at household's level. The findings of retention of MGNREGA earnings by women workers show that at an average of four districts 70.6 per cent women retain their earnings and spend on healthcare, food, savings and ceremonial purposes. This shows that the MGNREGA has changed the power relation between male and female at intra-household level. It has significant contribution in women empowerment at the community level as well. The women participation in the gram sabha has increased after the implementation of the programme. 73.2 per cent of women raised their voices in the gram sabha and 46.5 per cent of women interacted with government officials. Before MGNREGA only 16 per cent of women's households have bank or post office account which has increased to 73 per cent in post-MGNREGA period (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010).

6. MIGRATION:

According to the 2001 census, the migration was massive in India with more than 30 percent of the total population by place of their birth. Short term migration was estimated to be around 100 million which involves rural out migration (Deshinker & Akter, 2009). Impoverishment, agrarian crisis and economic inequality work as push factor for the rural out migration (Ghosh & Chandrasekhar, 2007). Rain fed agriculture is the main source of income to the rural household and rural economy in India. It produces seasonal unemployment during the slack season of agriculture. Unavailability of work during slack season of agriculture and extreme poverty force the poor to migrate or in the debt and when they are unable to pay the debt they are exploited by the lenders as bondage labours. This kind of labour market is an important character of labour force in rural economy. Most of them who work as bondage labour belong to lower caste of the society who share majority of poor population. Study from Karnataka, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh suggests that the employment provided under the MGNREGA is at highest during the lean season of agriculture. The percent of employment provided in three states Karnataka, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh during *Khari Season* (June- Sep) are 9.1, 37.6 and 34.5, during *Rabi Season* (Oct-Jan) 28.8, 14.1 and 0.0 and during *Summer Season* (Feb-May) it was 62.1, 48.3 and 65.5 percent respectively. This shows that MGNREGA, is effective in providing employment when there is high demand of employment in the lean season of the agriculture which has impact on reducing rural migration (Murthy and Indumati, 2011). Similar study from Villupuram district of Tamilnadu suggests that with the implementation of MGNREGA poor households have alternative employment opportunity and it has positive impact in reducing bondage labour and migration (Marios, 2009). The effective implementation of the programme and creation of good quality of assets have the potential to reduce the rural out migration (Das, 2014).

7. CONCLUSION:

More than one decade of the implementation of MGNREGA, it cannot be seen as just an employment guarantee programme scheme and its achievement cannot be measured just to analyse the figures of total number of person days generated or the number of persons participated in the programme. However it can be seen, as one of the most successful flagship programme of India ever had since its independence. Its success or failure cannot be measured just guaranteeing the employment to the rural poor households rather it is very much successful in addressing various core issues of rural economy like labour market, equal wages, women empowerment, creation of assets for agriculture production, migration, water conservation. Addressing these core issues, MGNREGA is successful in creating alternative livelihood opportunities at village level which is capable to challenge the existing exploitative labour market of rural India. The gender sensitive provision of the programme is also successful in providing equal and safe employment opportunity to women. Creation of durable assets under the programme also has significant contribution in improving level ground water and surface water which increases the agriculture production and household's income. MGNREGA is also successful in tapping the seasonal rural out migration.

Analysing numerous studies based on primary and secondary data it can be concluded that MGNREGA is successful in achieving the objectives as well as addressing very core social political and economic issues of rural India. The programme can be seen as comprehensive programme and effective implementation of the programme can make it an alternative of agriculture for the rural economy. Observing the success of the programme, the leaders of the

ruling party should avoid negative comments and should focus on increasing wages, early payments, increasing the number of days from 100 days to 200 days.

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