

# **RURAL WOMEN IN INDIA: THE INVISIBLE LIFELINE OF RURAL COMMUNITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with the general condition of the rural Indian women and the impact of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) on the overall empowerment of the rural women. MGNREGS is for the rural people, including rural women, who are unskilled or semi-skilled. Several provisions, like availability of drinking water, shade, first-aid, crèche at the working site have made this scheme unique. Crèches are helping the rural mothers as they do not have to depend on others at home to take care of the children. Usually, the elder daughter takes on the responsibility of the younger siblings at home when the mother is away for work. This facility has relieved the elder daughters from this duty and they can attend school. This flagship programme of the Government of India has been criticized from several quarters. However, some positive intentions of the ground-level officials and the awareness of the beneficiaries can really bring in a revolution in the lives of Indian rural women.

## **INTRODUCTION**

India is a country which attained independence in 1947, but the rural-urban divide and the rich-poor divide are still plaguing India. 68.84 per cent of the Indian population lives in villages. There are 6, 40,867 villages in India. According to 2011 census, the populations of rural women who are literate are 58.8 per cent. (Census, 2011) According to the “2007 Revision of World Urbanisation Prospects” by the United Nations, India would continue to have the largest rural population in the world until 2050. (Hindustan Times, 28.2.2008) There are several issues which are creating difficulties in the lives of Indians, like rising crimes against women, increasing poverty, corruption, nepotism, lack of transparency in the official functioning,

bureaucratic hassles, criminalization of politics, criminal-politician-bureaucratic entente etc. However, the common Indian citizen is striving to get two ends meet.

### **LIFE OF INDIAN WOMEN**

India is a country of contradictions. On the one hand, women are worshipped as deities, without whose blessings, work cannot be initiated. On the other hand, crimes against women and girls are increasing day by day in India. It is sad that in many cases, the perpetrators are known to the victims. The perpetrators could be among relatives, neighbors, friends etc. This increasing mistrust can create havoc in the Indian societal pattern. The patriarchal norms are so entrenched in the Indian society that it is very difficult to pull oneself out of this conundrum. When girls are born in most Indian families, they are not welcome, at times, even by their mothers. They lament that a son could have been a real asset for the family. Upbringing of girls is an expensive affair, where there is only loss as the girl gets married off and will serve the grooms' family throughout her life. In India, the life of a woman changes a lot after marriage. She leaves her parents' house after marriage and starts living with the groom's family. Since childhood, she is socialized into thinking that she has to take up the food habits, dress, rituals etc of the new family. So, happily or grudgingly, she evolves her identity according to the demands of the groom's family and the groom.

A hefty sum of money is spent on her dowry. At times, the demand from the groom's family continues even after marriage. When the bride's family fails to satisfy their demands, the bride is tortured. Domestic violence is high in Indian homes. There is dowry deaths' occurring every now and then. It has been pointed out that it is always the bride who is dying and not the women in the groom's side when they are working in the kitchen. Many young brides die in the kitchen due to stove-burst, where the groom's sides mask it as an accident. Dowry-deaths of Indian girls had gone up so much that Section 498A was brought in which makes the groom and his family responsible for unnatural death of the bride within 7 years of marriage. It also has other provisions to protect Indian women after marriage. However, like all other laws, this law has also been misused by a miniscule of the population in order to take revenge on the groom. Some innocent grooms had to face wrong detainment. However, the misuse cannot be a standard to judge the efficacy of the law. If that is the standard utilized, then none of the laws can be implemented. Violation of the law cannot prevent the law from protecting the real victims of society. Right to equal inheritance to women of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain religions, who form the majority in the country have been provided by the Indian State. But, still today, there are very few women who demand the property as they feel that it sour their relation with their brothers. In many cases, brothers are forcing them to relinquish their property right. Women lack the support system needed to contest in the courts.

Rural women in India are less literate than rural men. There is a negative attitude of the family towards educating the girl child. Moreover, lack of separate toilets for girls in schools, lack of security while travelling from home to school, lack of female teachers in schools, elder

sister's responsibility to look after the younger siblings when both the parents have to work to meet both ends, are some of the reasons behind the high drop-out rate of girls from schools. Primary education is free, but parents are not interested to send them to school. Right to Education has been passed by the Parliament, but it is still far when the right will be a reality. Mid day meal scheme has been formulated in order to attract the small children to school. However, this scheme received set-backs when many school children died after consuming food from the school kitchen.

