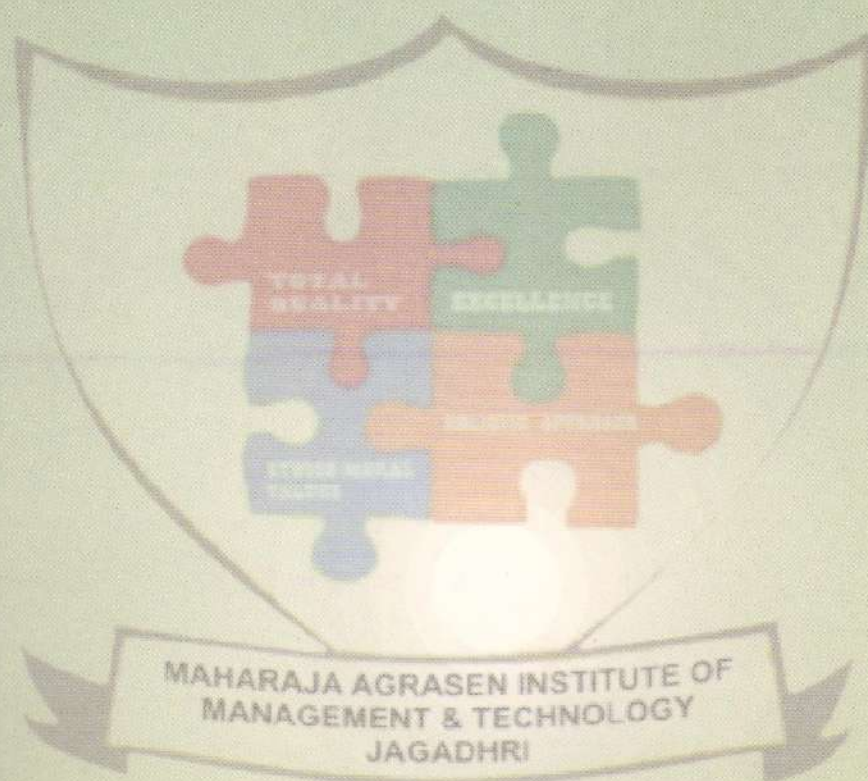


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**Women Participation in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural
Employment Guarantee Act: Issues and Challenges
in Bundelkhand Region of Central India**

Dr. Bijendr Pradhan * Dr.Amit Singh Rathore **

Abstract

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), renamed in October 2009 as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was a response by the then UPA government to the distress in rural India. It ensures the livelihood security of the poor households in the rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment, to the adult members who are willing to do unskilled manual labour, in every financial year. Independent India's serious efforts to alleviate poverty began with the famous slogan 'Gharibi Hatao' of the 1970's. It was soon followed by a flood of wage employment programme to eradicate poverty; like National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), Rural Landless Employment Programme (RLEGP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) and Jawhar Gram Samrithi Yojana (JGSY). But the huge backlog of rural unemployed poor stands testimony to the limited success of these wage employment programmes. The MGNREGA wage is critical in this aspect. Using data from official sites and filed data, the paper finds: (a) that women's participation in the NREGA has been increasing; (b) women's participation in the programme is positively correlated with women's participation in rural areas, though women's participation in MGNREGA is often higher than women's participation in other forms of recorded work so far; and (c) women's participation is negatively correlated with the existing gender wage gap in unskilled agricultural labour. The paper is based on primary data and secondary data. The paper presents a brief discussion of the women participation in MGNREGA. It also deals with a brief discussion of the unique features of MGNREGA as a wage employment programme and attempt to evaluate the performance of MGNREGA as a wage employment programme and to analyze the impact of MGNREGA on rural women.

Key Word: MGNREGA, Women Employment, Gender.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender is the inevitable push factor for growth and development of a nation like India. In India women constitute a major share of chronically poor population. They are facing vulnerabilities of life. Gender discrimination has been seen in terms of education, employment, control over property and resources, involvement in decision making process in public, political and household spheres etc. The Government has framed different programmes/schemes to uplift the women from poverty and vulnerability of life. One such women friendly program is National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) which was enacted in 2005. Subsequently, this programme was named after Mahatma Gandhi and now it is known as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). This programme has right-based framework. In other words it is demand driven. It is a paradigm shift from all other wage employment programmes which were supply led.

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was passed on 25th August 2005, and renamed Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2009 with the objectives: provide work at remunerative wages of landless labourers and marginal farmers; and create assets for raising agricultural productivity. The act became effective at the state level in February 2006 in 200 districts, guaranteeing employment up to 100 days a year to poor rural households on demand. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005 is landmark legislation in Indian history of social security legislation after independence. The essential feature of this legislation which separates it from any other public service provisioning scheme is its enactment through the Parliament of India. Read with the Right to Information Act, this legislation is seen to bring about a revolution in rural India.

