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THE IMPACT OF MAHATMA GANDHI NREGS IN THE ECONOMIC CONDITION OF RURAL POPULATION

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ABSTRACT

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) which has come into force with effect from February, 2006 was a novel step towards eradication of poverty in India. The scheme aims to strengthen the livelihood security of rural population by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to every household in a financial year. A study was conducted in Alappuzha District of Kerala, the southern-most state in India, with the specific objective of assessing the impact of the scheme on economic empowerment of marginalized groups and women. The study found that the scheme has helped to improve the level of income of the rural people to a great extent. Participation of women and people belonging to weaker sections was found to be very high in this scheme. The Scheme has resulted in to an increase in the general wage rates besides strengthening the women and weaker section of the society.

KEYWORDS

Empowerment of Weaker Sections, General Wage Rates, Mahatma Gandhi NREGA, Women Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

"The future of India lies in its villages". "I would say if the village perishes, India will perish too. It will be no more India". – Mahatma Gandhi, Harijan, 29.08.1936.

The economy of an Indian village is largely dependent on the agriculture, where one family or few persons own the land and other people work as labourers in their lands. This system has led to widespread exploitation of people, particularly illiterate and unorganized. The two classes- land owners and labourers- and the conflict between them has a long history in India. The level of exploitation is still very high in the rural areas of the country. In a democratic set up, the State can't keep away from the responsibility to protect the rights of individuals. Hence, facilities to meet the challenges of sickness and old age, the cost of education, minimum wages and working hours in industries, giving free meals to school children, providing employment to the people, etc. are to be facilitated by the State.

The Indian Constitution, in the Directive Principles of State Policy, has emphasized that ensuring "decent work" for all should be a crucial focus of state policy. Thus, Article 41 of the Directive Principles states that "The State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want." Similarly, there is attention to the conditions of work and the level of wages in Articles 42 and 43, which state that "The State shall make provision for just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief... The State shall endeavour to secure, by suitable legislation or economic organization or in any other way, to all workers, agricultural, industrial or otherwise, work at living wage, conditions of work ensuring a decent standard of life and full enjoyment of leisure and social and cultural opportunities" (The Constitution of India-Directive Principles).

The Government of India recognized the goal of eradication of extreme poverty and hunger as a legitimate policy commitment. The Mahatma Gandhi NREGA has been hailed as a major initiative of the Government of India's commitment to providing an economic safety net to India's rural poor. MGNREGA is the first legislation that compels the state to provide a social safety net for the poorest people of this country and seeks to address the urgent issues of hunger and rural distress that afflict large parts of India (Lakshman, 2007).

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) which was passed in September 2005 and has come into force from February, 2006 initially in 200 districts and later on extended to all the rural districts of India from 2008-09. It addresses mainly the rural poor and their fundamental "right to work" with dignity. It also empowers Grama Panchayats (GPs) to play a proactive role in the implementation of the scheme through GramaSabhas, social audits, participatory planning and other means. The scheme is to strengthen the livelihood security of rural population by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to every household in a financial year. The work guarantee can also serve other objectives like generating productive assets, protecting the environment, development of social infrastructure, empowering rural women, reducing rural to urban migration, fostering social equity, and so on. In 2009-10, the scheme was renamed as the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS (MGNREGS).

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

In Kerala, the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS was implemented with effect from 5th February 2006; initially in two districts, viz., Palakkad and Wayanad and subsequently (in 2008) extended to all other districts. Considering the importance and scope of the scheme it is necessary on the part of the planning authorities to undertake periodical evaluation of the scheme and to initiate corrective steps, as and when required. The study helps to bring into light the area specific problems, so that special efforts can be initiated for the effective implementation of the scheme. It was as a part of this requirement, an evaluation study was conducted in Alappuzha district of Kerala.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Studies have already been conducted at different parts of the country in connection with the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS. Most of these studies have also traced out the issues prevailed in connection with its implementation. Jos Chathukkulam and Gireesan (2007), Vijayanand (2009), Sudarshan (2011), Kareemulla et al.(2009), Pankaj and Tankha (2010), Samarthan (2010), Abhishek Thakur (2011) are examples. These studies also have put forward suitable suggestions for solving the problems found and also to improve the efficiency of the scheme. Though many suggestions formulated by the planning authorities of various States are incorporated in the scheme, still, there are problems connected with the operation of the scheme at various places. It is so, because of the heterogeneity in geographic, economic, social and political condition of various States in India. It is in this background the present study– Impact Assessment Study of the MGNREGS in Alappuzha district - was undertaken.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was carried out with the important objective of evaluating the effectiveness of the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS in Alappuzha district of Kerala. The study also had the objective of identifying the issues relating to implementation and suggesting possible remedies and documenting success stories for replication of good practices. Assessment of the influence of the programme in poverty reduction, social and economic empowerment and empowerment of marginalized groups and women was one of the specific objectives of the study. The present paper highlights the impact of the scheme on the economic condition of the beneficiaries in Alappuzha district.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In view of the objectives of the study, factors such as days of employment generated, sources of income, wage payment, level of income, nature of expenditure, savings habits, availability of banking facilities, etc., were considered. Among the 14 revenue districts of the state, Alappuzha District is the smallest one in terms of area but having the highest density of population and the longest coast line among the districts. This is the only district in Kerala that has no high lands and forests. Paddy and coconut are the major crops cultivated in the district. Apart from agricultural works, people of this district are also engaged in activities such as making of coir products, fishing, prawn peeling, etc. There are 12 Block Panchayats and 73 Grama Panchayats in the district. The study was carried out in 20 Grama Panchayats that were selected from the 73 Grama Panchayats in the district. The sample consists of two best performing panchayats, two least performing panchayats and one panchayat with maximum SC population. These five GPs were selected using purposive sampling and the remaining 15 Panchayats were selected using simple random sampling method.