Majority of rural Indian women do not have the right to choose their partner. It is always decided by the family elders and the marriage is arranged with an endogamous group, where caste plays a very important role. If the girl wishes to marry someone from other caste or tribe, the traditional leaders of the villages oppose. In states like Haryana, there are Khap Panchayats, or traditional village elders who provide punishments to both the adult girls and boys of the same village and caste, who falls in love and marries. According to the Khap leaders, marrying someone within the village or caste is equal to marrying a sibling. They act as kangaroo courts and punish them even by awarding deaths. In many cases, the brutality of such crimes is not even opposed by the parents. Such is the power of these Khap Panchayats that the elected Members from these constituencies do not oppose them for fear of losing the vote bank in the area.

Majority of rural women suffer not only from economic poverty but also from 'information poverty'. Rural women are vital and productive workers in India's national economy. There is statistical bias in under estimating the role of rural women in development. Women work for longer hours than men and contribute substantially to family income, they are not perceived as productive workers. (Pankajam and Lalitha, 2005) They are silent workers who are struggling to complete her household duties from dawn to dusk. But, still, in the family, many a times, she is criticized for not being sincere in her job. If the family members had to pay for the whole household work and the free labour she provides in the small agricultural land of the rural families, then her real worth could have been realized. She does this day-in and day-out with compromising the family interest, but in very few families, she gets the respect which she should get.

Equal pay for equal work is one of the cornerstones of the gender equality movement the world over. But Labour Bureau data show there has been little progress in terms of parity of salaries for men and women for equivalent work in India. Even more alarming is the fact that even though wage disparities have always existed in rural parts of the country, in some spheres of activity, the divide has widened. So while men were paid 70 per cent higher wages than women for ploughing work at the end of 2004-05, the difference rose to 80.4 per cent in end-March 2012 and stood at 93.6 per cent at the start of 2013-14. While men were paid 75 per cent more than women for well-digging work in March 2005, the difference stood at 80 per cent in the current financial year. The data indicate that daily wage disparities have by and large remained constant since 1999, though they did rise in the early 2000s. As of 2013, the discrimination in wages paid to women tends to be higher in physically intensive activities (such

as ploughing and well-digging), but lower in the case of work such as sowing and harvesting. Outside the agricultural sphere, it appears that gender stereotypes won out once again, if one considers unskilled non-agricultural work. (Jayaram, 2003)

In rural India, very few women have ownership over land or productive assets. This proves to be a road block in institutional credit. Majority of the agricultural labourers are women. They mainly assigned manual labour. Men perform operations involving machinery. (Kurukshetra, 2003) Agriculture which is the mainstay of the rural Indian economy is sustained for the most part by the female workforce. They are the invisible life line of the agrarian rural community life. Rural women from childhood days have to bear the burden of taking care of younger siblings, cooking, engaging in domestic chores, looking after the fodder of the domestic animals in their parents' house. They are married off at a very early age. Indian women are condemned to a life of serfdom, anonymity, facelessness. At the root is the 'gender insensitive' society. (Singh, 2004) According to UNICEF, child marriage is a violation of child rights. Child brides are often forced to drop out of schools, are subject to the risks of early pregnancy and are more likely to be exposed to violence and isolation. Approximately, twenty-three million girls in India face this reality. Among them, majority of them are from the rural areas. (UNICEF, 2012)

National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) a Government of India organization has stated that in 2009-10 and 2011-12, women's employment has taken an alarming dip in rural areas in the past two years. In jobs that are done for 'the major part of the year', a staggering 9.1 million jobs were lost by rural women. This is a reflection of the fact that women are no longer getting longer term and better paying jobs, and so are forced to take up short term transient work. (Varma, 2013) In this gloomy scenario, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act is providing a positive light to rural women. Several studies have shown that with the introduction of this Act, many rural women are coming out of their house for the first time to engage in paid employment. As it is a government scheme, socio-cultural stigma of patriarchy regarding working in the public space, that has been present earlier, is slowly ebbing. Moreover, the financial independence with the work is bringing in sea change in the mentality of rural women. They are for the first time, engaging in decision making regarding spending the money. With financial empowerment, comes in social empowerment as many of them are also joining self-help groups, to further their abilities. The flagship scheme has been discussed in detail.

