

An Evaluation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in the state of Sikkim: Its Impacts and Challenges

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ABSTRACT: *The paper tries to critically analyze MGNREGA scheme in the mountain state of Sikkim. It tries to identify the problems and challenges dealing with the scheme in the region and also coming up with suitable prospects as a solution. The paper tries to examine the implementation and effectiveness of MGNREGS in providing rural support in various forms, through the case study method it also deals with major findings from field study and observation. Followed by conclusion where it analyzes the outcome of field study and also attempts to provide suggestion in the form of policy recommendations.*

KEYWORDS: *Livelihood security, Rural development, MGNREGA, Sikkim.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The 73rd Amendment Act of Indian Constitution led to the establishment of Panchayati Raj system in the form of local governing body in rural areas (PRI) in India. The Panchayat were given special powers at the grass root level through three tier and two tier system of local governance at the village level (ISS, 2013). Thus in order to strengthen PRI and make it more viable scheme like National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) September 7, 2005 [renamed on 2nd October 2009 as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)] was initiated a central government response to the constitutionally manifested right to work and a means to promote livelihood security in India's rural areas (Debnath and Paramita, 2013).

The present MGNREGA can be traced from the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act of 1977 which aimed to revived traditional village industries and provide employment in the form of unskilled labour to the local artisans, the major reason for such act to pass, was due to early droughts of 1970's in Maharashtra making rural people to migrate to cities aided with political intervention was the main reason to pass the EGS in the state of Maharashtra in 1977 (Jadhav, 2006).

Also Personalities like Vithhall Sakharam Page¹ played an important role in advocating campaign for employment guarantee as a fundamental right beginning with an article 'Rojgaracha Hakk' (Right to Employment) in 1949 and subsequent persuasion to the Maharashtra Government to implement Employment Guarantee Scheme on a pilot basis in 1969².

The scheme ensure sustainable livelihoods and in the process would empower the poor rural population through its innovative process of implementation. The act guarantees 100 days of manual employment at statutory minimum wage rates to any rural house hold whose adult members willing to do unskilled manual work.

Thus, it aim of reducing the distress migration from rural to urban areas, improving the purchasing power of the rural people, primarily semi or unskilled work to people living in rural India whether or not they are below the poverty line. It ensures sustainable livelihoods and in the process would benefit and empower the rural poor population through its innovative process of implementation (Sen and Dreze, 2013). The manual work needs to create sustainable assets that promote the economic and infrastructure development of village.

¹ V.S. Page (1910-1990) was honoured with "Dalit Mitra" and Nyayaratha Ramshastri Prabhune Puraskar and regarded as "Father of Employment Guarantee Scheme".

² http://sangli.nic.in/english/about_sangli/prominant_personality/v_s_page.aspx

The act was introduced with an aim of improving the purchasing power of the rural people, primarily semi or unskilled work to people living in rural India whether or not they are below the poverty line. Around one third of the stipulated work force were women³.

MGNREGA was launched on February 2, 2006 from Anantapur in Andhra Pradesh and initially covered 200 “poorest” districts of the country. The act was implemented in phased manner covering 130 districts were added in 2007-2008. With its spread over 625 districts across the country, the flagship programme of the centre government has the potential to increase the purchasing power of rural poor, reduce distress migration and to create useful assets in rural India⁴. This project has a formidable impact on rural India by providing employment to 41 million households in year 2010-2011 (Lirway, 2010). It has also helped to improve the social and gender equality dimensions in Indian society in terms of enhancing livelihood security in rural areas along with the objectives like generating productive assets, protection of environment, empowering rural women, reducing rural urban migration and fostering social equity among others (Khera and Nayak, 2009).

At the same time it faces challenges in the form of constrains (like delay in wage payment, materials, goods, illiteracy, ignorance of beneficiary about the scheme etc.) in successful implementation of the scheme. Majority of people in the area are engaged in the rural development programme to build and develop their village and society. Similarly there are people who are not working in such scheme due to reasons like low wage payment, delay/irregularity in wage payment migrant population who doesn't have proper identification, people not given job card due to strain relations with village Panchayat. Thus MGNREGA is severely crippled by low wage, cheap and low class materials which is widely criticized by the workers (Panda, Roy and Dey, 2010).

