

UNDERSTANDING MGNREGA THROUGH GENDER LENS: A CASE STUDY OF BIHAR

Neha

Ph.D Scholar

Department of Political Science, University of Delhi

Abstract:

The passage of 73rd constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 started a new era in the history of Indian Constitution since its enforcement. A new chapter was added in the federal framework with a provision of a separate third tier of government. The idea was to provide arms and teeth to the local self government. The legislation ensured delegating suitable power to the people in making and implementing decisions through appropriate, legal, political, and financial support by the centre and the state. Early reforms in this direction like IRDP, RLEGP, TRYSEM, FFW and SGRY were rolled out but witnessed limited success. The main reason for their failure could be attributed to the lack of constitutional status which only came after the 73rd Amendment Act. The other reason was the trickle down approach of the centre and state government which completely ignored the ground realities. The years between 1990-2000 witnessed a period of jobless growth. The condition of waged labour went from bad to worse. The 2001 Census Report reaffirmed this fact and reiterated the urgent need to relook into the massive rural poverty. Recognizing the ominous signs the union government enacted the NREGA in 2005. The programme aimed to address poverty and unemployment in rural milieu. During the lean season, through provision of mandatory work for hundred days in a year based on demand, generated additional 33 percent compulsory reservation to women in MGNREGA work as prescribed in the schedule mentioned in the Act. MGNREGA is a concerted effort by Centre, States and PRIs to address rural poverty and migration. It also has implicitly addressed the gender discord by according suitable reservation, benefiting women in true sense.

Introduction:

MGNREGA is a right based demand driven programme aimed at enhancing the livelihood security to rural households by providing hundred days employment in a financial year to all those who are willing to do unskilled manual labor. It fosters the conditions for an intensive growth ranging from basic wage security to a transformative empowerment process. The main goals of MGNREGA is to reduce poverty, encourage sustainable development in the agricultural economy, empowering the vulnerable section by increasing their bargaining power, decision making power, and promoting the grassroot democracy. It has introduced a new dimension of development complemented with the regime of rights. It has provided legal entitlement to the adults of the household who are willing to work. It is a forward looking programme that has viewed women not only as reproducers but also as producers. In other words, it has made an attempt to bring about social justice and equality to the rural poor in general and women in

particular by providing them equality and empowering them by ensuring equal wages for equal work. These steps have motivated their rate of participation, and have made them more self reliant.

The programme has the potential to provide livelihood security to the poor through creation of durable assets, improved water security, soil conservation and ensuring empowerment of the vulnerable sections consisting of women, SCs, and STs. It provided the biggest thrust to the federal framework by leveraging a set of governance structure i.e. PRIs, and amalgamated various anti-poverty and livelihood initiatives which has further improved the condition of women in rural India.

The study focuses on the implementations and the realities of the programme in Bihar which is primarily agricultural and which also is among the poorest states in India. In Bihar, with the introduction and implementation of MGNREGA, there is a noticeable paradigm shift in the existing approach towards, wage distribution and gender, bargaining capacity, migration etc. Focusing on gender, we note that the participation rate of women at the national level in the financial year 2011-12 was 47 percent while it was just 29 percent in Bihar. The figure may not be satisfactory but it can be a good onset considering the socio economic dynamics present.

It is one of the wage employment programme which has been structured and designed uniquely and follows bottom up approach that addresses rural poverty therefore it makes the beneficiaries not only economically empowered but also socially strengthened to actively participate in other spheres of lives too e.g. culturally, physically by engaging making use of physical manual unskilled labor. The most important feature of the Act is sharing of the burden between centre and state over funding of the projects. The social audit is conducted to assess the achievements and challenges prevalent thereby making the programme people centric, transparent and accountable. The efforts and focus of the programme has made gender as the push factor for growth and development of the nation as whole and Bihar in its own way.

In Bihar, a survey conducted in Araria district in the Fiscal Year 2012-13 revealed that the women constitutes the majority when it comes to demand to seek work at a stipulated rate of Rs 122 per day. The payment of the wages was made through post office accounts. This was a short coming at that point of time as women had to travel long distances to withdraw money. They were illiterate and ignorant so they had to bear the brunt. Corruption was prevalent. Even for the realization of the hard earned wages they had to shell out a considerable pie of their wages to the postmaster and also some money for the form to be filled to withdraw money that was provided free of cost by the government. The corruption actually cost them dear. The authorities involved at various levels like Panchayat, Block and District did not look into the grievances vigilantly. This was another setback.

Women who were contributing positively to the MGNREGA work, suffered due to aforementioned challenges. The males of the villages had migrated to urban area looking for better work opportunities and those who stayed back were either unhealthy or worked on the private farmland. Undoubtedly, women wanted to take up work in the close vicinity and earn a decent wage to spend it on education, health and living but corruption and lack of awareness had deprived them and accounting for the failure of the prime objective of the Act i.e. addressing

poverty and migration. Work on demand was denied to women on the pretext of nonavailability of funds or unsuitable nature of the job that required rigorous physical labour.