### **MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT- A WAGE EMPLOYMENT SCHEME**

NREGA is the most significant act in the history of Indian polity in many ways like grass-root level participation of every citizen and beneficiary through democratic process, multi-layered social audit and transparency mechanism by involvement of civil society, comprehensive planning at village level towards sustainable and equitable development etc. Important salient feature of the Act is to improve the quality of life of rural households who are vulnerable to out-migration in search of daily wage employment by channelizing the wage workforce towards

developmental activities at the village level itself. (IAMR, 2009) It is a powerful instrument for ensuring inclusive growth in rural India through its impact on social protection, livelihood security and democratic empowerment. The Act was notified in 200 districts in the first phase with effect from February 2nd 2006 and then extended to an additional 130 districts in the financial year 2007-2008 (113 districts were notified with effect from April 1st 2007 and 17 districts in Uttar Pradesh (UP) were notified with effect from May 15th 2007). The remaining districts have been notified under MGNREGA with effect from April 1, 2008. In October 2009 the name of the scheme was changed to MGNREGA. ([www.nrega.in](http://www.nrega.in))

MGNREGA covers the entire country with the exception of districts that have a hundred percent urban population. The MGNREGA has given rise to the largest employment programme in human history and is unlike any other wage employment programme in its scale, architecture and thrust. Its bottom-up, people-centred, demand-driven, self-selecting, rights-based design is distinct and unprecedented. It provides a legal guarantee for wage employment. It is a demand-driven programme where provision of work is triggered by the demand for work by wage-seekers. There are legal provisions for allowances and compensation both in cases of failure to provide work on demand and delays in payment of wages for work undertaken. The MGNREGA overcomes problems of targeting through its self-targeting mechanism of beneficiary selection, that is, a large percentage of poorest of the poor and marginalized seek employment under the Scheme. The Act incentivizes States to provide employment, as 100 per cent of the unskilled labour cost and 75% of the material cost of the programme is borne by the Centre.

Goals of MGNREGS are social protection for the most vulnerable people living in rural India, livelihood security for the poor through creation of durable assets, improved water security, soil conservation and higher land productivity, drought-proofing and flood management in rural India empowerment of the socially disadvantaged, especially women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, through the processes of a rights-based legislation, strengthening decentralized, participatory planning through convergence of various anti-poverty and livelihoods initiatives, deepening democracy at the grass-roots by strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions and effecting greater transparency and accountability in governance

### **A PARADIGM SHIFT**

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has given rise to the largest employment programme in human history and is unlike any other in its scale, architecture and thrust. Its bottom-up, people-centred, demand-driven, self-selecting, rights-based design is new and unprecedented. It provides a legal guarantee of wage employment, which is a demand-driven programme where provision of work is triggered by the demand for work by wage-seekers. There are legal provisions for allowances and compensation both in cases of failure to provide work on demand and delays in payment of work undertaken. Self-targeting mechanism of beneficiary selection overcomes the problems of targeting. There is also a concomitant disincentive for failing to provide work on time, as the States then bear the cost of the unemployment allowance. Gram Panchayats implement at least 50 per cent of the works This

order of devolution of financial resources to Gram Panchayats is unprecedented in Indian history. Plans and decisions regarding the nature and choice of works to be undertaken, the order in which each work is to be triggered, site selection etc are all to be made in open assemblies of the Gram Sabha and ratified by the Gram Panchayat. The Gram Sabha may accept, amend or reject them. These decisions cannot be overturned by higher authorities, except to the extent of ensuring conformity with the provisions of the Act and its Operational Guidelines. A great share of the responsibility for the success of the MGNREGA lies with wage-seekers, Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats. It is a break from the relief programmes of the past towards an integrated natural resource management and livelihoods generation perspective. Social audit is an integral part of MGNREGA, which creates unprecedented accountability of performance. An Annual Report on the outcomes of MGNREGA is presented annually by the Central Government to Parliament and to State Legislatures by the State Governments, facilitating oversight by elected representatives. ([www. Nic.in/circular](http://www.Nic.in/circular))

