

IMPACT OF MGNREGA ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT-A CASE STUDY OF CUTTACK DISTRICT IN ODISHA

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Abstract *The paper attempts to study the impact of MGNREGA on women empowerment through their participation in Odisha. It will highlight some facts about level of participation of women in MGNREGA in Odisha. Further an attempt has been made to have an analysis of impact of such participation on women empowerment in Nelia village of Tangi-Choudwar block of Cuttack district in Odisha. It has been found out that the level of participation of women in MGNREGA in Odisha has been between 35-40 percent over a period of five years (2008-09 to 2012-13). Further it was found out that overall impact of MGNREGA on women's lives has been quite positive in many ways, whether it is by enhancing their economic independence and self-confidence or by helping them to have greater role in decision making in household. An integrated approach that links equality-based rights to manage productive assets and gender inclusive is the need of the hour for addressing risks arising from MGNREGA fatigue.*

Keywords: *Economic Independence, Empowerment, Gender Inclusive, Participation*

INTRODUCTION

“Employment to all” has always been accepted as one of the policy goals of India. Many schemes like National Rural Employment Programme (1980-89); Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (1983-89); Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (1989-99); Employment Assurance Scheme; Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (1999-2002); Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (2001-08) and National Food For Work Programme (2004-08) were introduced to achieve this goal. But in these programmes there was no guarantee of employment for longer period of time or payment of minimum wage which compelled the government to ensure guaranteed jobs for substantial period of a year and minimum wage. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one of the most progressive legislations enacted since independence. Its significance is evident from a variety of perspectives. First, it is a bold and unique experiment in the provision of rural employment – in India and indeed in the world at large. Second, it is the first expression of the right to work as an enforceable legal entitlement. In a country where labour is the only economic asset for millions of people, gainful employment is a prerequisite for the fulfilment of other basic rights – the right to life, the right to food, and the right to education.

Empowerment has become the buzz word for the last two decades. It is a process of building capacities of creating an atmosphere which enables people to fully utilise their creative potential in pursuance of a quality life. It is a social action process that promotes participation of people's organisation and communities in gaining control over their lives in their communities (Hazra, 2009).

Empowerment gives women the capacities to influence in decision making process, planning implementation and evaluation by integrating them into political system. Women empowerment is not only empowerment but also crucial if development is to be sustainable. Indian economic reforms based on globalisation, liberalisation and empowerment of women by reserving 33% reservation in areas such as *Panchayati Raj* are opening new vistas for development of women and in improving this status. A nation goes ahead only through the contribution of all of its members. Pushing women into the backyard drags behind the society. Current framework of international development recognises women empowerment as an immense effective stratagem for the all round development of the society. Though India is developing economically and technologically by leaps and bounds but women, especially rural women still continue to be discriminated and their current status in the society still causes concern (Hazra A, 2011).

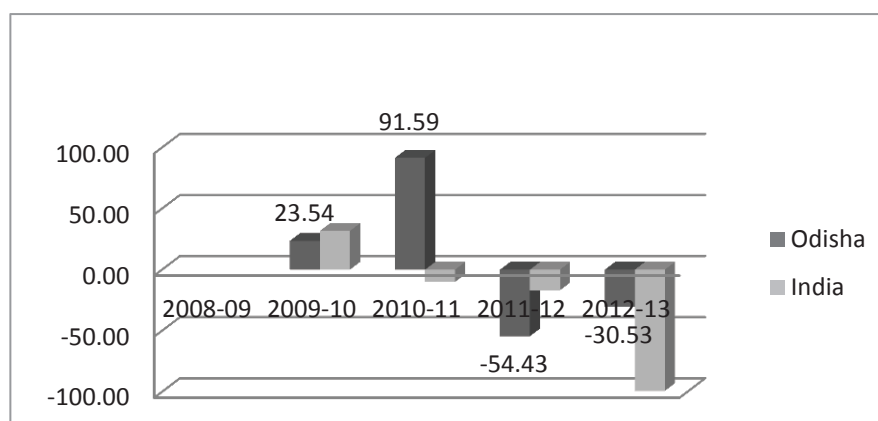
Measures to improve the status, role and participation of rural women must be given high priority both because women have a fundamental right to enjoy equality with men in all aspects of life and because women can play a crucial role in and must fully participate in the sustainable development process. It is therefore essential to integrate gender perspectives in policies, projects and programs that can be achieved by gender analysis. MGNREGA has become a beacon of light in the empowerment of rural women, and contributed substantially for the enhanced living and economic conditions by creating equal wages to male and female workers and increasing minimum wage (Hazra, 2009). MGNREGA is a completely centrally-sponsored scheme, which provides rights-based framework

