

## MGNREGA- A Programme for Inclusive Growth Among Rural Poor in India



### Sociology

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### ABSTRACT

*After Independence, The central and state governments have adopted number of poverty eradication programmes especially in rural areas. Among these The MGNREGP is pioneer one playing a vital role in providing employment in rural areas. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, (NREGA) was notified on September 7, 2005 and came into force on February 2, 2006. The objective of the Act is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.*

### INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, always cherished about India's rural beauty, resilient power as much he was concerned about the poverty and living conditions. His pet phrase was India lives in villages. Rural development as an integrated concept of growth and poverty elimination has been of paramount concern in all the five year plans. Traditionally, Rural Development programmes comprise of following basic steps like infrastructure facilities in the rural areas, namely schools, health centers, roads, adequate drinking water and electrification. There have been also schemes like improving agricultural productivity, providing social services like health and education for socio-economic development, implementing scheme for the promotion of rural industry and importantly providing rural employment.

All these were going on smoothly undoubtedly. However, despite the strides the country has made in the last six decades, it must be admitted that there have been certain areas especially in rural India where standard of living has been far from satisfactory. Therefore, in 2005, the Government undertook a major venture, which today could be easily called the turning point of the changing face of the Indian villages. The Government enacted a law, under the name of, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 whereby it says any adult who is willing to do unskilled manual work at the minimum wage is entitled to being employed on local public works within 15 days of applying.

### Objective

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, (NREGA) was notified on September 7, 2005 and came into force on February 2, 2006. The objective of the Act is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

### NREGA GOAL

- Strong social safety net for the vulnerable groups by providing a fall-back employment source, when other employment alternatives are scarce or inadequate,
- Growth engine for sustainable development of an agricultural economy. Through the process of providing employment on works that address causes of chronic poverty such as drought, deforestation and soil erosion, the Act seeks to strengthen the natural resource base of rural livelihood and create durable assets in rural areas. Effectively implemented, NREGA has the potential to transform the geography of poverty,
- Empowerment of rural poor through the processes of a rights-based Law,
- New ways of doing business, as a model of governance reform anchored on the principles of transparency and grass root democracy.

### NREGA ACT

Thus, NREGA fosters conditions for inclusive growth ranging from basic wage security and recharging rural economy to a

transformative empowerment process of democracy.

The Act was notified in 200 districts in the first phase with effect from February 2nd 2006 and then extended to additional 130 districts in the financial year 2007-2008 (113 districts were notified with effect from April 1<sup>st</sup> 2007, and 17 districts in UP were notified with effect from May 15th 2007). The remaining districts have been notified under the NREGA with effect from April 1, 2008. Thus NREGA covers the entire country with the exception of districts that have a hundred percent urban population. In its fourth year of inception NREGP has been rechristened as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as a mark of respect to the father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi who dreamt of self-reliant and self sufficient villages.

### Inclusive Growth

Independent India has to acknowledge the critical role the NREGA has played in providing a measure of inclusive growth. It has given people a right to work, to reestablish the dignity of labour, to ensure people's economic and democratic rights and entitlements, to create labour intensive infrastructure and assets, and to build the human resource base of our country. For the first time, the power elite recognize the people's right to fight endemic hunger and poverty with dignity, accepting that their labour will be the foundation for infrastructure and economic growth. The entitlements paradigm is still to be established in many States in the country. Second generation issues like the expansion of the categories of permissible works needs to be taken up with labour and the deprived continuing to be the central focus. The improvements must be to strengthen, not divert from these basic tenets. In the midst of the current economic slowdown, there is enough evidence that this kind of commitment can work to help reduce the slowdown.

The political class would do well to understand that the most important solution is an assertion of its will to respond to people's voices. The many wise, creative, and innovative initiatives emerging from theory and practice have a future only if they are owned by the people and implemented with justice. The NREGA can give people an opportunity to make the entire system truly transparent and accountable. Properly supported, people's struggles for basic entitlements can, in turn, become the strongest political initiative to strengthen our democratic fabric.

Within five years of time span, as per the government data more than 4.65 crores households are provided with employment throughout the country. This also states that around 200.7 crore person days are created. 88.32 lakh works taken up under this Flagship programme. The national bulletin of NREGA also puts on view that out of the total person days created 48.8% are the person days by the women laborers. Similarly, 29.9% are created by the laborers from SC community and 21.8% by the ST community laborers. However a swift look at these figures, giving a kind of contentment in terms of that the socially backward groups like scheduled tribes, scheduled castes as well as women participated in the programme but when it comes to social inclusion of these groups in a flagship programme like NREGA, it

needs to be viewed critically.