Wage seekers are the primary stakeholders of the Programme. Their exercise of rights and demand for work are the main triggers for the successful implementation of the programme. The rights of the wage seekers are very clearly mentioned. They are application for registration, obtaining a Job Card, application for work and to obtain a dated receipt for the application made, choice of time and duration of the work applied for getting work within fifteen days of application or from the date when work is sought in the case of an advance application, whichever is later. Facilities of crèche, drinking water, first aid, shade should be available in the work site, so that the wage workers have the basic facilities, in order to function effectively. Presence of crèche is a boost for mothers to work. They also have the right to get ten per cent extra wage in case of employment provided beyond 5 km of radius. They have the right to check their Muster Rolls. Wages are to be disbursed on weekly basis or in any case not later than a fortnight after the date on which such work was done. This is the first time that the Government of India is providing the right to get unemployment allowance; in case employment is not provided within fifteen days of submitting the application or from the date when work is sought in the case of an advance application, whichever is later. The unemployment allowance should not be less than one-fourth of the wage rate for the first thirty days and not less than one-half of the wage rates for the remaining period of the financial year. Medical treatment in case of injury in the course of employment including cost of hospitalization if required and ex gratia payment in case of disability or death in the course of employment has also been included.

The other stake-holders of the scheme are the Gram Sabha (GS), three-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), especially the Gram Panchayat (GP); programme officer at the block level; District Programme Coordinator (DPC); State Government; Ministry of Rural Development; civil society and other stakeholders like line departments, convergence departments, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), etc. It is very necessary that all the levels realize the importance of the purview of the scheme and are honest in providing the facilities to the beneficiaries, which they are supposed to get.

MGNREGA has been a large and ambitious social security and public works programme in the world. The Prime Minister has pointed out that nearly 5.50 crore families or nearly one in four rural households were provided over 250 crore person-days of work under this flagship

programme. The safety net provided by the scheme has helped rural India cope with the frequent distress and natural disasters. The combined effect of expanded agricultural production, demand for labour from the construction sector and the effect of MGNREGA has led to tightening of the market for agricultural labour and a steady rise in real wages, which has helped the landless improve their standard of living. A very positive outcome of this Act is the issue of gender parity. Studies have showed that a silent revolution is taking place among rural women due to MGNREGA. Wage disparities are being reduced and women are being visible in the public sphere to take up work and interact with banks, post offices and government officials. This has done wonders for boosting their self-confidence and improving their empowerment level, including their say in financial matters of the household. (Shillong Times, 15.7.12) MGNREGS, was always conceived as a 'green' scheme'. It is supportive of regeneration of the rural natural resource base through the creation of employment opportunities related to water conservation, flood control, drought proofing, irrigation and afforestation should be encouraged. ([www.ruraldiksha.nic.in](http://www.ruraldiksha.nic.in))

### **SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPOWERING THE RURAL COMMUNITY**

The MGNREGS projects should be planned as to utilize the period of off-season for agricultural labourers. Such a planning will provide off-season employment to labourers. The MGNREGS projects should be made time-bound. Many workers think that it is a means to earn easy money as it is a government scheme and the functionaries aim is to spend money. It is thought to be a dole. This mentality needs to be amended for making the scheme effective. Whenever, attempts are made to ensure proper measurement of the work done, there is resentment among the workers. (Thadathil and Mohandas, 2012)

It is absolutely essential for the success of the NREGA that the local community be involved in the planning and implementation of the works. The local community must make it a part of the village long term development plan. The number of Gram Sabha meetings is very few. Again a dismal record is indicative of problems within the community. There is a heavy presence of the administrative bureaucracy in planning and implementation of the works.

Under the current implementation regime, maintenance is not covered. While assets are created in large number, the Panchayats are being told to maintain it. The problem is that Panchayats do not have the money to undertake such large-scale maintenance works. Our studies pointed out that due to this most of the assets are going to be put into disuse. Another very important point is that there should be a binding work completion plan for each asset created. MGNREGS can be made effective, if the community assert their rights. The rural women can play an active role in this. This is possible only through an effective means of awareness and mobilization process. The level of awareness is very low among some wage seekers, particularly regarding unemployment allowance, wages to be paid if work is provided beyond five kilometers, social audit and grievance redressal mechanisms etc. Appropriate media and agency for awareness generation should be identified and utilized.

