

Women work issues in rural development: a case of m.g.nrega implementation in west bengal, India

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Abstract

Based on gender and development (GAD) approach, this paper explores how M.G.NREGA is opening a new window for the ease of livelihood for rural women in India. M.G.NREGA is the first right based and demand driven employment generating scheme of the country which ensures some special provisions for rural women. The focus of these provisions is to mainstream the rural women into the contemporary discourses of economic development. The paper keeps an inner look about the expectations from this scheme for the development of women livelihood in rural areas and the challenges in ground level implementation. The problem addressed in the paper is the women work issues generating through the successful implementation of the scheme. It is important to find out how the full benefits of the scheme can be explored. This exploration is needed for a large section of the societal benefit and improved livelihood.

For the entire study, a twofold approach is taken. First, analysis of available literatures to understand the possible outcomes of the scheme with current discourses of economic development. Second, analysis of primary and secondary data for revealing the characteristics of the problem based on gender dynamics of the region. The study relates findings from the field survey of 210 samples in the state of West Bengal, India. Intensive field study has identified several positive outcomes like saving of time for domestic works, mainstreaming of women labour, generation of income and livelihood security for village women, reorganization of women's work etc., with wide regional variations. The study has identified major challenges to get these benefits. The result drawn from the study is general and regionally applicable.

Key words: M.G. Nrega, India, Rural women, Gender and development

Background:

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act popularly known as MGNREGA, was enacted by legislation in August 25, 2005 is the most prevalent in contemporary discourses pertaining to employment guarantee schemes ever passed in Indian history of employment generation. This act targets rural people of the country, irrespective of financial, social and gender status. From the very first day of its inception, this act has drawn the attentions of the economists and scholars for its wide scope of improving of the livelihood of the rural people, especially rural women.

The expectations arisen in contemporary times may brief as follows:

Ensuring right to work for rural women:

The present rural context of India often sees women workers as invisible workers. Schedule II, Section 6 of MGNREGA Act states 'While providing employment, priority should 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.' MGNREGS is the first scheme, which provides the right of employment to the rural people with a specific reservation for the rural women. MGNREGA makes a conscious effort to provide employment to the rural women by ensuring work identity and employment as a right. Surely, this scheme marks a paradigm shift in

this way by ensuring the right of employment to the rural people, especially women. Thomas (2008, p.8) argued that “NREGA is unique in the sense that, it gives primary importance to women participation and empowerment as well as a corruption less implementation of the wage employment programme; through social auditing by Gram sabhas.” .

Mainstreaming rural women into developmental process:

A complete developmental initiative should touch the target group irrespective of gender status. Unfortunately from the past experience it has seen that most often women are the most deprived of all benefits offered by Government. It is an accepted fact that women has to bear the domestic work burden which is a major factor restricting them to perform work outside. They do prefer home based job and performs the home based part of farming and cattle rearing in the rural areas which are often non countable invisible work. This invisibility and non-accountability has deeply rooted to such an extent that often women workers treated themselves as non-workers. The word ‘nothing’ is a frequent answer of rural women when surveying in a rural area with the question ‘what do you do?’, while they are investing at least one and half or double work hours than their male counter parts, the realization of work is almost absent. To mainstream this invisible workers to the process of economic development , MGNREGA has framed the swork design outside the home boundary , ensures their wok identity by ‘job cards’ and records their contribution of work days and wage sharing which is certainly a good initiative to mainstream a large section of invisible workers in rural India.

Reduction in the exploitation level:

In the rural labor market , women do suffer from three stand points, first differential wage rate which is mostly lower than men, second, comparatively longer working hours with no choice of preference of work and third, harassment by local employers. These situations have some expected improvements though MGNREGA. This scheme ensures all fixed working hours with equal wage for equal work .Besides; one can apply in a season or for a worksite which she prefers like the plantation sites rather than road construction sites or in agriculturally slack season when she has comparatively less work burden. As this scheme ensures the employment days within 15 days from its demand, it is expected that a woman can balance her employment days and earnings according to her choice of preference. This situation is expected to reduce the exploitation level of the rural women.

Rise in the bargaining power and improvement in the local market situation:

It has proved by different scholars that the income level and power of bargain are directly related, i.e. rise of on results the rise of other too. One of the expected outcomes of M.G.NREGA is the rise in the bargaining power of the rural women as a result of the increased job opportunities in the villages and a considerable rise in income. This will improve the wage situation for Non-NREGA casual works too with less harassment .In the fully implemented phase of MG NREGA, less supply of labor for these worksites will enhance the situation demand exceeding supply and the wage situation will improve. Similarly, the local employers will compel to improve their worksite situation without harassment for securing the non-interrupted availability of cheap labor. In this way rise in the bargaining power of rural women will result the improved wage and worksite situation of the local market too, if M.G. NREGA is fully implemented.

