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## PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NREGP AND GENDER EQUALITY

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### ABSTRACT:

The NREGA has become a powerful instrument for inclusive growth in rural India through its impact on social protection, livelihood security and democratic governance. Indian economy is on a higher growth path, it still suffers from high incidence of poverty and unemployment in rural India. The low rate of growth of agriculture sector also affected the rate of creation of employment opportunities in rural areas. The significant contribution of NREGP was that it has removed these constraints as the wage employment was made available within or closer to the village. The overall impact of NREGP on women's lives is quite positive in many ways, whether it is by enhancing their economic independence and self-confidence, contributing to food security, helping to reduce distress migration, or fostering better awareness of minimum wages. While we have highlighted some of the problems in the implementation of the NREGA, it is important to note that the Act is still in its infancy. It takes years to put in place the tools and instruments needed to actualize the right to employment through a scheme, even in the best of circumstances. In this context the paper has focused on the problems involved in the implementation of NREGP in our country and gender equality aimed through the programme.

**Key Words:** NREGA, inclusive growth, opportunities, constraints, actualize, implementation

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) came into force on February 2, 2006 and was implemented in a phased manner. In phase I it was introduced in 200 of the most backward districts of the country and in 130 districts in phase II during 2007-2008. The primary objective of the Act is augmenting wage employment. Its auxiliary objective is strengthening natural resource management through works that address causes of chronic poverty like drought, deforestation and soil erosion and so encourage sustainable development. The NREGA has become a powerful instrument for inclusive growth in rural India through its impact on social protection, livelihood security and democratic governance



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### **Objectives of the Programme :**

The main objectives of NREGP are to provide hundred days of wage employment, unskilled manual work to any adult who seeks work, livelihood security to rural households, creation of durable community assets, payment on weekly basis, equal wages to men and women, ban on contractors and labour-displacing machines and taking up works which are identified by gram panchayat, Mandal Parishad and Zilla Parishad. The facilities provided at the work places are engaging “Aaya” for taking care of children, engaging water persons for supply of drinking water, providing shade and floor sheet, first aid box and medical facilities. Main works take up in this programme are water conservation & water harvesting, drought proofing including afforestation, irrigation canals including minor irrigation works, provision of irrigation facilities to SC/ST, renovation of traditional water bodies, land development, flood control & protection works, rural connectivity and any other works approved by Government of India.

Indian economy suffers from several distortions since independence. Though, current Indian economy is on a higher growth path, it still suffers from high incidence of poverty and unemployment in rural India. Agriculture and allied sectors, which provides employment at least 60 percent of the Indian population is a backbone of rural economy. The low rate of growth of agriculture sector also affected the rate of creation of employment opportunities in rural areas. It is observed that majority of the poor in rural areas of the country largely depend on the wages earned through unskilled casual manual labour. The inadequate labour demand in lean period or unpredictable events like natural disaster or personal ill-health, all such have adverse impact on the level of employment, income and livelihood securities of rural population.

### **Issues and Challenges:**

NREGA ideally creates a wage push from the bottom. It will also push small farmers and peasants into cooperatives. Issues and Challenges of MGNREGA with respect to the Government are poor planning & administrative skill, lack of focus on objectives, lack of adequate man power, difficulty in funding the scheme, discrimination, corruption & irregularities, Maoist insurgency and lack of safety measures. Issues and challenges of MGNREGA with respect to the people are inadequate awareness, no purposive spending and being unorganized.

NREGA from the day of its inception is not without controversies. A major criticism of NREGA is that it is making agriculture less profitable.



Landholders often oppose it on these grounds. The big farmer's point of view can be summed up as follows: 'Landless labourers are lazy and they don't want to work on farms as they can get money without doing anything at NREGA worksites; agriculture will die if the NREGA continues; farmers may have to sell their land, thereby laying foundation for the corporate farming'.

The workers points of view can be summed up as: 'Labourers do not get more than Rs. 80 in the private agricultural labour market, there is no farm work for several months, few old age people who are jobless for at least 8 months a year; when farm work is available they go there first; farmers employ only young and strong persons to work in their farms and reject the others and hence many go jobless most of the time'.