II. MGNREGA IN SIKKIM

Sikkim being the 22nd state of Indian Union is a small hilly state which comprises the total area of 7096 sq. km, its total population consist of 6,10,577 persons and about 75% of the population resides in rural areas. In which rural women population consist of 2,14,202 (Census, 2011). As majority of its population resides in rural areas the Central scheme of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 rechristened as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2006. It is most significant as it aims to promote right to work and a means to promote livelihood security in rural areas by providing daily wage employment of 100 days of guaranteed unskilled manual work.

However through this scheme it provided support and the platform for i. a sense of social security through minimum wages ii. It made villagers more vocal and their issues heard in Gram Sabhas while engaging in MGNREGA social audits and other development projects iii. It encouraged women folks to come out of their private sphere, iv. It created a space apart from household to form women groups in the form of social capital (Subba, 2014) and v. It has also supported them to purchase ration from open market and government shops. These schemes have been initiated in order to alleviate poverty and to provide livelihood security to all in the state of Sikkim. Such initiatives would directly help to ensure food security by providing individuals with minimum purchasing power to ensure daily intake of the required calories (Subba, 2015).

The state NREGS-Sikkim was implemented from 2nd February, 2006 in North District and, from 1st April, 2007 in South and East districts of the state The NREGS, a demand-driven scheme, has its focus on works relating to water conservation, drought proofing (including afforestation/tree plantation), land development, flood-control/protection (including drainage in waterlogged areas) and rural connectivity in terms of all-weather roads (RMDD, Govt. of Sikkim, 2008⁵).

2.1. IMPLEMENTATION OF MGNREGA

The present study is based on data and reports collected from the field survey conducted in parts of Rongyek, Tathanchen (lower), Syari (Lower and Middle) and Lower Aho of East Sikkim. The study includes major impacts it has brought in form of livelihood security to the rural people especially women groups, in providing food security etc. The majority of study area consists of rural areas which makes them to actively engage in MGNREGA as manual laborers.

³ Irjs.info/international multidisciplinary research journal,2011,1(3):37-46.

⁴ Minsistry of Rural Development Department, Govt. of India/MGNREGA 2005/Sikkim.http://www.mgnrega.nic.in.

⁵ Sikkim.nic.in/homedept/demog.htm

The field was chosen on the basis work under progression and women participation. Thus objective was to know the effectiveness of scheme and the perspectives of male and women beneficiaries engaged in scheme. Due to the shortage of time the field work was based on respondent who gave information about working of MGNREGA in the respective study area. As the field survey was conducted on the basis of “ethics of research” every caution were taken where the respondent identity and workplace would not be revealed as it might hamper the worker interest. The study area would be termed as Case 1, 2, 3 and so on. The fieldwork followed a stratified random sampling for the data collection with closed and open ended questionnaire.

The age varies from 22-70 years old. Due to low wage rate men choose to work as private laborers than work in MGNREGA. Such move of men opens space and make majority of women to work on the scheme. At the same time the objective of study was also to look specifically on worker perceptions of MGNREGS. Thus in order to achieve the objective the field survey was conducted on the areas where women worker were more compared to men.

Table 1

Case Study	Total no. of workers		No. of Job card holders		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1	4	14	4	14	18
2	3	13	3	13	16
3	4	15	4	15	19
4	3	14	3	14	17
Total	14	56	14	56	70

Source: Field Study

On the basis of interviewing them it was found that there is no notion of discrimination in distributing of job cards. On the basis of gender, caste, socio-economic backgrounds etc. people from different background they have equal right to hold job card. The majority workers belong from Scheduled Tribe categories i.e. Lepcha, Limboo, Bhutia, Sherpa and Tamang and from Others categories i.e. Chettri, Sharma, Gurung, Rai, Mangar etc. followed by Schedule Caste category. It has been helpful to women who are the only earning member of their family, whose financial condition is not so good. In the study area there where women who were unable to send their children to school due to financial problem but now due to MGNREGA her children can go to school and was very happy while working under the scheme. MGNREGA and PDS provide a major source of food security and economic security at the rural areas. Its timely allocation and payment would ensure for development of people by saving their daily earnings by buying subsidized rations.