Reduction of working hours of women for household work:

The assets created by MGNREGS are equally created for both men and women. But in most cases women is the direct beneficiary of those assets than men. For example, plantation for land development and flood protection, creation of social forestry under MGNREGS in the territory of the village helps the rural women to collect the fuel wood and forest products from their locality and thus saves them from the longer duration of their work for collecting firewood. As wood is the main fuel in the rural India and in most of the cases, collection of the firewood is the responsibility of the children and women of the household, so it is the compulsory duty for them to collect by spending hours varying from 5 hours to 9 hours in an average depending on the availability of the wood. Except this, through NREGS water harvesting feature is being created which is another useful asset especially for rural women. As collecting the drinking water and sometimes water for domestic work is the essential duty of the rural women, the assets created under NREGS plays dual role in favor of rural women, first, it saves the time by providing firewood, forest products and water in the locality. Secondly, it generates the possibility of participating women in economic activities in their spare time. In this way NREGA plays a key role for the rural women by saving their working hours for the jobs which are specially recognized as women's jobs.

Issues from the Field:

Though the scheme has undoubtedly explored the rural women labor force unused or underused to the mainstream of rural development, **women are facing newer challenges to get their right of work under MGNREGS.** The question arises what the challenges of this right based scheme especially to women are? Are they inherent in the Act or is a result of the implementation failure? Let us discuss the points of the women work issues to understand the matter clearly. It draws from data obtained through the field survey carried out in two villages (Rupnarayanpur & Galsi) in Burdwan district of West Bengal. The survey was carried out during November 2009 to January 2010 and covered a sample size of 210 respondents. This study refers to the data for the financial year 2008-2009. The major queries of this study are a) how this scheme has influenced the lives of the marginalized people as well as the lives of the rural women and b) whether there is a positive change regarding this or not. The scheme of sample selection in the study area is as follows:

Table: 1. Scheme of Sample Selection in Study Area

RUPNARAYANPUR						GALSI		
TOTAL								
Participating			Non-participating			Participating		
Non-participating								
Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
Men	Women	All						
27	29	56	35	12	47	40	35	75
15	17	32						210

Source: Primary Survey in Burdwan district of West Bengal November'09 –January'10

First, the household approach of MGNREGS puts a major challenge to the women workers of MGNREGS. The concept of household, as explained in the MGNREGA Act section 5.1.3 is 'Household will mean a nuclear family comprising mother, father, and their children and may include any person wholly or substantially dependent on the head of the family. Household will also mean a single member family.'

This definition excludes the single women residing with her brother's family or with the family of the any relative having own earning from any source in the absence of her father and mother. It is a known fact that a women very rarely stays alone in rural India as the social restriction does not allow her to do so. In that case, if she is a widow or unmarried or separated in marital status and having a distinct earning source, is deprived from earning wage under NREGS automatically. And the point is, the rate of self employment is predominant among rural women, who do not have any other options of work and these self employment in most of the cases, non remunerative. Poor single women, if employed by an employer in most of the cases are exploited and under-paid. In that case, the need of the employment seeking single women is as much as other members of the household, but she is not eligible to work as per the guideline of NREGA as she is neither in the reproductive group (mother) nor in dependant group (wholly or substantially).

Second issue is how do we measure substantial dependency? Is it in the terms of food, clothing and shelter? How do we demarcate a line between partial and substantial dependency? In most of the cases of rural India, dependency of single women is related with shelter, as society does not permit them for single residing. Except that either she has to earn her own food by working somewhere or have to put her labor for the shelter giver's family. The second option does not generate money but make her indispensable for the family. In that way a single woman secures her shelter in a family. When we consider the dependency of the household member to the head of the family, we should consider the fact that, dependency is not the sole criteria for eligibility, as a woman may be single and independent, having inadequate income for her livelihood should be considered eligible for applying job under MGNREGS.