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Table 1: Women Participation in MGNREGA in Odisha and India

	Odisha			India		
	percentage of women participation	Cumulative Person days generate(in lakh)	rate of growth of person days generated	Cumulative Person days generate(in lakh)	percentage of women participation	rate of growth of person days generated
2008-09	37.58	162.58		10357.36	47.88	
2009-10	36.25	200.85	23.54	13640.48	48.1	31.70
2010-11	39.4	384.81	91.59	12274.21	47.73	-10.02
2011-12	38.65	175.35	-54.43	10197.74	48.17	-16.92
2012-13	37.39	121.81	-30.53	74.74	53	-99.27

* Source: compiled by author and www.nrega.ac.in

Figure 1: Rate of Growth of Person Days Generated to Women

* Source: Compiled By Author

of wage employment programme and makes the government legally bound to provide employment to adult members of rural household. The Act got first introduced in 200 most backward districts of the country in Feb 2006. It was proposed to extend to the remaining districts only after 5 years, after seeing the popularity of the Act. But in the next year itself the Act was extended further to 130 more districts and within a year after the Act got universalized by bringing the entire country under its horizon with the exception of districts that have a hundred percent urban population, it got named after Mahatma Gandhi (2nd October 2009) to make the Act more reachable to the masses. Thus it became Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). There is much that the MGNREGA promises from the perspective of women's empowerment. Most boldly, in a rural milieu marked by stark inequalities between men and women – in the opportunities for gainful employment afforded as well as wage rates –MGNREGA represents action on both these counts. The act stipulates that wages will be equal for men and women. It is also committed to ensure that at least 33% of the workers shall be

women. By generating employment for women at fair wages in the village, MGNREGA can play a substantial role in economically empowering women and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem. Various provisions under the Act and its guidelines aim to ensure that women have equitable and easy access to work, decent working conditions, equal payment of wages and representation on decision-making bodies. Though much has been there in the act to empower women, whether really it is doing so? This needs an evaluation of MGNREGA in empowering women. So an attempt has been made to examine the impact of MGNREGA on women empowerment with following specific objectives:

1. To examine the level of participation of women in MGNREGA in Odisha and India.
2. To find out the impact of participation in MGNREGA on women empowerment in Nelia village of Cuttack district in Odisha.
3. To shed light on possible improvements that can be introduced to make MGNREGA more effective and responsive to the needs of women.

Women will be benefited in some way if they participate in the programme. So the next section deals with the comparative analysis of women participation in MGNREGA in Odisha and India.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION UNDER MGNREGA

As women's participation is one of the most targeted objectives of MGNREGA, it is important to see the extent of women's participation in the programme. There are various factors which encourage the women worker's participation under this scheme include nature of work which do not need skilled worker, the limited hours of work, availability of work locally, reduction of migration of male member, substantial jump in the wage rate etc. Participation of women varies widely across the nation. Women participation under MGNREGA is measured in person days. Table 1 shows the participation of women in MGNREGA in Odisha and India. The comparison of rate of growth of person days generated in India and Odisha can be seen in Figure 1.