A large number of workers major sources of income are through MGNREGA especially women workers and they were happy while working on the scheme. Few numbers of workers sources of income is through working on dairy farm and some of their husbands were working on Sunpharma and Cipla medicine factory.

Table 2

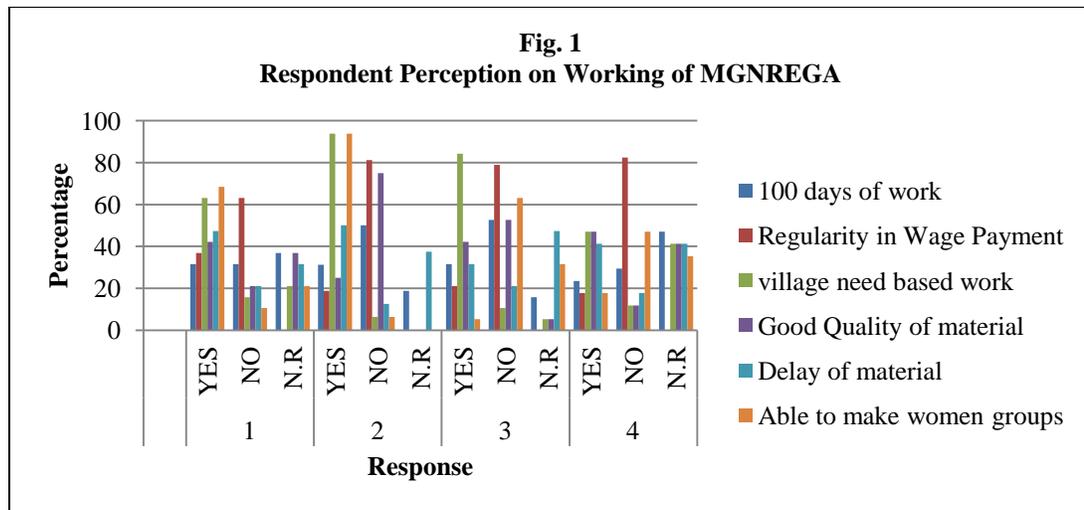
Case Study	Gender	Education Qualification			
		Illiterate	Primary	Secondary	Graduate
1	Male	3	3	2	0
	Female	5	2	3	0
2	Male	2	3	2	0
	Female	4	2	2	1
3	Male	2	3	2	0
	Female	5	4	3	0
4	Male	3	3	1	0
	Female	6	3	1	0
Total		30	23	16	1

Source: Field Study

The above table depicts in terms of education background or educational qualification of workers who is working under MNREGA. So, there are not much workers who have acquired higher education. In other words only the workers of the secondary level and below of educational qualification were working under the scheme. This also shows the negligence in the field of education in hill regions in the past which symbolized the old saying ‘*pari guni ke kam, haolo joti mam*’, meaning ‘What is the use of reading and writing as ultimately you have to plough the field’ (Lama; 2001).

As there are more dropout rate in 10+2 due to reasons like poor condition of family, school days marriage, job seekers, poor infrastructure (class and teacher) and remoteness of area. The recent trend in the hills both in urban and especially in rural areas the society are unsupportive towards the promotion of education they ask the age of a person and insist on doing any job rather going for higher studies.

Respondent were satisfied with MGNREGA says through such scheme there is a development in their village. Most of the women were able to form informal women groups in the villages this was due to MGNREGA as the scheme provided money any delay in money meant problem for their families. So they formed one voice in social audit and raised their voice and complaint and put their grievances. And if asked question they gave answer in one voice about the development of programme as they were the ones who actively participated in the project. Such events also made them to form SHG’s in making bags, pickle, soft toys etc.