Analysis, interpretation and suggestions:

Data for the study was collected making use of primary and secondary sources. The Primary Sources included the official report from the DDC office, Panchayat and other relevant documents like research survey data and the Secondary Sources like articles, books, internet, journals and newspapers. The work is predominantly empirical so data collection was an important task. The collected data were arranged and analysed. Focus was on gender aspect while conducting research and use of independent variables like age group, class based on income earned and gender and hence a link was drawn between the independent and dependent variables like migration, bargaining capacity, and decision-making power for better understanding and analysis.

Fifty women beneficiaries were selected based upon purposive sampling method and application of structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews were made at various level i.e. at the level of beneficiaries and respondents, at Panchayat level, at Block level and at the District level. The objective was to have unbiased and near perfect analysis of the research work. The selected women beneficiaries belonged to the age group between 30-60 years. They were categorised based on their marital status, caste, class, level of education and number of members in the household. They shared their experiences about the work place and also the new development – in other spheres of their lives like social, economic cultural and daily routine. The unstructured and semi-structured interviews along with the questionnaire helped further in taking note of the real time experiences. Focused group interviews also widen the scope of analysis. The structured interviews with higher authorities, and informal talks laid the foundation of better understanding of the impact and future implications of MGNREGA.

It can be assessed from the above interpretation and analysis that MGNREGA has restructured the anti-poverty initiatives by mainstreaming gender and the wage distribution and in the process has empowered the vulnerable sections rendering social and economic justice by providing equity. This step has addressed the sexual division of labour. Gender is obviously a social construct but the relative discrimination of one in context of another makes the whole concept a contested concept and MGNREGA has not only stepped in to look at it through social and economic lens but has also worked towards the achievement and realization of worth of the labour which is unskilled and manual in nature. The gradual empowerment of women in Bihar is a testimony of this beautiful change that has occurred after the implementation of MGNREGA.

Conclusion:

Gender norms and values may and do change with time. This change requires the realization of worth of labour and the social and economic justice meted to them in the process. MGNREGA in Bihar has initiated this development. The rural poor in general and the women in particular seek opportunities under the programme and earn enough wages to give them means of livelihood in the lean season and opportunity to earn wages and save them in their account. This has also laid to rise in financial inclusion of the rural households. The health, education and food habits have improved and the migration has also reduced; if it has not stopped completely. The bargaining

capacity in the private sphere has also improved giving them enough space to decide the worth of their labour.

To address future challenges of abject poverty and gender, the government should try to plug the shortcomings in the beginning by imparting skill and education to the women of each household, so that future generations become competent and efficient enough to shun the demand driven programme. The durable assets created under MGNREGA projects in Bihar must be geo-tagged to avoid misinformation and corruption. The payment of wages must be done based on biometric method so that the economic wellbeing is realized and a quality life is ensured. All these concerted efforts require the active engagement of Gram Sabha that conducts selection of work projects and social audits. The role of civil society, role of block and district level authorities must be complemented with participation of each household that owns a job card or has applied for. The role of expertise should be accommodated well to make it a grand success.

All these efforts require four “I’s” i.e. inclusion, information, influence and integration and empowerment will become an indispensable outcome. Gender has to be at the core for making the programme grand and viable for all the sections of the society.

The Management Information System which is on the official website of MORD that keeps a record of every minute detail relating to the programme e.g. work detail, fund disbursed to each Gram Panchayat, wages disbursed to beneficiaries, demand generated for work, delay in wages, and reason for non-allocation of work should be updated every fortnightly. Delay in disbursement of wages should be compensated with interest. The mentioned issues are addressed in a time bound manner and therefore it will have far reaching impact.

Participation of women in social audit will make the programme more gender sensitive. Decision making process in work provisioning and allocations should have adequate participation of women as they generally constitute the majority in the demand driven MGNREGA work. The realization of wages should be made in the account of women of the household, to make economic empowerment in rural milieu a reality than a farce promise. A fractionally high rate of interest should be made in the account held by women to promote the culture of gender empowerment.

References

MGNREGA SAMEEKSHA: An Anthology of Research Studies on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (2006-2012), MORD, GOI; Orient Black Swan.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (42 of 2005), Bare Act; University Law Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd.

Women Empowerment, March 2015 (Vol.63, No. 05), Kurukshetra : A Journal on Rural Development.

Rural Migration, September 2014 (Vol.62, No 11), Kurukshetra: A Journal on rural Development.

Women Empowerment, September 2016 (ISSN-0971-8400), Yojana: A Development Monthly.

Kamla Bhasin , 'Understanding Gender' (2014), Woman Unlimited Publication.

(Ed.) Reetika Khera. The Battle for Employment (2012).Oxford Publication

Asha Sharma "SC/ST Employment Guarantee: Women'sEmpowerment in Rural India by MGNREGA" in International Journal of Human Development and Management Sciences Vol. 1 No.1 (Jan-Dec, 2012).

Samik Shome et. al. "Impact of workfare programme on quality of life; A Case Study of National Employment Guarantee Act in India" in Stirling International Journal of Postgraduate Research 1.1 (2012).

Danice Lynn Langdon and Roger Klomegah "Gender Wage Gap and its associated factors : An examination of traditional gender ideology, education, and occupation in International Review of Modern Sociology (Vol. 39, No.2 , 2013)