Traditional and modern media should be utilized for awareness building among the workers. The awareness building methods should be carved so that it is well understood by the wage workers. Most of them are illiterate or have studied up to primary schools only. So, the awareness messages should be in the form of short films, animation slides, posters, etc.

Traditional media such as folk songs, puppet show etc should be properly utilized to get the message across to the community. The views of the Ministry of Rural Development, state governments, non- governmental organizations and others have already started working on this aspect. The views of the National Institute of Rural Development, State Institute of Rural Developments and professionals should be well analyzed to generate good quality material with acceptable standards.

It is difficult as most of the participants stated that the government officials cannot reach the large mass of the rural people given their workload, logistic problems and attitude. So, the non-governmental organizations can be roped in to perform this function in a cost effective way.

The planning has to be done, keeping in view the terrain, rainfall, social conditions, local presences etc. Some of the facilities include core banking operations, weekly and monthly reconciliation of accounts, adoption of two cycle approach in Muster Roll operation, Mobile Monitoring System (MMS) for capturing attendance at worksite and location of the worksite, wage payments through mobile vans etc. Incentives to staff to motivate the staff can make the scheme successful. Plugging corruption is a sure way of making the scheme really effective. (Rao, Kanth, Dheeraja, 2012)

Several research studies on MGNREGA have stated that this has opened doors for supplementary source of income and this income is being used by rural households for starting their own ventures. Rural community, including the rural women are benefitting from this scheme. It has brought in a significant increase in monthly per capita consumption expenditure of rural households. There is high participation from marginalized groups including the Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes. In the case of both the groups, the participation rate exceeds their share in the total population. It has reduced the traditional gender wage discrimination, particularly, in the public works sector and has had a positive impact on the socio-economic status of the women. This is a real contribution as both men and women are having equal right to work and payment. The scheme has made a more direct and positive impact on reducing distress migration as compared to migration taken-up for economic growth and other reasons. Distress migration from the rural areas creates a lot of social problems, which are being warded off by MGNREGS. ([www.nird.org.in](http://www.nird.org.in)) Rural women have indigenous knowledge, which can be properly utilized by the State. Conservation of bio diversity and food security can be entrenched in the rural community if rural women's indigenous knowledge can be learnt.

Women in rural areas from families living below the poverty line were a target group of the scheme. In India, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment in 1992 has brought in reservation in Panchayats. 30 percent of the seats are reserved for rural women. In MGNREGS also, it has been stated that there should be minimum 30 per cent of the women beneficiaries. In many states, they have gone beyond the minimum number. In some villages, the whole government scheme is being carried out by the women in the village as all the male members are engaged in other work. This belief in themselves that they can run their families and the village, has created a boost in their self-esteem. The challenges may come in, but rural women are ready for it. The rise in the confidence level has helped them to go ahead in many fields.

A newspaper produced entirely by women in rural India is among the four winners of this year's Literacy Prizes awarded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural



Organization (UNESCO). Khabar Lahariya, the fortnightly newspaper distributed to more than 20,000 readers in Uttar Pradesh, is entirely created and marketed by newly literate "low caste" women who are training as journalists in Chitrakoot and Banda districts. The King Sejong Literacy Prize was given to this fortnightly paper. (Deccan Herald, 6.9.13)

## CONCLUSION

To make the scheme successful in empowering rural women, it is very necessary that they should participate in large numbers in the Gram Sabha (open rural assembly) and voice their preferences and concerns regarding the implementation of government schemes, including, MGNREGS. The opportunity of right to livelihood should be properly made use of. Indian Constitution had not given the right to work as a justiciable right. But, it was in 2005 that the Indian Parliament passed the law on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to provide the right to work to Indian citizens of rural areas. Rural Indian women are stepping out of their private space and making a contribution in building infrastructure in the village, other than empowering themselves. The Government of India has provided an opportunity to rural women to live with dignity and honor and equal footing with the rural man. Earlier, the contribution of the rural women was invisible to the people with patriarchal mindsets. MGNREGS is trying to empower the invisible lifeline of rural community. For making their lives successful and meaningful, Indian rural women have also to put in 100 percent initiative. Otherwise, the scheme may fail as any other government project, with all its loopholes. If implemented successfully, it can become a role model for all developing countries.

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