With an increased rate of participation and amounts being spent on wages for women, studies and field evidence suggest a positive impact of the scheme on the economic well-being of women. The impact of MGNREGA on gender empowerment in Morigaon and Bongaigaon district of Assam showed that almost 70 to 80 percent of sample workers had meaningful income other than unpaid family work during the pre-NREGA (Hazarika, 2009). The scheme has also led to gender parity in wages. The NSSO 66th Round indicated that MGNREGA has reduced traditional wage discrimination in public works.

MGNREGA holds the powerful prospect of bringing major changes in the lives of women (Ramesh & Kumar, 2009). Access to economic resources also had a favourable impact on the social status of women. MGNREGA work has allowed women to spend money on their own needs, while earlier they might not have been at the liberty to do so (Khera & Nayak, 2009). This programme has also helped in easing out the debt burden to some extent (Ramesh & Kumar, 2009). There has also been an increased participation of women in *Gram Sabha* meetings (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010; Panda & Umdor, 2011).

Though women have been coming out in large numbers to participate in the scheme, the most important issue is women empowerment through participation. The question remains –does participation in MGNREGA lead to empowerment? A lot of literature though supports the emergence of women workers as independent bread earner leading to greater role in decision making in the family, discretion to spend and control the use of earning and confidence to earn without support further needs to be examined at micro level which is analysed in next section.

IMPACT OF MGNREGA ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

To assess the impact of MGNREGA on women empowerment, a survey was carried out in Nelia village in Tangi-Choudwar block of Cuttack district of Odisha in 2012-13. A random sampling was done to select a sample of 50 female workers from this panchayat. Data were collected from them through scheduled questionnaires.

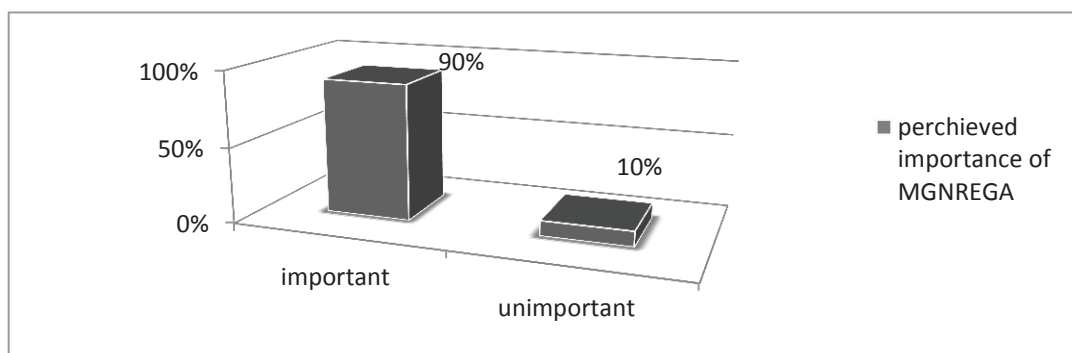
More than half (52%) of the interviewed women were from Scheduled Tribes; the rest were SCs (40 percent) and OBCs (8 percent). Most respondents reported agriculture or manual labour (construction) as the household's main occupation. Number of days worked, amount of wage, importance of scheme in workers life, collection of wages, decision in household expenditure, level of awareness, worksite facilities, participation in *Gram Sabha* meetings are the parameters based on which impact of MGNREGA on women empowerment in the present study will be assessed.

