EMPOWERMENT EFFECTS OF THE MG-NREGA ON WOMEN WORKERS: A CASE STUDY OF FOUR VILLAGE PANCHAYATS OF MAJULI, JORHAT DISTRICT

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Abstract

MG-NREGA is an ambitious mass employment guarantee scheme implemented since the last 8/9 years in Assam. The most important change MG-NREGA represents is that it gives rise to programmes that spring not from its wilful benevolence, but as a legally binding response by the state to a ‘right to work’ that’s why it enshrined in law. Moreover, the MG-NREGA promises from the perspective of women’s empowerment as well. It enshrined employment for women at fair wages in the village and also economically empowering women and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem. In fact, empowering of women is essentially the process of upliftment of socio-economic and political status of women. This paper examines the empowerment effects of the MG-NREGA on women at both individual and community levels. Moreover, in this paper analyzed the prospects and problems of women in the four Gaon Panchayats of Majuli Sub-Division of Jorhat Districts who work under the Scheme, even as it plays positive role in their lives.

Introduction

Unemployment and Poverty, both these problems have continued to be a matter of concern for the Government. After independence, the Government at the Centre and the States have launched a large number of schemes under the broad framework of rural development. Rural Development is the primary objective for a democratic form of Government like India. So, the Government has endeavoured to formulate rural development programmes for socio-economic upliftment of the rural population.

The Ministry of Rural Development spearheading the frontal attack on rural poverty and endeavoured to reach out to the last and most disadvantaged sections of society through its various programmes schemes- National Rural Employment Programme (NREP:1980), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP:1983), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY:1989), Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS:1993), Jawahar Gramin Samraddh Yojana (JGSY:1999), Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozogar Yojana (SGSY:2001) Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM) and most importantly National
Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) etc. The NREGA differs from all the other schemes in that the legal provision under this scheme to prevent corruption is much stronger and several steps have been taken to ensure greater transparency of operation. The NREGA, 2005 was passed unanimously by the Lok Sabha on August in 23 and notified on 7th September 2005. The NREGA was renamed as the Mahatma Gandhi- National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2 October 2009. It came into force in 200 Districts on February 2, 2006. The implementation of this programme is in 595 Districts out of 614 Districts in all the States in India with effect from April 1, 2008.

MG-NREGA is an ambitious mass employment guarantee scheme implemented since the last 7/8 years in Assam. The most important change MG-NREGA represents is that it gives rise to programmes that spring not from its wilful benevolence, but as a legally binding response by the state to a ‘right to work’ that’s why it enshrined in law. The Act also aims at ‘the generation of productive assets, protecting the environment, employment of rural women, reducing rural-urban migration of both female and male and also the fostering social equity among others.

This paper examines the empowerment effects of the MG-NREGA on women at both individual and community levels. Moreover, in this paper analyzed the prospects and problems of women in the four Gaon Panchayats of Jorhat Districts who work under the Scheme, even as it plays positive role in their lives.

**Women Empowerment and MG-NREGA: A Brief review**

In the area of empowerment of rural women however what is considered as the epoch-making is the passing of the 73rd constitutional amendment act on December 22, 1992(Gail:1987).This Amendment has the provision of reserving not less than one-third of the total number of seats in the local bodies for women. It has conferred special political rights to women of rural areas to actively participate in the decision-making process of their locality. The 73rd Amendment is indeed a great leap forward for empowering women. The Act states that women should be represented the social audit process i.e. the monitoring mechanism to promote accountability of MG-NREGA implementation. With regards of empowering women through PRIs, the MG-NREGA is highly gender sensitive scheme. In this programme, Priority should be given to women in the allocation of work in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries should be women. The Data reviews that women participation in MG-NREGA works in India is 15.51 (55.91%), in Assam 88.07(24.92%), in Jorhat 5.29(45.26%). Moreover, it is necessary to provide various facilities at the worksites like- crèche facilities and childcare practices of working women. Women are attracted towards the scheme because the equal wage level for men- women. As for example- Generally we have seen that if male labours get Rs. 100 per day then women labour get Rs. 50 to 60 as agricultural wage labour.

Moreover, the MG-NREGA promises from the perspective of women’s empowerment as well. It enshrined employment for women at fair wages in the village and also economically empowering
women and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem. In fact, empowering of women is essentially the process of upliftment of socio-economic and political status of women and also they can also breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a women in a traditionally male dominated structure (Lal:2007).