#### **Problems involved in the implementation of NREGP:**

- The operational guidelines of the NREGA detail a household as a nuclear family comprising mother, father and their children. In addition, a household refers to a single-member family. Our country has historically followed the system of joint families and such practices will put joint families in a disadvantageous position.
- Discrimination based on caste has also been noted in some states like Gujarat. During a survey conducted by Participatory Research in Action (PRIA) in the state of Uttar Pradesh (Sitapur district), women were discouraged from registering.
- The percentage of job cards issued to registered households varies across states. For some states like Maharashtra it stands at 12 percent, while for others such as Andhra Pradesh it is over 90 percent.
- Though job cards have been prepared across most states, in many states they have not reached the people, thereby restricting their right to demand work. A probable cause for this is the workload of the panchayat sevak who undertakes the task of distribution.
- Fees for application forms are being charged in many states like Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. The fee ranges from Rs 5 to Rs 50 in some states. Forms are also sold openly in local markets.
- Another general problem noted in the villages is the absence of a system to issue receipts to applicants. This could be because of lack of awareness on the part of the panchayat sevak and the villagers.
- The NREGA provides for facilities for safe drinking water, shade for children, periods of rest and a first-aid box at the work site (Section 27,



Schedule II of the NREGA). But a lot has to be done to ensure these facilities, the notable absence of which is a problem that cuts across states.

- Small children remain unattended, in the heat. As a consequence, women are hesitant to bring their children to the sites. It also forces them to rethink about applying for work in the first place. Trees act as the only source of shade for the rural poor working at the sites. The Commissioners of the Supreme Court have advised the states that if need be, temporary shelters must be built for those doing NREGA labour.
- Like in many other rural development programmes, contractors are increasingly becoming a threat to the NREGA. Though this may not be very apparent on the surface, private contractors are slowly finding their way into the system. The Act clearly states (Schedule I, Section 11), that no contractor is permitted in the implementation of these projects.
- It is rare indeed to find muster rolls at the worksites. Reports from across NREGA districts show that kutchmuster rolls/attendance sheets are being maintained by people at worksites. Rough notebooks and diaries are being used to mark attendance and make wage payments.
- The Act's launch was not accompanied by the appointment of additional staff for its implementation. This has resulted in the existing staff being burdened with additional work. At the panchayat level, the guidelines specifically advised the appointment of a 'rozgar sevak'. Disappointingly, this has not yet been done. The lack of staff is having a negative impact on the workings of the NREGA.
- Some states like Chhattisgarh have disrupted work under the NREGA on account of the monsoons. A circular issued by the Chhattisgarh government clearly states that from June 15 to October 15, the state will not be liable to open works within 15 days, or provide an unemployment allowance. So the workers are forced to accept whatever is determined by rich landlords. Such occurrences strike out the very purpose of the formulation of the NREGA.
- Delays in wage payments have always been a matter of concern in previous employment programmes, and this issue continues to plague the NREGA. Wage payments are delayed for weeks, sometimes months. The time lag varies from state to state.



While we have highlighted some of the implementation problems of the NREGA, it is important to note that the Act is still in its infancy. It takes years to put in place the tools and instruments needed to actualize the right to employment through a scheme, even in the best of circumstances. The NREGA addresses itself chiefly to working people and their fundamental right to live with dignity.

### **Women and National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (NREGP):**

The participation of women in the workforce has surpassed the statutory minimum requirement of 33 percent and through this it has protected the women justice and rights. The Act provides some explicit entitlements for women to facilitate their full participation. These include:

- Equal wages for men and women
- Participation in Management and monitoring of the programme
- Participation in social audit
- Providing support for child care, and convenience to households
- Ensuring that single women are eligible

Regarding the gender equality the NREGA mentioned mainly two points, one, the 'women' is a major focus of the program in so far as the employment guarantee policy is seen as an instrument that can support job creation and bring about gender equality, essential for empowerment. And two, the program itself, in course of its implementation has brought into focus several issues concerning gender and poverty which should to be examined intimately for deriving planning lessons.