Number of Days Worked and Wages

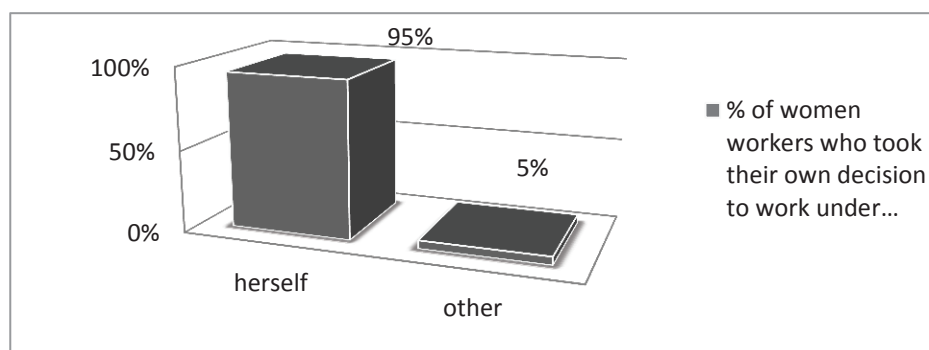
Employment at MGNREGA worksites seems to have raised both enthusiasm and expectations among women workers. Women workers unanimously affirmed that the benefits from MGNREGA employment were high and that they would like to get more days of work in a year. The challenge of the situation becomes clearer when we look at the small proportion of women surveyed (only 10 percent) who got more than 75 days of work in the last year. Almost half of the respondents (70 per cent) reported that they had worked for less than 25 days in the previous year.

Regarding wage payments, we found that most women workers were receiving the stipulated minimum wage, i.e. Rs. 100 per day or Rs 90 per assigned work. One surprising thing we found out that those women workers were getting more wages i.e. Rs 150 as a daily agricultural or manual worker. When asked why they are working under MGNREGA when they would be getting more wages if engaged in agricultural or manual works, some said that they would be getting the work under MGNREGA within 5 km from their village and if it is more than that, extra payment would be paid, while to others it provided supplementary income during lean agricultural season. To some of them they were working early in the morning within 9 am or digging 100 cubic feet soft soil getting the MGNREGA payment and going to their daily wage work i.e. earning both ways.

It is also clear that, men and women are paid equal wages at MGNREGA worksites as has been mandated by the Act. Given that wage gaps between the male and female casual workers have been the norm in rural India, this is an extremely significant development.

Figure 2: Percentage of MGNREGA Women Workers Considering Programme As Important

* Source: Compiled by Author

Figure 3: Percentage of Women Workers who Took Their Own Decision to Work Under MGNREGA

* Source: Compiled by Author

Contribution to Women's Independence

By putting cash incomes into their hands, MGNREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. As mentioned, this was one of MGNREGA's main aims. With the increased participation of women in household income-generation, a positive contribution to gender relations can be made. The survey data suggest that women workers are more confident about their roles as contributors to family expenditure and their work decisions, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere.

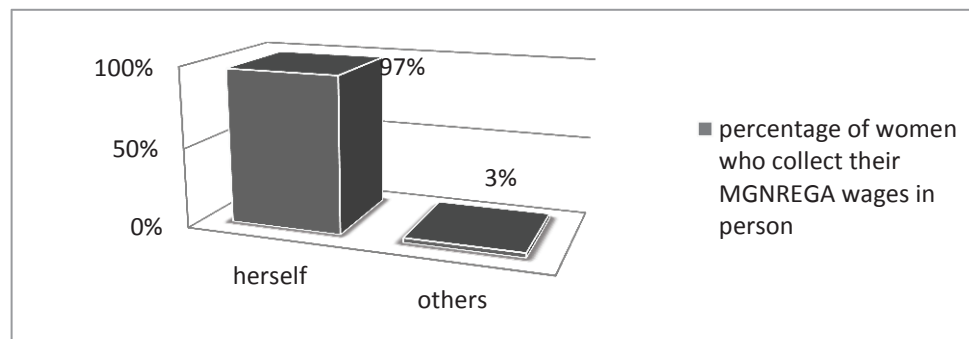
Near about all the respondents felt that the MGNREGA has brought a significant change in their villages as well as in their own lives. This is because employment is being provided within their village, generating community assets and enhancing their spending capacity. Most of the women felt that the Act is "important" for them as shown in Figure 2.