Objective of the Study-

- To assess the impact of MG-NREGA works with regard to achievement of the women beneficiary of respective GPs of under Study.
- To identify the level of awareness among the women of the respective GPs in regards of the Scheme.
- To examine of the effectiveness for the empowerment of rural women in economic and social aspects through this Scheme.
- To examine the positive and negative approach of the scheme in regards of rural women of the respective GPs.

Review of Literature-

Sudha Narayanan in his article ‘Employment Guarantee, Women’s Work and Childcare’ indicates the programmes positive impact on the Social and Economic well-being of rural women labourers and their families. In this article, the author elaborates the difficulties predicament of women in the Tamilnadu, the Viluppuram District who work under the MG-NREGA. Moreover, he also discussed how the MG-NREGA has brought about major changes in the lives of women through mass participation in Social Audit in Tamil Nadu. And also, he analysed that the Childcare is a problem for many of the working women, especially for young mothers in this District.

S.V.Lal and A.Srivastava in his article ‘Women Empowerment and Poverty Eradication in India: A Critical Appraisal of the MG-NREGA’ reviewed the poverty situation of the country and analysed through the secondary data. They also discussed that MG-NREGA has been instrumental in bringing cheers to the lives of millions of rural people specially women. They examined that the issue of inclusion of the traditionally marginalized weaker sections of the society and its contribution towards women empowerment. They also identified the main shortcomings of the programme and the scope for improvement.

Amrita Chatterjee in her article ‘Employment Guarantee and Women’s Empowerment in Rural India: Assessing Institutional and Governance Need’ presents a socio-economic analysis of female labour supply in rural areas. In this study, she found that circumstantial participation in workforce for females from BPL families in rural areas adverse effects of women withdrawing from work in terms of awareness and empowerment. She also reviewed that there has been a marked slowdown in employment growth.
in India in the post-reform period compared to the pre-reform period and that this slowdown has been relatively more marked in the case of female employment in rural areas.

Ashok Pankaj and Rukmini Tankha in their article ‘Empowerment Effects of the NREGS on Women Workers: A Study in Four States’ examines the empowerment effects of the NREGA on rural women in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. In this paper, they analysed that women have gained more opportunity because of cash payment in hand through the scheme as a result they have benefitted through income-consumption effects, intra-household effects, and the enhancement of choice and capability than before. They also discussed that women have also gained to some extent in terms of realisation of equal wages under the NREGS, with long-term implications for correcting gender skewness and gender discriminatory wages prevalent in the rural labour market of India.

Rebecca Holmes, Nidhi Sadana and Saswatee Rath in their article ‘An opportunity for change? Gender analysis of the MG-NREGA’ analysed gender and social inequalities influence rural poverty in Madhya Pradesh. They also reviewed that the MG-NREGA design and implementation should be strengthened to avoid exacerbating gender inequalities in the State. They also assess the extent to which MG-NREGA integrates a gender-sensitive approach to public works programmes to support the inclusion of women especially from marginalised communities in India’s poverty reduction and growth processes.

**Methodology**

This study was carried out on Majuli Sub Division of the Jorhat District. In this Block, there are 20 Panchayats and among of these four Panchayats namely Rangachahi gaon Panchayat, Phulani Gaon Panchayat, Bongaon Gaon Panchayat, Pokajara Gaon Panchayat. And Each Panchayats four villages were identified based on the performance of the Scheme in terms of Completed and ongoing works. The Study focuses on the process of issuing job cards as per requirement of women, the awareness and perception of the women workers about the scheme, quality of works, mode of payment, variation in payment, facilities provided at the work site for particularly women and child care facilities etc. A set of questionnaires were used for the data collection. It was addressed to women workers.

**Findings from the field study of the respective GPs.**

**Awareness about the MG-NREGA:**

All sample respondents were somehow aware of the level of minimum wage and also aware that under the Act household is guaranteed 100 days of work in a year in the respective GPs. But awareness regarding operational guidelines, household registration, the job card distribution process, work applications and entitlements such as worksites facilities and unemployment allowance was inadequate. Only 39 percent of women workers reported having made a formal application for a job card and rest of 61 viewed that the Panchayat representatives have filled up their form and provided the job cards in
worksites. We can say that low level of awareness is the another shortcoming for the proper implementation of the Scheme.

Worksite facilities:

The MG-NREGA is committed to ensuring a workplace conductive to productivity and worker’s welfare. But there are no any facilities at the worksites. Only 58 per cent of worksites had drinking water facility according to the respondents. And 42 per cent respondent viewed that there is urgent need or any other option for women with young children who cannot be left alone at home. Importantly, only one GPs, the president of the 32 No. Panchayat, said that in her panchayats a child care facilities provided in worksites.