By putting cash incomes into hands, NREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. Women workers are more confident about their roles as contribution to family expenditure and their work decision, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere. The significant contribution of NREGA was that it has removed these constraints as the wage employment was made available within or closer to the village. It has provided them with the opportunity to earn without having had to forgo their other familiar obligations. Now all they have no fear to enter in to a commercial bank or government office to hold discussions with the officials.



The overall impact of NREGA on women's lives is quite positive in many ways, whether it is by enhancing their economic independence and self-confidence, contributing to food security, helping to reduce distress migration, or fostering better awareness of minimum wages. The role of NREGA as a tool of women's empowerment deserves much more attention than it has received so far. Account payment of wages also creates some other effects. Apart from increasing the chances for greater control over earnings, it leads to the development of a saving habit. Initially, most of these workers used to withdraw their entire wages at one go. Gradually, they have started withdrawing as per their needs. This has an added advantage as women are able to save money from wasteful expenditure, if husbands or other male members tend to spend on items like liquor. Women were also found to invest in fixed deposit schemes in the same bank.

Implementation of NREGA has contributed to very high levels of Women empowerment particularly in the following aspects.

- As the work is organized by women's groups, the gender perspective gets built in automatically.
- As women are comfortable working along with their neighbours, nearly 80 percent of the workers have been women
- For the first time equal wages are really paid and this has boosted the earnings of women.
- As the wages are paid into bank accounts the habit of thrift which was already inculcated
- As the bank deposits are increasing, the intra-household status of the woman has also been improving commensurately as she controls substantial cash resources and withdrawal can be only on her decision.

#### **Advantages of NREGP:**

NREGP can give rise to a new work culture. The workers were hitherto controlled by contractors and their middlemen who knew how to extract work. When NREGP began the out-turn was very poor as the workers could not be supervised properly. But soon the workers themselves realized that they would be losing collectively and a new internal dynamics evolved with peer pressure forcing workers to put in their maximum effort. At the same time a kind of social responsibility also became evident as more capable workers became more than willing to put in extra effort to make up



for those who genuinely could not do hard work beyond a point, like the women and the elderly.

Public works have gained respectability. Hitherto they were seen as high jacked either by a contractor or a local leader. Now the workers see it as their right. They tend to distinguish between wages provided by a contractor and wages directly given by the Panchayat. The latter is almost equated with a salary. This has motivated a large section of people who were hitherto unwilling to work into join the work force.

Large scale social security programmes like MGNREA are subjected to undergo several stumbling blocks. Government and NGOs must study the impact of MGNREGA in rural areas so as to ensure that this massive anti-poverty scheme is not getting diluted from its actual path and to see that the disparity in terms of socio-economic condition among people in rural and urban areas is reduced to considerable extend.

### **Conclusion:**

More than half a century ago, Ragnar Nurkse, the distinguished Cambridge economist, had pointed out that capital starved over-populated countries could build social capital in a big way by employing the surplus labour on a variety of projects. He had listed schemes concerning irrigation, drainage, roads, railways, housing, etc. Though the Indian planners were aware of Nurkse's prescription, they could not have implemented the idea in the pre-Green Revolution era of precarious food supply. Now we have ample stocks of food grains. And our industry will welcome the enhanced demand for consumer goods. We can, therefore, employ the surplus labour for building social capital in a big way without incurring any risk.

The NREGA makes it mandatory for job-seekers to have a job. NREGA must realize its potential and focus on raising the productivity of agriculture in India's most backward regions. This can then lead further to the creation of allied livelihoods on the foundation of water security. The Andhra Pradesh Government wanted to implement the scheme in the state, and realized that a transparent and accountable system with IT-led execution at the grass-roots level would go a long way in ensuring its success. Government does see NREGA implementation as coming from a third tier of government. First tier of government is central government; 2nd tier is state government; third tier is gram sabha. Without creating a labour union we cannot activate the third tier of government. The success of the NREGA, however, will depend on people's realization of the Act as a right. Effective levels of awareness and





sustained public pressure are crucial to ensure that the implementation problems are addressed and the objectives met.

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