Source: Field Study

Majority of workers expressed worked on construction of minor irrigation channels (MIC) cemented footpath (CCFP) and Jhoras-drainage system which would be beneficial to all the members of the society. If the Jhoras is constructed in water prone areas then there will be no danger for flood and landslides. Plantation of bamboo helps the villagers to avoid soil erosion and it checks landslides.

However they had grievances like increase in their wages as the wage they obtain was too low plus with frequent delay of wage. After MGNREGA most of the worker went for labour work in building construction where they fetch Rs. 300-400. Low class material issued by the distributor as against the A grade material issued by the concerned department, and no compensation in delay of wage etc. no action taken against the complaint is the fundamental problem of the department.

2. 2. OBSERVATION

The village Panchayat focuses more on the development of area where there are voters and gives no attention to the areas where there are no voters which are mostly outsiders and temporarily residents though the area comes under his own jurisdiction.

In some areas Panchayat are engaging the contractors in MGNREGA works which is strictly against the MGNREGA rules and regulations. During the 1st and Last stage they employ all job card holders whereas in between they implement contract workers. This is done because in 1st and last stage Block Development Officer

(BDO) now termed as Khanda Vikas Adhikari (KVA) visits which makes the Panchayat and Supervisor to show the work is done accordingly under MGNREGA.

Another thing which came across the field study was that workers did not work properly in worksite as they think it is government scheme so it is not necessary to work hard specially the male members and when there is time for their wages they usually come forward. These were the reason which made Panchayat and Supervisor to implement contract works which gave them quicker and quality result on time. But these should not be the reason they should utilize their leadership and make them work.

MGNREGA not only gives equal opportunities to both men and women but also those workers who are not able to hear or speak properly (deaf, dumb) in the field study of Case 2 one men and one women were facing such problem. So in MGNREGA there is equality and no discrimination in the wages between normal and handicap person they get the same wages as compared to the other workers.

2.3 EFFECTIVENESS OF MGNREGA

MGNREGA, during the last eight years has played a significant role in economically empowering rural women. In Sikkim itself 35,188 individual and 4427 joint bank accounts have been opened through the mechanism where women share a large part. This involves the access of a much greater number of women in institutional finance from which they have been largely excluded before.

Another encouraging finding is that women workers are by and large receiving their wages in person, rather than through husbands or other proxies which makes them realize their role and importance as a responsible and independent earning member. It has made women mentally strong, due to women participation in social audit helping them to share their views in other development projects in their respective village. It has made them to actively participate and discuss in gram sabha and also with rural development department officials.

The private wage rate ranges from RS-250 to 400 for manual labourers whereas in MGNREGA has been fixed at RS-155 making men to go for private works, and leaving huge space for women to work in it, though it is low wage but it has been a “blessing in disguise” for women.

It has provided a source of supplementary income to the families without making any wage discrimination between men and women. It is the local women who are the active participants under this scheme. MGNREGA was one of the principle sources of earning alternate income in rural Sikkim. This program has enhanced food security and provided the unemployed a means of sustenance. There are the positive impacts of the assets created under MGNREGA in the state of Sikkim, and second round of positive multiplier effect of this programme, however, the mechanism to ensure durability and sustainability of the assets created under this programme was absent.

The most significant impact the scheme is that it has brought back home as it were earlier, the dignity of labour. It has created significantly to the purchasing power of the beneficiaries who are spending the additional income on better quality of life and human development related issues which is good sign for the better future of the state and its people. The MGNREGA work has enhanced the bargaining power of the rural households in negotiating their wages in open market.

Through its wage employment scheme it has been able to make the beneficiaries to have plenty if money were they can use in business or other profitable schemes in one hand and secondly, it has helped women folks of villages to come together, understand each other and even made potential to form a “self help groups” (SHGs) and utilize the facilities of government schemes like IRDP, Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana.