Thirdly, the household approach taken by the scheme puts another challenge to rural women. It is obvious that where there is a strict boundary of job days as hundred days per household per financial year, the intra-household distribution of job days is possibly not equal for the adult male and female unemployed members of the household. Preference always goes to the unemployed males. Females are, in fact the secondary receiver of job when either a) male member is unwilling to do so or b) temporarily migrate from the village. Decision of taking job is possibly determined by the head of the family, who is usually a male. Thus women suffer in intra-household level in the point of job distribution and decision taking. These two extremely important points are ignored by the scheme which causes less participation of women than men as expected. Government figure reveals that women participation is increasing with years, from percent in 2006-07 to percent in 2007-08, but still it is lower than the men.

Table: 2: Women & Decision Making

Women who took their decision independently regarding MGNREGS work influenced by household Members	Women whose decision was
21.88%	78.12%

Source: Primary Survey in Burdwan district of West Bengal November'09 –January'10

Fourthly, MGNREGA provides unskilled manual work to the job seeking people. It is true that rural poor are generally unskilled and it is one of the reasons that metro cities and big towns are denying to accept them in various works which needs some minimum skill. That makes their life more struggling in urban areas. In that context, providing job opportunity within the territory of the village is certainly a good step to stop un- economic job -driven rural to urban migration.

The point needs to mention that, beside providing the poor unskilled manual work the stress should be given on some skillful works too as most of the rural population in India are malnourished and have inadequate health facilities, women are the worst sufferer of it, so exposing them to hard manual work in every season without any option needs consideration of the government. MGNREGS should cover some skillful work and obviously the category of skillful work should be higher paid than the unskilled ones. This categorization will develop rural women workforce in many ways: firstly, women have some inherent domestic skills like cooking, stitching, making household products etc which can be improved through training. This skillful training will develop a new window of reorganization of women's domestic work as earning one. Secondly, these skills will certainly improve their livelihood. Thirdly, rural people can value the skilled work and gradually learn it which will ready them for big job market other than MGNREGS.

Table: 3 .Distribution of Women Non Working Respondents in Different Categories

Category of non-participation		Rupnarayanpur		Galsi	
Total					
N	%	N	%	N	%
Lack of detailed information 4	13.79	1	8.33	3	17.65
Low wage rate 1	3.45	1	8.33	0	0
Not home based 12	41.38	7	58.33	5	29.41
Not secure 8	27.59	3	25.00	5	29.41
Administrative difficulties 4	13.79	0	0.00	4	23.53

Source: Primary Survey in Burdwan district of West Bengal November'09 –January'10

Fifthly, non participation of rural women in the planning stage puts another obstacle for planners to plan the work successfully suitable for rural women. Participation is very less in the case of the rural backward classes. Overall low rate of women participation in planning has influenced the participation rate also, as seen in the study area. Women are often seen uncomfortable to move in the public meetings and to express their requirements which are another major issue of mainstreaming women workforce.

Table: 4. Women Participation in NREGS Planning Level (Respondents Workers)

Caste	Rupnarayanpur		Galsi		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gen	5	17.24	8	22.86	13	20.31
SC	4	13.79	0	0.00	4	6.25
ST	3	10.34	2	5.71	5	7.81
OTHERS	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
TOTAL	12	41.38	10	28.57	22	34.38

Source: Primary Survey in Burdwan district of West Bengal November'09 –January'10

Conclusion

One interesting point is, women participation under NREGA is increasing gradually with the pace of time. Sudarshan (2008) argues that the participation of women is getting high basically because of three reasons, ‘(a) because of the high market wage of males for works other than NREGS , (b) for low market wage of females for works other than NREGS (c) migration of the male members of the family and need to earn money in the female-headed households in poverty stricken states’. From this discussion it can be suggested that M.G.NREGA should move from its household specific approach to person specific or more precisely, gender specific approach to achieve its goal for women participation. Ensuring women participation in the public meeting is the second step through which the desired assets of the village women can be created, or in other words, active participation of women in the planning process and inclusion of some skillful works in the M.G.NREGA framework can only enhance the full benefits of the scheme and to achieve the improved sustainable livelihood for rural women.

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In most cases in the epics Ahalya appeared as an innocent victim. If we focus on the characteristic of Ahalya in the *Mahabharata*, we can notice her chastity and fidelity. However, in the later literature she was only described as anti – *pativrata* woman. The renowned Ahalya of the *Mahabharata* turned into the stone-woman in the later *Puranas*. Becoming a stone was one of the curses given by Gautama and gained popularity from the later *Puranas* (*Skanda* and *Brahmavaivarta Purana*) onwards.

