

WOMEN WORKERS AND THEIR STATUS IN MGNREG PROGRAMME: A STUDY IN JHARKHAND

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) is a programme of rural development which aims at enhancing livelihood security of households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. In this programme a minimum of 33 percentage participation of women is envisaged. However, the participation has wide inter-State variation ranging between 94 in Kerala and 19 per cent in Uttar Pradesh during the financial year 2012-13. Participation percentage of Jharkhand is 32 which is 1 percentage below the minimum requirement. Under this backdrop the paper makes a critical enquiry of the status of women in MGNREGA in the State of Jharkhand. Based on the State level data on implementation of this scheme, this paper examines the status of women participation in MGNREGA in Jharkhand. The paper presents inter-district variation drawing on secondary source and forwards reasons for the same.

Introduction

Rural development in response to international development discourse, particularly following globalisation, has been a shifting paradigm with ever changing schemes and programmes (Behera, 2006). Among other things one of the objectives emphasised in such programmes is to ensure participation of women in the process of development. Necessarily, gender mainstreaming happens to be one of the critical concerns in all development policies and programmes in recent years. In this regard introduction of rural development programme in India as per the provisions of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (hereafter MGNREGA) is an important step.

The MGNREGA, in general, aims at enhancing livelihood security of households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. In particular, the programme emphasises on women participation in development process with the provision of at least one-third of women beneficiaries from among those who have registered and requested for work under the scheme. There are studies which evidently show that the National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes (hereafter NREGS) have broadened the scope for wage employment of rural women by opening up of new avenues and enlarging

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their choices and capability (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010: 46). Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India records 54 per cent participation of women on an average in the country during the financial year 2012-13. Nevertheless, empirical studies show that achievement of this target of 33 per cent across the States happens to be erratic. It has wide inter-State variations ranging between 94 in Kerala and 19 per cent in Uttar Pradesh during the financial year 2012-13. Participation percentage of Jharkhand is 32 which is 1 percentage point below the minimum envisaged in the programme (Ministry of Rural Development, 2013).

With this backdrop the paper examines the status of women beneficiaries of MGNREGA in Jharkhand in general and with reference to inter-district variations in particular. It has also tried to identify factors contributing to such an emerging status of women in the process. Being a preliminary inquiry it has some shortcomings. Beneficiaries apart, we have not interviewed the mates and the implementing agencies to address the issue. Moreover, the male participation is not analysed to situate the female participation in a comparative perspective. The qualitative analysis also draws on a single focused group discussion and its generalisation for the State might have its own limitation.

As Acharya & Ghimire maintain, 'The impact of any development programme or any approach on gender must be measured in terms of changes in life option for women which are determined not only by material assistance provided by the project but by the overall gender ideology and socio-economic structure' (Acharya & Ghimire, 2005: 4726). It is to be mentioned that the status of women is normally examined in broader frame of gender relations in social context. But such relations also manifest in various fields consequent upon development programmes. Therefore, Acharya & Ghimire suggest to examine gender relations in any development programme with reference to

'access to resources and economic opportunities, impact on the division of labour and workload, household decisions and women's role in them, decision-making in the public arena and their effectiveness and the ideology of exclusion on the basis of gender' (*ibid*:4726). It is to be further mentioned that the 'status' of women in this paper is not studied in terms of changing role relations along gender line, but in terms of participation of women in NREGS.

Methodology

The study is empirical in nature and by and large a preliminary enquiry into the research problem formulated for investigation. Data were collected from both the primary and secondary sources for analysis. Secondary source consists of State and district level implementation statistics available in government records, basically Jharkhand government's website on MGNREGA and Registrar General of India. Secondary data were analysed to study overall performance of the schemes and the issue of participation in relation to expenditure, sex-ratio, and literacy rate. Simple statistical tools like covariance and percentage were employed for the analysis.

Primary data were collected through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) organised and conducted in Senha Block of Lohardaga district which is one of the tribal dominated districts of Jharkhand. For the FGD representatives of Mahila Vikash Mandal (MVM), Senha were interviewed. Mahila Vikash Mandal is a block level Self-Help Group (SHG) Federation having 180 SHGs as constituent members, formed in February 2010. A total of 22 members participated in this discussion, out of whom four were male members and employed as service providers of this Federation. This FGD was carried out for about two hours and all the participants discussed on the topic titled 'MGNREGA- local problems and women'. Reason behind selecting the Federation was that it represents the whole SHG members of the block as the informants of this study are the representatives of them.

