



Rural women in India: The invisible lifeline of rural community

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Abstract

This paper deals with the general condition of the rural Indian women and the impact of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) on the overall empowerment of the rural women. MGNREGS is for the rural people, including rural women, who are unskilled or semi-skilled. Several provisions, like availability of drinking water, shade, first-aid, crèche at the working site have made this scheme unique. Crèches are helping the rural mothers as they do not have to depend on others at home to take care of the children. Usually, the elder daughter takes on the responsibility of the younger siblings at home when the mother is away for work. This facility has relieved the elder daughters from this duty and they can attend school. This flagship programme of the Government of India has been criticized from several quarters. However, some positive intentions of the ground-level officials and the awareness of the beneficiaries can really bring in a revolution in the lives of Indian rural women.

Keywords: rural women, community, employment, MGNREGS

Introduction

India is a country which attained independence in 1947, but the rural-urban divide and the rich-poor divide are still plaguing India. 68.84 per cent of the Indian population lives in villages. There are 6, 40,867 villages in India. According to 2011 census, the populations of rural women who are literate are 58.8 per cent. (Census, 2011) According to the “2007 Revision of World Urbanisation Prospects” by the United Nations, India would continue to have the largest rural population in the world until 2050. (Hindustan Times, 28.2.2008) There are several issues which are creating difficulties in the lives of Indians, like rising crimes against women, increasing poverty, corruption, nepotism, lack of transparency in the official functioning,

Bureaucratic hassles, criminalization of politics, criminal-politician-bureaucratic entente etc. However, the common Indian citizen is striving to get two ends meet.

Life of Indian women

India is a country of contradictions. On the one hand, women are worshipped as deities, without whose blessings, work cannot be initiated. On the other hand, crimes against women and girls are increasing day by day in India. It is sad that in many cases, the perpetrators are known to the victims. The perpetrators could be among relatives, neighbors, friends etc. This increasing mistrust can create havoc in the Indian societal pattern. The patriarchal norms are so entrenched in the Indian society that it is very difficult to pull oneself out of this conundrum. When girls are born in most Indian families, they are not welcome, at times, even by their mothers. They lament that a son could have been a real asset for the family. Upbringing of girls is an expensive affair, where there is only loss as the girl gets married off and will serve the grooms' family throughout her life. In India, the life of a woman

changes a lot after marriage. She leaves her parents' house after marriage and starts living with the groom's family. Since childhood, she is socialized into thinking that she has to take up the food habits, dress, rituals etc of the new family. So, happily or grudgingly, she evolves her identity according to the demands of the groom's family and the groom.

Rural women in India are less literate than rural men. There is a negative attitude of the family towards educating the girl child. Moreover, lack of separate toilets for girls in schools, lack of security while travelling from home to school, lack of female teachers in schools, elder sister's responsibility to look after the younger siblings when both the parents have to work to meet both ends, are some of the reasons behind the high drop-out rate of girls from schools. Primary education is free, but parents are not interested to send them to school. Right to Education has been passed by the Parliament, but it is still far when the right will be a reality. Mid day meal scheme has been formulated in order to attract the small children to school. However, this scheme received set-backs when many school children died after consuming food from the school kitchen.

A paradigm shift

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has given rise to the largest employment programme in human history and is unlike any other in its scale, architecture and thrust. Its bottom-up, people-centred, demand-driven, self-selecting, rights-based design is new and unprecedented. It provides a legal guarantee of wage employment, which is a demand-driven programme where provision of work is triggered by the demand for work by wage-seekers. There are legal provisions for allowances and compensation both in cases of failure to provide work on demand and delays in payment of work undertaken. Self-targeting mechanism of

beneficiary selection overcomes the problems of targeting. There is also a concomitant disincentive for failing to provide work on time, as the States then bear the cost of the unemployment allowance. Gram Panchayats implement at least 50 per cent of the works this order of devolution of financial resources to Gram Panchayats is unprecedented in Indian history. Plans and decisions regarding the nature and choice of works to be undertaken, the order in which each work is to be triggered, site selection etc are all to be made in open assemblies of the Gram Sabha and ratified by the Gram Panchayat. The Gram Sabha may accept, amend or reject them. These decisions cannot be overturned by higher authorities, except to the extent of ensuring conformity with the provisions of the Act and its Operational Guidelines. A great share of the responsibility for the success of the MGNREGA lies with wage-seekers, Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats. It is a break from the relief programmes of the past towards an integrated natural resource management and livelihoods generation perspective. Social audit is an integral part of MGNREGA, which creates unprecedented accountability of performance. An Annual Report on the outcomes of MGNREGA is presented annually by the Central Government to Parliament and to State Legislatures by the State Governments, facilitating oversight by elected representatives.

MGNREGA has been a large and ambitious social security and public works programme in the world. The Prime Minister has pointed out that nearly 5.50 crore families or nearly one in four rural households were provided over 250 crore person-days of work under this flagship programme. The safety net provided by the scheme has helped rural India cope with the frequent distress and natural disasters. The combined effect of expanded agricultural production, demand for labour from the construction sector and the effect of MGNREGA has led to tightening of the market for agricultural labour and a steady rise in real wages, which has helped the landless improve their standard of living. A very positive outcome of this Act is the issue of gender parity. Studies have showed that a silent revolution is taking place among rural women due to MGNREGA. Wage disparities are being reduced and women are being visible in the public sphere to take up work and interact with banks, post offices and government officials. This has done wonders for boosting their self-confidence and improving their empowerment level, including their say in financial matters of the household. (Shillong Times, 15.7.12) MGNREGS, was always conceived as a 'green' scheme'. It is supportive of regeneration of the rural natural resource base through the creation of employment opportunities related to water conservation, flood control, drought proofing, irrigation and afforestation should be encouraged. (www.ruraldiksha.nic.in)

Some recommendations for empowering the rural community

The MGNREGS projects should be planned as to utilize the period of off-season for agricultural labourers. Such a planning will provide off-season employment to labourers. The MGNREGS projects should be made time-bound. Many workers think that it is a means to earn easy money as it is a government scheme and the functionaries aim is to spend

money. It is thought to be a dole. This mentality needs to be amended for making the scheme effective. Whenever, attempts are made to ensure proper measurement of the work done, there is resentment among the workers. (Thadathil and Mohandas, 2012) ^[3].