III. CONCLUSION

On the basis on field research and interview it was found that people perceive MGNREGA as one of the important source of income by providing 100 days of employment to every rural people helping them in their purchasing power. It also provided equal opportunities to both men and women but participation of women is in large number than men.

Gram Sabah which is the platform of speech and expression for the people of the lowest level. It should be made mandatory and minimum four times a year starting at every 1st week beginning of every 3rd month. It is not necessary to held meeting at Panchayat Bhawan only rather than any place within the village should be the venue.

It should function as a platform where active participation and discourse should be promoted, in which development projects and its budget should be disclosed and suitable action plan should be initiated. Awareness of RTI Act 2005, Citizens Charter etc should be made theoretically to the people and promote its uses practically in daily life through skits and role play. Academic Awareness Initiative: In this school, colleges and university could play an important role. Assigning in school curriculum activities and providing grades for their assignments which would not only educate the concerned beneficiaries but also the students who would not hesitate to use it practically for their interest in future.

There is no discrimination in distributing job card and wages between male and females, where majority of the workers working under the scheme is APL and minority of the workers are BPL. Apart from working in wage employment scheme they also engage themselves in agriculture activities and few people in dairy farming.

Inspection of scheme has been very low making the scheme to underperform, so frequent inspection is required to bring accountability and transparency. Thus Effectiveness of Department can only be achieved through i). Frequent and thorough checking by concerned department, ii). Strict penalties against the defaulters if found guilty iii). Mandatory field visit of officials disguise as an ordinary person to every programme especially in between operations iv). Visiting people one to one in the form of field visit minimum four times in a year v). Meeting people in Gram Sabha minimum four times in a year. It would help to restrict problem and also to know the actual problem in the grass roots level.

In some places women are the only earning member of their family. So, they are satisfied with the wages and of course that through these works especially large number of women can able to come front from the four corner of their house or from private to public sphere as expressed by female workers of various study areas.

Most of the females can spend to buy household item, send children to schools and tuitions. They are able to visit to their relatives without depending on her husband money (feeling expressed by the women worker). Workers reported that wages in past which they got through these earnings was unavailable to fulfill their children needs. Thus to some extent they were satisfied with their wages, which they get as it helped them.

Use of MGNREGA workers in building pucca sanitation at left out homes at rural areas. Though government gives money to build sanitation to the beneficiaries the allotted amount never reaches to the beneficiaries and the amount which is reached to the beneficiaries is shared most of the time as they are unable to build the proper sanitation. Thus by implementing MGNREGA workers in such scheme will not only provide accountability of government policy of "Nirmal Bharat" but also provide benefits to rural poor in true spirit and especially to women community.

Lastly, Individuals like Panchayats/Councilors should be unbiased while distributing welfare schemes. The setting up of 5 members Grievance Committee should be set up in every ward and villages, where it members would belong from various backgrounds of beneficiary of schemes including destitute person who checks the working of welfare scheme. In case of problem or complaint it could be discuss in the Gram Sabah and to other Individuals and institutions (Food dept, Rural Dept., etc) to clarify and to initiate required action.

For the better functioning of MGNREGA scheme implementation of Skill Training in Practice (SRT) initiative should be implemented. For instance they have to depend on the male members in major works like construction of Connectivity Path (CC footpath), tanks, ponds, CMRHM etc. in hill areas Chief mason, assistant mason, carpenter are majority male and if they are absent the entire day is lost. As in majority of cases there is presence of women folks why not give training to women in mastering such skills. Such initiative will not only make female independent male members but also save the extra expenses and could freely use the skill apart from working in the scheme that is for self in home and in public works.

Such workings of Individuals and Institution would help to reform the structure by identifying the problems in the workings of existing scheme. It would correct the loopholes and make the system effective. The inclusion of the ideas, experience and grievance of people belonging from the grass roots would help in the effective policy making as they are the once to whom the policy is to be implemented.

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