In order to investigate the issue of the status of women in relation to their participation in MGNREGA the following assumptions are made:

- There is a positive relationship between the level expenditure, along with its components like wage expenditure and administrative expenditure, and participation of women in MGNREGA.
- There is a positive relationship between literacy and women beneficiaries in the programme.
- The favourable sex-ratio and women participation in the programme are positively related.
- The efficient implementation process and level of participation are positively related.

MGNREGA: Status of Implementation in Jharkhand

MGNREGA is the first ever law in India that guarantees wage employment at an unprecedented scale (Ministry of Rural Development, 2013) with a focus on gender mainstreaming. It 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. Then in Phase II additional 130 districts were included under this programme in 2007-08 and it covered all the districts of India in 2008. The main objective of this Act is to ensure wage employment along with strengthening resource management through works that address the cause of chronic poverty such as drought, deforestation, soil erosion (*ibid*). MGNREGA aims to provide a steady source of income and livelihood for the poor through wage employment and infrastructure creation.

Of course, NREGS following the guidelines in MGNREGA is not the first scheme to guarantee wage employment. There were other schemes like Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (JRY)

with the same objective. But NREGS differs from earlier one in that it has a comprehensive approach to rural development where income generation through wage employment is associated with gender concerns and sustainability to address local issues in a cultural perspective.

In Jharkhand, the Phase I included 21 districts namely Bokaro, Chatra, Deoghar, Dhanbad, Dumka, Garhwa, Giridih, Godda, Gumla, Hazaribagh, Jamtara, Koderma, Latehar, Lohardaga, Pakur, Palamu, Ranchi, Sahebganj, Saraikela, Simdega and West Singhbhum. East Singhbhum was included in Phase II and the Phase III included remaining districts namely Khunti and Ramgarh. The overall data on the financial and physical performance in Jharkhand show that MGNREGA does provide basic income assurance to a large number of beneficiaries. Another important achievement of the MGNREGA is that 68.42 per cent out of total outlay allocated is spent on wages and 31.58 per cent on material heads for FY 2012-13 (nrega.nic.in). Thus it maintains the 60:40 ratio of fund allocation between wage payment and material heads.

The performance of MGNREGA in Jharkhand presents a mixed picture as transpires from Table 1. There is increase in the allotment of job cards in FY 2012-13 as compared to FY 2011-12, but there is decline both in demand to employment and assurance of job to demand employment. This may be because of low participation of women in this programme which we have dealt with in following paragraphs. However, one positive aspect which is visible is the gap between demand over employment and actual employment which has decreased in FY 2012-13 over the preceding year. Although the percentage of households which completed 100 days of work, both in the FY 2011-12 and 2012-13, is very low, 3.67 and 3.98 per cent, respectively, there is slight increase over the previous year.

Table 1 : Performance of MGNREGA in Jharkhand in FY 2011-12 and 2012-13

Performance of different heads		2011-12	2012-13
Cumulative No. of Households Issued Job Cards	Total	4012789	4051059
	SC	540157	545356
	ST	1491165	1513570
	Others	1981467	1992133
Cumulative No. of Households demanded Employment		1563750	1334437
Cumulative No. of Households provided Employment		1556569	1327618
Percentage of Households provided employment to the demand		99.54	99.48
Cumulative number of Households completed 100 days		57163	52789
Percentage of Households completed 100 days to total number of households provided employment		3.67	3.98

Source: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (official website), <http://nrega.nic.in>

The official data show that the MGNREGA notified wages have increased across the nation since 2006 (Shah, 2012), but in case of Jharkhand it is fluctuating and it is still below the legal minimum agriculture wage in the State as is presented in Table 2. Moreover, in Jharkhand the MGNREGA average wage is still below the MGNREGA notified wage rate for the FY 2011-12. Whereas the MGNREGA notified wage is ₹ 122, minimum agricultural wage is recorded ₹ 127 during the period of reference. As per field data, surprisingly, the average wage paid to beneficiaries was found to be ₹ 119.77. Moreover, if we calculate the average annual wage of the households then we will find that it is far below the notified annual wage rate. The annual average wage income of the households should be ₹ 12700.00 if we take ₹ 127.00 as minimum wage rate, but the data of 2012-13 show that average wage income of households in Jharkhand was only ₹ 4454.80, which is 35.08 per cent to notified average annual wage rate of the household. Further, it was also observed that the average annual work days is also very less which is calculated to be 35 days only if we

keep average wage rate as ₹127.00. Thus there is data inconsistency in records which could be due to ineffective implementation of the schemes or/and practice of corruption.