Consumption and expenditure of MG-NREGA wages:

From the survey, we found that women employment in MG-NREGA has improved the economic status of women and enhanced their decision making power in house households. It’s Impact upon purchasing Power of the women i.e. women have taken the decision on the food purchased for household consumption and other essential commodities and to access education and health care. The 82 per cent respondent viewed that they spent wages earned at MG-NREGA works on regular food and consumer goods and their children’s education. And 7 per cent of the respondents said that they had spent their wages on repaying small debts. 11 per cent spent their wages on buying clothes and durable goods. Moreover, Women have acquired the capacity to mitigate some household problem also.
The diagram shows the ground level picture of women beneficiaries in the implementation of MG-NREGA works in the respective GPs.

Wages:

Wages are paid into a bank account or post office account that everyone who asks for a job card must open. Important point emerged from the survey is that 91 per cent women workers collected their own wages through Bank or Post Office account. And, rest of them viewed that they collected their wages through family members or Panchayat officials. From that point of view, we can say that some women workers are not able to get their wages by cash in hand and it leads to corruption.

Migration-changing trends:

One of the most positive trends in the studied areas has been the impact of MG-NREGA on migration patterns. 87 per cent of the respondents said that either they or their family members had migrate in earlier, but after implementation of the programme they got an opportunity to earn money. They also stated that where earlier entire families would migrate, now only one or two persons tend to leave for seasonal work in neighbouring villages or towns. Women job card holder said that they have worked as agricultural labours and casual labours in rich families with a minimum wages. After implementation of this programme, they have the acquired capacity of bargaining. And rest of them viewed that they are only interested in job cards works. After all, MG-NREGA seems to have created reasons and opportunities for people to work and remain in their own villages.

Worker's Views:

90 per cent women’s viewed that they were almost negligible participation in the selection of MG-NREGA woks and social monitoring, including auditing also. 10 per cent viewed that they had attended gram sabha meetings held in connection with the MG-NREGA works and also participating social auditing also.

They also expressed that some ‘soft works’ should provided especially women workers and the authority should be allocated the MG-NREGA works only for women.

No one received wages within 15 days. It often took a month to be credited in the bank account.

Decision-Making:

When asked about their decision to work under the MG-NREGA works, 53 percent women said that the decision to work at worksites was their own. 47 per cent women said that they receive fewer days’ work because they are not allocated all the types of work available and are often assigned soft work, such as moving soil dug out of wells which requires less time. They said that if women are less than men
then female workers faced discrimination in doing works. Example- Earth works is high demand for men, but the respondent said that we are also able to work.

**Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Gram Sabha:**

PRIs are the principal planning, implementing and monitoring authorities. The Gram Sabha too plays a crucial role in the selection of works and the conduct of social audits. Participation of people at large and women in particular in these institutions is more effective participatory process of the Act. During the survey period, the researcher found that women workers didn’t generally take part in Gram Sabha. Respondent viewed that below 50 percent women attended the Gram Sabha meeting. Due to lack of awareness about the significant role to be played by the Gram Sabha in making a ‘self of projects’ and conducting social audits of MG-NREGA works. During the survey period, the researcher found that reservation procedure maintained clearly in the respective villages, but the delivery of works was not satisfactory by them.

**Recommendations:**

- The overall impact of MG-NREGA on women’s lives is quite positive in many ways. Such as-
- There should have some provision for different types of work only for Women. And also, there should have some provision for pregnant, nursing women and for older women.
- Women should attend the community meetings and take part in decision making process.
- Lack of childcare facilities prevented many of these women from claiming their entitlement under the work. So, Childcare facilities should provide in M-NREGA worksites.
- Awareness level of women should increase and acceptance on the part of their families to their participation on MG-NREGA works.

**Conclusion:**

MG-NREGA is a programme that has begun to make a difference in the lives of women. In each of the four survey GPs, most of the women felt that the Act is very important for them and it would impact socio-economic status of each and every households. Now, women workers are more confident about their roles as contributors to family expenditure and taking part in the family decision and also spend some earning money by their own hand. The Scheme act as a tool of women’s empowerment deserves much more attention than it has received so far.

**End Notes:**
1. NREGA operational guidelines Schedule II, Para 6, Clearly noted the role and status of women in this programme as per Act.

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