When asked about their decision to work under the MGNREGA, most respondents said that the decision to work at MGNREGA worksites was their own. About 95 % report that it was their own decision. Evidently, MGNREGA

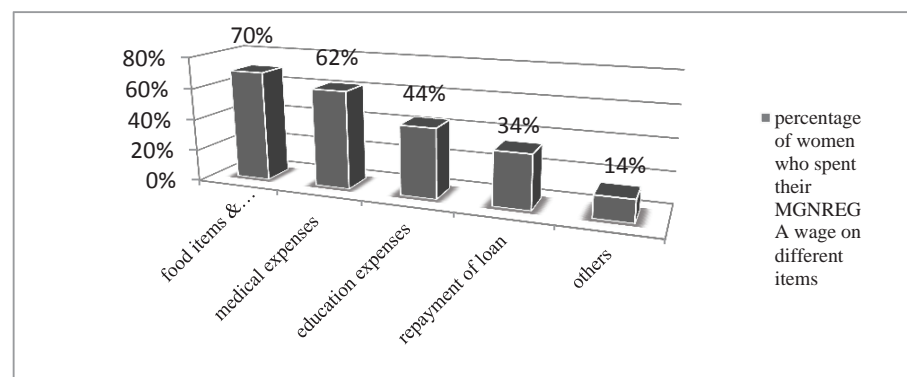
employment has encouraged women to take the decision to enter the sphere of the cash economy (Figure 3).

Another important point that emerged from the survey is that women workers were receiving their wages in person, rather than through husbands or other persons. 97% received their own wage (Figure 4).

Inevitably, women's MGNREGA earnings are increasing their contribution to household income. A large majority (70 percent) of the respondents said that they spent wages earned at MGNREGA works on regular food and consumer goods. They felt that the increased income locally available through MGNREGA work was helping to ensure at least two regular meals a day. For the most part, the amounts earned through MGNREGA are insufficient to repay debts. Nevertheless, 34 percent of the respondents said that they had spent their wages on repaying small debts. Further, it helps them to keep themselves away from the clutches of local moneylenders. A significant percentage of workers – almost 44 percent - also spent their MGNREGA wages on their children's education. The other large expenditure regularly met through MGNREGA wages is healthcare, with 62 percent of the respondents having spent earnings on this. Around 14% says that they spent their wages on other

Figure 4: Percentage of Women who Collect Their MGNREGA Wages in Person

* Source: Compiled by Author

Figure 5: Percentage of Women who Spent Their MGNREGA Wages on Different Items

* Source: Compiled by Author

ways like purchase of agricultural inputs (seeds, fertiliser), maintenance of house etc. (Figure 5)

All this taken together seem to sketch out the beginnings of a marked shift from the previous role of women. While women's labour (farm and non-farm) has always been an essential component in the functioning of rural households, it has been made invisible due to the absence of any monetary remuneration. By putting additional cash earnings in women's hands, MGNREGA has both increased and diversified the contributions that women are making to household incomes as wage earners.

Awareness

It is perhaps predictable that awareness about the provision of MGNREGA will be low among disadvantaged communities. About 25 percent of all sample workers were aware of the level of minimum wage. Most women were aware that under the Act each household is guaranteed 100 days of work in a year. But awareness regarding operational guidelines, household registration, work applications and entitlements such as worksite facilities and unemployment allowance was inadequate. Around 90% percent of women workers have

reported of having knowledge about job card registration. The situation was worse with respect to applications for work. Only 28 percent of the women surveyed were aware of the work application process and had applied for work themselves.

The low level of awareness among women workers is indeed worrying. Generating much higher awareness about MGNREGA work clearly constitutes one of the key challenges for authorities, NGOs and popular movements.

Worksite Facilities

The MGNREGA is committed to ensure a workplace conducive to productivity and workers' welfare. With this in mind, MGNREGA funds have been allocated for the provision of safe drinking water, shade for periods of rest, first aid and child care facilities at the worksite. The last of these, in particular, is significant in order to make MGNREGA work a viable option for women with young children who cannot be left alone at home. It is disturbing, therefore, to find that most of these facilities are routinely absent from worksites.

Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Gram Sabhas

MGNREGA is designed to be largely implemented through PRIs, at least 50 percent of all sanctioned works are to be implemented by the *Gram Panchayats*. The *Gram Sabha* too plays a crucial role in the selection of works and the conduct of social audits. During the survey it was found that women workers did not generally take part in *Gram Sabhas*. This is partly due to lack of awareness about the significant role to be played by the *Gram Sabhas* in making a selection of projects and conducting social audits of MGNREGA works. Women's participation in *Gram Sabha* is very low that is only 20 percent of the respondents said that they were involved in PRI's activities.

Thus from above analysis it was found out that despite numerous problems like no timely payment of wages, low levels of awareness about programme, lack of worksite facilities, and low participation of women workers in PRI's activities; overall impact of MGNREGA on women's lives has been quite positive in many ways, whether it is by enhancing their economic independence and self-confidence, by helping them to have greater role in decision making in household, contributing to food security, or fostering better awareness (and wider enforcement) of minimum wages. A review of five years of MGNREGA programme shows that the challenge is not to reinstitute policy for women's economic security, but to redeploy the machinery already in place to be used in a more gender responsive manner to overcome persistent gender inequalities, in both economic and socio-cultural spheres.

POLICY PRESCRIPTION TO IMPROVE MGNREGA IN EMPOWERING WOMEN

The overarching vision that informs the design of MGNREGA for women's economic empowerment has hardly ever articulated the need for women's interests and inclusion of adequate numbers of women in management and social audits of creation and maintenance of productive assets. These errors or omissions and systematic de-emphasizing of gender equality in MGNREGA policies need to be made visible through district-level and country-level workshops. An integrated approach that links equality-based rights to manage productive assets and gender inclusive, participatory rural institutions is the need of the hour for sustainable development and for addressing risks arising from MGNREGA fatigue. The following are certain policy measures that can be taken into consideration to make this programme more beneficial from women perspective.

1. Women should not be subjected to hard manual work and efforts should be made to extend MGNREGA provisions for skilled and semi-skilled work such as weaving, artisanal work etc.
2. Awareness about MGNREGA and its provision can be spread through radio, poster, television, notice board on *Gram Sabhas*, etc.
3. MGNREGA implementation in the ongoing phase could be strengthened by provisioning of what is already available in the Act, such as worksite facilities, eg. shade, safe drinking water and to some extent child care facilities.
4. Some "gender-neutral measures" such as increase in participation of women in planning and social audits of MGNREGA implementation, in turn, will create an opportunity for women's role in asset management. The SHGs are one of the potential institutions at the grassroots level which can be used as an instrument of gender responsive implementation of guaranteed employment in creation of productive assets.
5. There should be upward revision of minimum wage and efforts should be made to provide wages on time.
6. It seems that emphasis was made only on providing work opportunities to unskilled labour, so steps should be taken by government to upgrade the skills of rural women and enable them to earn more.

CONCLUSION

Viewed in a wider perspective, MGNREGA signals a possible reshaping of state priorities in India through a democratic determination to provide real livelihood opportunities for the rural poor. Thus, as a progressive legislation for excluded groups (women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes), MGNREGA can help to reclaim the lost faith in the possibility of pro-people governance. MGNREGA has positive impact on gender and gender empowerment. Women have benefited both as individual and community. Women are benefited individually because they are able to earn independently, spend some money for their own needs, contribute in family expenditure etc. The gained benefits of women as community can be understood by increased presence in the *Gram Sabha*, increasing number of women in speaking out in the meetings, increasing capacity of interaction etc. But the poor implementation across the nation (such as lack of child care facility, worksite facility and illegal presence of contractors) accrued the gender sensitiveness of this act. Certain initiatives and changes should be taken to remove these barriers. The valuable gains should not be derailed for poor implementation. Lack of timely payment, availability work site facilities, low awareness among women about MGNREGA and its benefit are some of the reason why there has been a marginal increase in women participation

in Odisha in period of four years. Solving such problems could increase women participation and this could lead to women empowerment. So the role of MGNREGA as a tool of women's empowerment deserves much more attention than it has received so far.

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