MGNREGA and Participation of Women in Jharkhand

As mentioned above, one of the major objectives of MGNREGA is to ensure women participation in development process. Accordingly, this participation level is fixed at 33 per cent following the guidelines of MGNREGA. But in Jharkhand still the participation of women in this programme is below the required percentage. The data for 2012-13 show that the participation rate of women in this programme in Jharkhand is only 32.53. Out of all 24 districts, 11 districts have shown the required performance and remaining 13 districts the participation is below the 33 per cent (Appendix I). The districts which have above 33 per cent participation are Saraikela, Latehar, West Singhbhum, Lohardaga, East Singhbhum, Hazaribag, Chatra, Ranchi, Koderma, Garwa and Ramgarh. In remaining 13 districts the performance is

Table 2 : Increase in MGNREGA Notified Wages in Jharkhand from FY 2006-07 to FY 2011-12 and Minimum Agricultural Wage (₹ per day) FY 2011-2012

State	MGNREGA wage 2006-07	MGNREGA wage 2007-08	MGNREGA wage 2008-09	MGNREGA wage 2009-10	MGNREGA wage 2011-12	Minimum agriculture (Minimum Wage Act) 2011-12
Jharkhand	76.68	76.68	99	120	122	127
India	72.52	79	101.07	126.88	93.87	104.67
Differences	4.16	-2.32	-2.07	-6.88	28	22.33

Source: - Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (official website), <http://nrega.nic.in>

below 33 per cent. Saraikela records highest with 44.31 per cent from among all the districts, while Deogarh records lowest performance with 18.51 per cent only. From among the districts registering below 33 per cent performance Simdega shows the highest performance at 32.58 per cent.

One of the objectives of this paper is to test the hypothesis stated above to find out the relation between the participation of women in MGNREGA and other variables such as sex ratio, education, and expenditure on the programme. For this we have calculated the correlation co-efficient between these variables for the FY 2012-13.

For a better understanding, the districts of Jharkhand have been classified into two categories viz. a) districts with above 33 percentage participation of women named as category-1, (b) districts with below 33 percentage of participation of women named as category-2 (Appendix-I).

Table 3 shows that there is no significant co-relation between the level of participation of women in the programme and the different variables such as female literacy, sex ratio, total expenditure, wage expenditure and administrative expenditure. It has also been found that except female literacy all other

variables such as sex ratio, total expenditure, wage expenditure and administrative expenditure have a positive relation with participation of women in MGNREGA. It follows that with an increase in these variables the participation of women in MGNREGA in Jharkhand is likely to increase. There seems to be a causal connection between sex ratio and women participation in the programme. In category-I the sex ratio is 1000:955 and the participation rate is 39.37 per cent, the correlation coefficient being 0.77. On the other hand, the sex ratio recorded in category -II is 1000:957 and the participation rate is found 26.96 with coefficient correlation being 0.11. In other words, the favourable sex ratio is negatively related to women participation in NREGS. A cursory look with reference to Appendix-III at Saraikala, Latehar and West Singhbhum districts with sex ratio of 1000:958, 1000:964 and 1004:43.54 shows that these districts have registered participation rates at 44.31, 44.17 and 43.54 per cent, respectively. The trend is obvious and declining. But Lohardaga district with sex ratio of 1000:985 registers 43.32 per cent of participation which does not fall into the trend. Similar is the case with Simdega, Palamu and Giridihi and Khunti districts where sex ratio is 1000:1000, 1000:929, 1000:943 and 1000:994, respectively, but the corresponding participation rates are 32.58,

Table 3 : Result of the Correlation Study

Variables	Category-1	Category-2
Participation and Female Literacy	-0.20	-0.04
Participation and Sex Ratio	0.77	0.11
Participation and Total Expenditure	0.13	0.32
Participation and Wage Expenditure	0.22	0.32
Participation and Administrative Expenditure	0.02	0.34

Source : Interpreted from the data available in Government records drawn from official website www.nregra.nic.in

32.10, 31.85 and 31.85 without displaying any trend. It is to be mentioned that Garhwa district which is included in category-I is identified as gender critical district in Census of 2011 out of 8 gender critical districts (other 7 are included in category-II) of Jharkhand. In this district the sex ratio is 1000:933, but the participation rate of women in the programme is 33.18 per cent, less than, say that of in Saraikala district where the sex ratio is 1000:958 and participation rate is 44.31 per cent. The comparison between the two does not hold to the premise that favourable sex ratio is negatively related to the rate of women participation. Therefore, it needs to be substantiated with further investigation because while considering a few individual cases the trend is found to be erratic.