Savitri

Savitri has been represented as one of the role models of Hindu women. Her effort to save her husband Satyavan's life against Yama (the god of death) makes her the best *pativrata* in the brahmanical tradition. She appears in the religious practice called 'Vata – Savitri – Vrata' as the goddess who is worshipped by married women for their husband's health and longevity. On the full moon day of Jyeshtha (May – June), women whose husbands are living perform the Savitri – Vrata or Vata – Savitri – Vrata even now in many parts of India. Different from the story of Arundhati and Ahalya, the Savitri story was given fully in the *Mahabharata*.

In the Aranyaka Parvan (Book III. 277 – 283) the story of Savitri was told when the exiled Pandava king Yudhishtira asked the sage Markandeya whether there had been a woman whose devotion matched with Draupadi's. In reply, Markandeya narrated Savitri's story. Here, the Savitri myth was narrated to juxtapose her as a devoted, virtuous wife, capable of matching with Draupadi. Thus when Yudhishtira heard the story of Savitri he was supposed to expect the same result from his wife Draupadi.

The first chapter (277) describes the context of the story and gives information about Savitri from her birth till her marriage. To acquire sons, the Madra king Ashvapati performed severe penance. After 18 years, the goddess Savitri appeared and promised to give a splendid daughter to him. When Savitri was grown up, Ashvapati worried about his daughter and told her to find a husband on her own. She departed to the forest with the king's experienced counselors. The second chapter (278) shows the celestial sage Narada's prediction to Ashvapati about the death of Satyavan, and strong will of Savitri who insists on marrying Satyavan. When the sage Narada warned that Satyavan would die after a year, she stood by her decision to marry him. Savitri finally persuaded her father and Narada they were getting married. The third chapter (279) narrates Savitri's marriage with Satyavan and her new life in the forest. Savitri began an ascetic way of life following her husband and in-law parents. The fourth chapter (280) contains Savitri's three-night fasting vow. Reminding Narada's prediction Savitri observed of three-night vow. The fifth chapter (281) is the longest and describes her encounter with Yama, the long speech of Savitri and the four boons she obtained from Yama. On reaching the forest, Satyavan was suddenly afflicted with a headache and wanted to sleep. Savitri rested his head in her lap and thought about Narada's remark. At that moment, she saw Yama coming to them. They started the discussion on dharma. Due to her great knowledge about dharma she persuaded Yama and Yama promised four boons (restoration of eyesight and kingdom for her father-in-law, sons for her father, sons for herself by Satyavan, and finally Satyavan's life) to her. The sixth chapter (282) narrates Dyumatsena (Savitri's father-in-law)'s sudden regaining of eyesight and Savitri's explanation about her encounter with Yama in the forest. The last chapter (283) is concerned with how the remaining boons were fulfilled.

In the *Mahabharata* Savitri appeared as an active, independent and self-assertive woman. Also she was described as a great ascetic woman who possessed mysterious knowledge about dharma. In the conversation between Yama and Savitri, the main speaker was Savitri. Her attitude was dignified and voice was commanding.ⁱ Savitri myth shows she perfectly accomplished her duty of *pativrata* and at the result of this she can save herselfⁱⁱ, her parents, her parents-in-laws and her husband's entire family from calamity.

Conclusion

The ideology of *pativrata* had been applied to the concept penetrating the epics. To become *pativrata*, a woman should realize their selfhood not as a sexual being who follows the *strisvabhava* (innate nature) but as a social being who accepts and follows the *stridharma* or *pativrata*.

Arundhati and Savitri became the well-known *pativratas* because they accomplish the *pativrata* successfully and Ahalya failed to gain the title of *pativrata* because she could not keep her chastity whether she wanted or not.

This ideology of *pativrata* has steadily emphasized in the later literature. With the intention to strengthen the *pativrata*, the writers (usually male) have dealt with this subject very seriously. Thus Arundhati and Savitri's fidelity and chastity were more emphasized and Ahalya's failure was more highlighted in the later literature.

Notes

ⁱ Her character totally changed and she lost her independent character in the later *Purana*. In the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* (2. 23-24), she was described as a young lady who wanted to learn various knowledge from Yama. Here main speaker was Yama and Savitri appeared as a listener who was very curious. Chakrabarti argues that the long speech (over 800 verses) of Yama contains the quintessence of Brahmanism and makes listeners familiar with the principle of the Puranas. Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*, OUP: New Delhi, 2001, PP. 262-263.

ⁱⁱ Chakravati asserts that Savitri fights off the god of death to avoid being a widow. Uma Chakravarti, *Ibid.*, p. 162.

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