In brief, this Act provides for 100 days of employment for all households in rural areas in manual work, if demanded. Along with various transparency and accountability measures and provisions for social audits, this Act, for the first time, defines the role of the state as a guarantor of minimum livelihood to the poor and the demand for work by the poor as critical to their participation in seeking employment. It underlines the role of the State in facilitating the right to employment to its masses.

The real challenge as well as the strength of the Act comes from it being given the legitimacy as well as authority from the Indian Parliament, which puts the onus of its implementation in the hands of the recipient as well as that of the implementing authorities. By design, it is different from any employment generation scheme previously implemented. The recipients have a greater role, at least by design, not only in demanding the employment but also in deciding on how the Act will be implemented. Such a situation poses unique challenges in implementation as the Government machinery has to design and deliver timely services that are demanded (employment options and jobs) rather than dole out grants to individual recipients. And, for the first

time, it provides for mechanisms for penalising the government if it fails to provide employment on time. Moreover, the employment options are expected to be such that they contribute to the creation of durable natural resource assets in rural areas supporting long term sustainable livelihoods for the communities. Finally, the Act envisages strengthening of the village governance system in the process.

Starting from 200 districts in 2006, the coverage of NREGS was increased to 330 districts in 2007. It moved into its third phase with coverage extending to all rural districts of India from April 1, 2008. Now in its third year, the analysis of the scheme has indicated its tremendous potential for alleviating absolute poverty. The Government of India has expressed its intent to develop and test new models for convergence of this land-mark scheme with ongoing development planning and social welfare schemes so that assets created through the NREGS are durable and provide long term livelihood benefits to the community and open up the full potential of the Scheme. MGNREGA is conceived as a holistic approach to make the growth more inclusive.

The Act requires every State to formulate a State Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (REGS), which should conform to the minimum features specified under the Act. According to the Act, rural households have a right to register themselves with the local Gram Panchayats (GPs), and seek employment. Work is to be provided within 15 days from the date of demand, failing which the State Government will have to pay unemployment allowance at the stipulated rates.

Women empowerment can be considered as a dynamic process which enhances women's abilities to change the structures and ideologies that keep them subordinate. It is a process of challenging existing power relations and gaining greater control over the sources of power. Today nobody consider women as second to men. There are plenty of evidence that when women get opportunities, that are typically the preserve of men, they are no less successful in making use of these facilities that men have claimed to be their own over the centuries. There are plenty of evidence that whenever social arrangements depart from the standard practice of male ownership, women can seize business and initiative with much success. It is also clear that, the result of women's participation is not merely to generate income, for women, but also to provide the social benefits that come from women's enhanced status and independence. The economic participation of women is thus both the reward in its own (with associated reduction of gender bias in the treatment or women in family decisions) and a major influence on social change in general. The first U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. It emphasized the need for ensuring freedom and equality for women in civil, cultural economic, political and social areas of activity. The 1993 Vienna conference on Human Rights, 1994 Cairo Conference on population and Development and the 1995 Beijing Women's World Conference also highlighted the need for the promotion of women empowerment programmes all over the world.

All the women empowerment programmes consider the attainment of the following targets as their ultimate goals; distribution of power and influence, Financial independence and equal opportunities to develop personal ambitions. The gender inequality in terms of opportunities has been evaluated by UNDP (2005) by considering the degree of participation and decision making power for women in the following spheres of human activities;

- a) Political participation and decision making power as measured by women's and men's percentage shares of Parliamentary seats.
- b) Economic participation and decision making power as measured by two indicators - women's and men's percentage shares of positions as legislators, senior officials , and managers and women's and men's percentage shares of professional and technical positions.
- c) Power over economic resources as measured by women's and men's estimated income.

Some provision under MGNREGA for women empowerment

- 'While providing employment, priority will be given to women in such a way that at least one third of the beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested for work under the scheme'.
- 'In case of every employment under the scheme, there shall be no discrimination solely on the ground of gender and the provisions of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 (25 of 1976).
- 'In case the number of children below the age of six years accompanying the women working at any site are five or more provisions shall be made to depute one of such women working to look after the children'.
- 'Not less than one third of the total number of non- official members of the central council shall be women'.
- 'The average out-turn of work put by men and women workers working in a group will be the basis for fixing task based schedule of rates so there is no gender based discrimination in the schedule of rates'.

Some provisions like work within a radius of five kilometres from the house, absence of supervisor and contractor, flexibility in choosing periods and months of employment etc. were not solely made for women but some way these are helpful for rural women. Hence equal wages both for men and women, facility for child care, participation in management, monitoring and social audit of the programme, preference in case of single women etc make this act gender sensitive.

Methodology

To the significance of the study for policy issues, the Probability Sampling has been adopted in designing of study methodology. The study sample is splitting up in two districts of Bundelkhand (Each from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in Bundelkhand region). Total 4 villages taken from selected districts were covered under the study. The two sample village were taken from each sample districts.