Although rate participation of women and administrative expenditure do not have very significant relation in both the categories of districts, it has been observed that the coefficient value is more in category- II than category-I. Surprisingly the rate of women participation as can be seen from Appendix I comes to 39.37 and 26.96 per cent, respectively. In other words, higher correlation coefficient between participation and administrative expenditure does not confirm to higher rate of women participation in the programme. So is the case with women participation and wage expenditure. The higher coefficient correlation between the two in category –II has not ensured

higher level of women participation in the programme. The effort of the State government through more expenditure in administrative component to create awareness among the community members about the programme by different governmental and non-governmental organisations such as PRADAN, AROHAN etc., and creating women self-help groups for gender mainstreaming have not been effective. However, this needs further scrutiny with reference to number of mobilising agencies in the districts and the level of participation which has not been taken up in this analysis. Further, whether the administrative expenditure has gender bias or not needs to be examined with reference to male participation in the programme. This also holds in the case of the relationship between the level of women participation and wage expenditure. There are some other factors which could not be captured from the analysis of data available in government records. This has been attempted through Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

Three major factors have come to the fore from FGD and these are late payment or no payment, corruption in Panchayati Raj Institutions and lack of awareness about the programme.

All the members who participated in the FGD had the same view point regarding payment in MGNREGA. According to them, people do not want to work in MGNREGA as

they are paid late or they are denied the wages of their work. According to guidelines of the Act, wages are to be paid on weekly basis and not beyond a fortnight in any case. But it was revealed during focused group discussion that the guidelines are not strictly followed while implementing the programme. Payments are delayed; and in some cases these were delayed for over a year. One of the participants shared that she has not been paid till the date of interview (25 March, 2013) for the work she did last year in MGNREGA. Even one participant ironically remarked, NREGA *kodega to bhodega* (if you work in NREGA then you have to suffer). No doubt, as the members shared, it is very difficult for a wage labourer to continue to work if they are not paid regularly. As a result, the programme has become less attractive for women. People, due to late payment or no payment to their work, prefer to work in other places where they are paid regularly even though they are paid less wage. Earlier studies also have found similar results. (Abraham, 2010; Khera & Nayak, 2009). Abraham in his study in Khunti district of Jharkhand found that there are many cases of late payment and no payment (Abraham, 2010). Delayed payment is found to be the major factor for low participation of women in the programme in the studied area as "delays in wage payment make things particularly difficult for single women, who cannot afford to wait for work and wages as they are the sole earners in the family." (Khera & Nayak, 2009:10).

Delayed payments however do not explain the increase in the level of participation of women in the programme as registered in the records of the government. There is a slight increase of this participation, by 1, in Jharkhand from 31 per cent in 2011-12 to 32 per cent in 2012-13. This trend is also reported at national level where 47 per cent participation in 2011-12 has increased to 53 per cent in the 2012-13 registering a 6 percentage point increase over a year. This increasing trend could be due to

coverage of new beneficiaries to the programme along with some of those who are also reported working in the following year having no other alternative avenue. Delayed payments discourage participation, but the rural unemployed people do not keep themselves 100 per cent away from participation in the NREGS due to this reason in the absence of any other alternative. There seems to be an element of exploitation in the process of implementation of NREGS because people have to work under the scheme in the absence of any other alternative choice in the village. This has also been proved by the data of government as the average wage paid to the wage labourers of Jharkhand in MGNREGA is less than the actual payment.

According to the guidelines of the plans and decisions regarding the nature and choice of work, planning process are to be made in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). PRI has been envisaged to play a major role by this Act. However, it was revealed during field work at FGD that lack of transparency and accountability in PRIs also discourage women in participating in this programme. Members present in FGD said that wage jobs were assigned to those people who have good relation with the representatives of the PRI or the workers who agree to give some portion of their earning from their wage. It was also reported that annual plans are prepared without taking most of the people's views and without involving them in the process in general and excluding all women in particular. The representatives in PRI, obviously through MGNREGA create a power centre in place of decentralising it as envisaged in Panchayati Raj guidelines. It is because of the gender and power bias in implementation process in which women are excluded from decision making that low participation of women is recorded. This premise also needs to be substantiated with a comparison with the male participants in the programme.