It is absolutely essential for the success of the NREGA that the local community be involved in the planning and implementation of the works. The local community must make it a part of the village long term development plan. The number of Gram Sabha meetings is very few. Again a dismal record is indicative of problems within the community. There is a heavy presence of the administrative bureaucracy in planning and implementation of the works.

Under the current implementation regime, maintenance is not covered. While assets are created in large number, the Panchayats are being told to maintain it. The problem is that Panchayats do not have the money to undertake such large-scale maintenance works. Our studies pointed out that due to this most of the assets are going to be put into disuse. Another very important point is that there should be a binding work completion plan for each asset created. MGNREGS can be made effective, if the community assert their rights. The rural women can play an active role in this. This is possible only through an effective means of awareness and mobilization process. The level of awareness is very low among some wage seekers, particularly regarding unemployment allowance, wages to be paid if work is provided beyond five kilometers, social audit and grievance redressal mechanisms etc. Appropriate media and agency for awareness generation should be identified and utilized.

Traditional and modern media should be utilized for awareness building among the workers. The awareness building methods should be carved so that it is well understood by the wage workers. Most of them are illiterate or have studied up to primary schools only. So, the awareness messages should be in the form of short films, animation slides, posters, etc.

Traditional media such as folk songs, puppet show etc should be properly utilized to get the message across to the community. The views of the Ministry of Rural Development, state governments, non-governmental organizations and others have already started working on this aspect. The views of the National Institute of Rural Development, State Institute of Rural Developments and professionals should be well analyzed to generate good quality material with acceptable standards.

It is difficult as most of the participants stated that the government officials cannot reach the large mass of the rural people given their workload, logistic problems and attitude. So, the non-governmental organizations can be roped in to perform this function in a cost effective way.

The planning has to be done, keeping in view the terrain, rainfall, social conditions, local presences etc. Some of the facilities include core banking operations, weekly and monthly reconciliation of accounts, adoption of two cycle approach in Muster Roll operation, Mobile Monitoring System (MMS) for capturing attendance at worksite and location of the worksite, wage payments through mobile vans etc. Incentives to staff to motivate the staff can make the scheme successful. Plugging corruption is a sure way of

making the scheme really effective. (Rao, Kanth, Dheeraja, 2012) [5].

Several research studies on MGNREGA have stated that this has opened doors for supplementary source of income and this income is being used by rural households for starting their own ventures. Rural community, including the rural women are benefitting from this scheme. It has brought in a significant increase in monthly per capita consumption expenditure of rural households. There is high participation from marginalized groups including the Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes. In the case of both the groups, the participation rate exceeds their share in the total population. It has reduced the traditional gender wage discrimination, particularly, in the public works sector and has had a positive impact on the socio-economic status of the women. This is a real contribution as both men and women are having equal right to work and payment. The scheme has made a more direct and positive impact on reducing distress migration as compared to migration taken-up for economic growth and other reasons. Distress migration from the rural areas creates a lot of social problems, which are being warded off by MGNREGS. (www.nird.org.in) Rural women have indigenous knowledge, which can be properly utilized by the State. Conservation of bio diversity and food security can be entrenched in the rural community if rural women's indigenous knowledge can be learnt.

Women in rural areas from families living below the poverty line were a target group of the scheme. In India, the 73rd Amendment in 1992 has brought in reservation in Panchayats. 30 percent of the seats are reserved for rural women. In MGNREGS also, it has been stated that there should be minimum 30 per cent of the women beneficiaries. In many states, they have gone beyond the minimum number. In some villages, the whole government scheme is being carried out by the women in the village as all the male members are engaged in other work. This belief in themselves that they can run their families and the village, has created a boost in their self-esteem. The challenges may come in, but rural women are ready for it. The rise in the confidence level has helped them to go ahead in many fields.

Conclusion

To make the scheme successful in empowering rural women, it is very necessary that they should participate in large numbers in the Gram Sabha (open rural assembly) and voice their preferences and concerns regarding the implementation of government schemes, including, MGNREGS. The opportunity of right to livelihood should be properly made use of. Indian Constitution had not given the right to work as a justiciable right. But, it was in 2005 that the Indian Parliament passed the law on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to provide the right to work to Indian citizens of rural areas. Rural Indian women are stepping out of their private space and making a contribution in building infrastructure in the village, other than empowering themselves. The Government of India has provided an opportunity to rural women to live with dignity and honor and equal footing with the rural man. Earlier, the contribution of the rural women was invisible to the people with patriarchal mindsets. MGNREGS is trying to empower

the invisible lifeline of rural community. For making their lives successful and meaningful, Indian rural women have also to put in 100 percent initiative. Otherwise, the scheme may fail as any other government project, with all its loopholes. If implemented successfully, it can become a role model for all developing countries.

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