Women's Participation under MGNREGA

There are various factors which encourage the women worker's participation under this scheme include nature of work, which do not need skilled worker, the limited hours of work, availability of work locally, reduction of migration of male member, substantial jump in the wage rate etc. Participation of women varies widely across the nation. Women participation under MGNREGA is measured in person days. At the national level participation of women has increased significantly from 46.41 percent in 2010-11 to 48.81 percent in 2011-12. The participation rate of women in Bundelkhand region is mentioned in the following.

Selected Village of Bundelkhand Region	Women's Participation Rate (%)		
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
Selected Village (Jhansi)	36.31	40.54	42.31
Selected Village (Tikamghar)	31.12	37.32	40.11
INDIA	46.41	48.81	52.44

Source: Field data & www.nrega.nic.in

Women participation in district of Bundelkhand region

From the above data it has come to light that none of the district could able to cross the national level participation of women in 2010-11 (46.41percent) and 2011-12 (48.81 percent).

Reach of MGNREGA

MNREGS guarantees 100 days of work to each household applying and demanding for work. However, due to a lack of awareness, people do not demand work and therefore get work as and when the works are implemented by the Panchayats. It is estimated that 23.14% households have demanded work. Of those who have demanded work, 53.43% households have got work within 15 days. Overall estimated 82.31% households of Job cards holder have been provided work under MNREGS. Despite its efforts to provide job cards to all rural households, it is estimated that 25% households still do not have job cards. Preparation of job cards is not an ongoing activity. In absence of job-cards, these left-out community members

are not able to demand for jobs. The aspect of guarantee for work against demand is still missing in the scheme.

Against a guaranteed 100 days of work, the average households are getting only 42.1 days of work in a year. 75% women of households of the estimated households have got less than 30 days of work under MNREGS. If we look at the number of households which have got 100 days of work, it is seen that only an estimated 1.74% have got 100 days of work in a year. However, among landless and BPL households have got work for 10 to 30.

Impact of MGNREGA on Women

MGNREGA plays a significant role to meet the practical as well as strategic needs of women's participation. The impact of MGNREGA on women's participation can be understood through the following points:

Effect of Income:

Effects of income mean an increase in income of women workers and as a result, their ability to choose their consumption. MGNREGA more emphasis is given to consumption because it is the main factor for judging income-consumption effects. If a woman earns but unable to spend for her own needs or surrender her income to the head of the household then the element of empowerment does not come. MGNREGA empowers women by giving them a scope of independent earning and spend some amount for their own needs. It is estimated that only 21.04% women who have participated in MGNREGA, take decision her conception of own income.

Decision Making Enhancement Effects

Women play a major role in raising the economic resources for their family but their contribution remains uncounted because of they perform a significant amount of unpaid work. In rural areas, the dominance of males in household decisions has been seen. MGNREGA has significant impact in converting some unpaid work into paid work and widen the scope of decision making role of women in household matters. As the wages are paid through bank/post office the intra-household status of women increases and she can control cash resources because withdrawn can be made only as per her own decision. It is very interesting found that only 2.19% women play major role in household decision.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Non-Availability Facilities at work site for women

One of the major challenges of the act is non-availability of facilities at the work site for women and child care. It is show that 70.21% women remained worried about their children while

they are working at MGNREGA worksite even some women do not accept the job facilities of MGNREGA because of non-availability of proper child care facilities.

Awareness Level

It is very big issue for women participation in MGNREGA because low level of awareness about the process and entitlements of the Act. It is found that the level of awareness among people is 29.23% on the facility like their entitlement for drinking water, health care and child care at work place. This is followed by the awareness on the provision of 100 days of guaranteed employment in the scheme (87.65%) and minimum wage rate (81.35%). It is interesting to note that despite a basic knowledge among respondents about their entitlement for 100 days of work, a very little information is found in relation to their awareness on the right to demand the work (09.87%).

Delay in Payments

Delay in payments is also responsible for poor participation of women particularly in case of single women if they are the main earners in the family. It is estimated that only 41.56% women who have participated in MGNREGA, receive payment on time.

Administrative and planning skills in local bodies

Under MGNREGA, villages are the basic unit of planning. Panchayats (the village local bodies) are required to prepare project estimates that involve extensive mapping of village resources and making an annual plan every year to identify works that can be taken up for local resource improvement. However with limited skill in planning, resource management, handling of monetary resources and poor leadership skills, village Panchayats fail to implement the scheme in the desired manner.

CONCLUSION

Empowerment of rural women has emerged as an unintended consequence of MGNREGS. Women have benefited more as workers than as a community. MGNREGA has positive impact on gender and gender empowerment. Women have benefited both as individual and community. Women as individuals have gained because of their ability to earn independently, made possible due to the paid employment opportunity under MGNREGS, spend some money for their own needs, contribute in family expenditure etc. This has helped women in registering their tangible contribution to the household's income. But the poor implementation across the nation such as lack of child care facility, worksite facility accrued the gender sensitiveness of this act. Certain initiatives and changes should be taken to remove these barriers. The valuable gains should not be derailed for poor implementation.

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