"The placement of mates at the worksite is considered particularly important in the

context of Jharkhand" (Mishra, 2010: 40). They are responsible for making entries in the job cards, maintaining attendance in the master rolls, measuring the work and ensuring on-site facilities. Participants also informed that it is mate or site in-charge who directly interacts with them and provides them information on available work. As they are made solely responsible for implementation of work in worksite and there is lack of transparency in PRI, there are examples of exploitation of the beneficiaries by the mates. From the FGD it came out that generally mates give job or information regarding the new works to those beneficiaries with whom they have good relation or from whom they can extract commission. It seems that it excluded lots of beneficiaries for whom this programme has been introduced. Moreover, there are other examples of mis-utilisation of job cards of the beneficiaries by the mates. Two members during focused group discussion reported that their job cards were appropriate by the mate who returned to them after a long time. They also said that their job cards were used to show their participation in the worksite and to avail of their wage. In such a situation women are found victim of PRI representatives' manipulation because of low female literacy and lack of decision-making power.

It is also revealed during the FGD that women have low awareness about the programme. Most of the participants were unaware of the different provisions of the programme. They do not know about unemployment allowances and probably because of this ignorance and consequent lacking in political pressure, "Jharkhand is yet to notify the State Unemployment Allowance Rules" (Aind, 2013: 7). This apart, people in general and women in particular do not have awareness about the procedural formalities of making complaints against the non-payment or late payment of wages. Thus, all these reasons affected their participation in the programme.

Conclusion

From the analysis of data available in government sources we find that the level of participation of women in NERGS in Jharkhand is low as compared to national level. Although the gap of women participation in Jharkhand to average national participation is decreasing year by year, still the gap is of about 22 percentage points which is very alarming for gender mainstreaming to development process. A number of factors are found to be responsible for the low participation of women in the programme.

The analysis made with reference to government records finds a positive relationship between level of women participation in the programme and sex-ratio, total expenditure, wage expenditure and administrative expenditure. On the other hand, it also shows a negative relationship between such participation and female literacy, meaning that literacy level has no positive impact on the level of participation. While negative relationship between level of participation and female literacy could be used to explain the issue of low level of participation of women, the positive relations as we find do not help in explaining it. In other words, the positive relationships between participation and wage expenditure, for example, do not explain the low level of women participation in MGNREGA. That is why qualitative approach to understand the issue was applied by conducting focused group discussion. From the discussion, three major factors have emerged from FGD, namely late payment, corruption in Panchayati Raj Institutions and by mates, and lack of awareness of women about the programme, which explain the low level of participation to a greater extent. This proves the hypothesis that efficient implementation process and level of participation are positively related. Alternatively, it means that inefficient implementation process with women lacking in awareness, practice of late payment and existence of corruption results in low level of participation.

However, a comparative study with male participation is suggested to capture the ground reality to explain the emerging issue of low level of participation of women more analytically.

This study thus finds that there are serious problems in the nature of implementation which discourage women to participate in this programme. There is an urgent need to remove these problems. Although the Government of India has directed the State to involve Self-Help Groups in planning process of MGNREGA (Ministry of Rural Development, 2012), actually in field it has not taken place.

Still women SHGs are excluded from decision making in the planning process. It is important for both the State Government and the implementing agencies to implement the recommendation of earlier studies to speed up the participation of women in this programme. It has also been observed that the average annual wage income of household and average annual work days of household in Jharkhand in MGNREGA is very poor. This study has not studied the average annual income of and workdays of women separately. Despite this shortcoming, this study has tried to find out the reasons which affect the participation of women in this programme, though it has not addressed many questions such as the reasons for late payment or no payment, the role of administration, why the PRI is ineffective, etc., which need further investigation on the issue.

It has been observed that the success of MGNREGA in Jharkhand is not significant in terms of 100 days employment of beneficiaries and

participation of women. Moreover, the Government data show that the actual payment to MGNREGA worker is less than the notified wage rate of MGNREGA. All the beneficiaries are victimised through this process of late payment, no payment and less payment but women are victimised in double way. First they remain absent in decision making and secondly, they are paid late. Already women have low voice about the wages. This is evident from the fact that except in government works, women are paid unequally in other works. Wage rate in Jharkhand in all other works is unequal as mentioned by all the participants of the FGD. Thus, socially women are marginalised. May be it is one of the reasons why women are not raising voice against the late payment or no payment system in MGNREGA. The status of women participation in NREGS is not unique in Jharkhand only. It is a general state of affairs when we look at gender mainstreaming through policy programmes. Therefore, it is not a surprise when we are informed that despite numerous UN resolutions and agreements requiring gender mainstreaming in policies, programmes and institutions (Chant & Pedwell, 2008 and Momsen, 2004), it is a fact that women's presence remains largely absent in global policy making arenas and institution. This is because, as is the case in Jharkhand, "gender equality in most cases does not feature as an explicit goal of the project, and this may be because of the assumption that gender has been mainstreamed into the project design, yet in practice it leads to the exclusion of women, particularly from decision-making and control position" (Rao, 2005: 4704).

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