No doubt that NREGA is the first act in its type which is more inclusive in nature. It was primarily implemented in 200 districts (later on expanded to all the districts) in the country where poverty and backwardness are the major issues. Similarly, in the act there is the provision for giving preference to 30% of women in each works. There are provisions for land development of SCs, STs and IAY beneficiaries. The central portal also maintains a data base, where it indicates person days created by the scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, and persons with disability and women laborers. Even though the data generated under NREGA views a bright picture in terms of inclusion issues but the state and regional wise data says a different story all together. It is like some states performing well and have successfully included these socially excluded groups where as many other states are lacking behind.

Let's start with the figures of inclusion of women laborers in NREGA. Women are the half of the whole workforce. As per the national level consolidated figure, during the financial year of 2010-11 out of the total laborers, 48.8% were women. That means the involvement of women in NREGA is half in the total work force.

Next in the inclusion ladders are the laborers from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribe communities. In India as per the 2001 census, the share of the scheduled caste population in total population is 16.2%. This is the community which have either no or less access to land. They depend on caste based occupation as well as on the daily labour activities. Therefore the rural employment guarantee act becomes a vital source of income for these communities. The national consolidated figure for the financial year 2010-2011, proves that the participation of different scheduled caste communities in NREGA is somehow fair, if compared to the share of the community in the total population. In the financial 2010-2011 year, percentage of SC participation in NREGA was around 29.87% nationally. In the states like Punjab (78.92%), Tamil Nadu (53.29%), Haryana (53.59%), Bihar (45.3%), it was more than fifty percent. However in the states like Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa etc. the participation of S.Cs in NREGA is higher than their share in the states total population but it is not very much encouraging.

Similarly, as per 2001 Census, the share of scheduled tribe population in total population is 8.1%. In the financial 2010-2011 year, percentage of SC participation in NREGA was around 17.05% nationally. In the states like Chhattisgarh (38.2%), Jharkhand (42.99%), Maharashtra (33.16%), Orissa (35.69%), Madhya Pradesh (45.34) the share of tribal population is bit high in comparison to other states. These states are the backward states of India and the socio-economic condition of the tribal communities is also not good. They are normally excluded from many of the government programmes and schemes.

NREGA created a scope for inclusion of these backward communities and improving their socio-economic conditions. In the year of 2008-09, the percentage of ST participation in NREGA was 25.43, where as in the year of 2009-10, it is 21.54%, but in 2010-2011 it was declined to 17.05%.

The issue of people with disability and opportunity for them to get work under NREGA is one more concern from the beginning of the programme. However, things have improved in terms of engagement of the disables in NREGA but more efforts need to be done. It has experienced that the inclusion of people with disability in NREGA is an issue of mindset of the officials at the local level. It is a common mindset that disables people cannot do physical labour and therefore not allowed to work by the local officials and representatives. A high number of disable persons having job cards in different states indicates that they are interested to be engaged in the work. In order to ensure their inclusion, the typical mindset of the ground level officials needs to be changed.

#### Financial Inclusion:

Over 10 crore NREGA bank and post office accounts have been opened so far. These accounts have helped bring the rural poor under the organized banking sector. Besides the agencies for wage payment are being separated from implementing agencies through accounts-based wage payment. This will not only infuse integrity in wage payment, but also bring the most vulnerable people in rural India into formal banking and credit system. Workers under NREGA are provided medical and health cover insurance. Innovative experiments in the form of use of smart cards and biometric signatures for wage payment to NREGA workers in remote villages are being supported.

The Act is doing extremely well so far. However, there have been instances of certain hurdles in implementation. So many ideas are being formulated and plans made for implementation of NREGA, but panchayats which are implementing it, have no proper place to do so. This has been rightly addressed with the Government announcing setting up Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendras in all 2.5 lakh panchayats of the country in the next three years. These would act as mini-secretariats for NREGA projects implementation. The greatest strength of democracy is that under this system of governance, the people are the masters of the destiny and also of their own developmental works. This is one thing, Mahatma Gandhi had always underlined. The rural Indian population, their welfare and the improvement in agriculture and rural India's other facets were close to his heart. India always lives in villages and still it is a rural-based society. Yet in a fast changing world and pressure of urbanization has often led hundreds off the fields taking them away from the villages. Perhaps going back to the field would be a difficult proposition for many Indians, but the Government's target of improving rural living conditions is worth appreciating. Well, the MGNREGA that way is a good instrument of change.

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