The Grama Panchayats selected for data collection are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1: LIST OF SELECTED GRAMA PANCHAYATS IN ALAPPUZHA DISTRICT

| Sl. No. | Panchayat | Block | Remarks |
|---------|-----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| | Purposively Selected | | |
| 1 | Kanjikuzhi GP | Kanjikuzhi BP | Best Performing I (Inland) |
| 2 | Pandanadu GP | Chengannur BP | Least Performing I (Inland) |
| 3 | Chettikulangara GP | Mavelikkara BP | Maximum SC population (Inland) |
| 4 | Thrikunnappuzha GP | Haripad BP | Best Performing II |
| 5 | Mannar GP | Mavelikara BP | Least Performing II |
| | Coastal Panchayats | | |
| 6 | Arattupuzha | Mulakuzha | |
| 7 | Pattanakkad | Pattanakkad | |
| 8 | Thuravoor | Pattanakkad | |
| 9 | Karuvatta | Haripad | |
| 10 | Purakkad | Ambalapuzha | |
| 11 | Pallipuram | Thycattuserry | |
| | Inland Panchayats | | |
| 12 | Perumbalam | Thycattuserry | |
| 13 | Kainakary | Chambakulam | |
| 14 | Thaneermukkom | Kanjikuzhi | |
| 15 | Muhamma | Aryad | |
| 16 | Krishnapuram | Muthukulam | |
| 17 | Thazhakara | Mavelikara | |
| 18 | Bharanikkavu | Bharanikkavu | |
| 19 | Mulakkuzha | Changannur | |
| 20 | Veliyanadu | Veliyanadu | |

DATA COLLECTION

The data required for the study were collected from the following three categories of respondents viz., Beneficiaries, Officials and Non-Beneficiaries. Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. Total 1021 respondents were interviewed for the purpose of collecting data. This consisted of 600 workers, 100 mates, 140 officials and 181 non-beneficiaries. The opinion and views of various categories viz., beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries and officials were also collected by organizing Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) in all the selected panchayats. Data pertaining to the years 2011-12 and 2012-13 were collected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study pertaining to the Impact of the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS are discussed herein.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Out of the respondents, 97.3 per cent were women (681 out of the 700 beneficiaries). The study revealed that, during the year 2012-13, a total amount of Rs.139.46 crores was distributed towards wages under the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS in Alappuzha district. Out of this, an amount of Rs.134.53 crores (96.46 per cent) was received by women beneficiaries and the balance by men in the form of wages during the year. Obviously, this indicates the encouraging impact of the scheme on the economic and social empowerment of rural women. This result is in consonance with the findings of the National Federation for Indian Women (2008) which conducted an evaluation study in Rajnandgaon (Chhattisgarh), Jhabua (Madhya Pradesh), Mayurbhanj (Orissa) and Cuddalore (Tamil Nadu). The study found that, in spite of all the grey areas in the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi NREGS, a silent revolution was taking place in rural India with respect to women. Women workers were getting empowered through Mahatma Gandhi NREGS as was visible in the form of growing contributions to household expenditure and bearing cost of children's education and healthcare. The study noted a general trend of low migration and repayment of debts by the workers. The study showed that despite numerous problems, Mahatma Gandhi NREGS is a programme that has begun to make a difference in the lives of women. Similar observations were made by Sudarshan (2011) who examined women's participation in Mahatma Gandhi NREGS in selected areas in three States: Kerala, Himachal and Rajasthan. He found that Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has succeeded in bringing together large numbers of women into paid work, many of them for

the first time. According to him, the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has achieved some success in empowering women, economically and socially. But, the study suggested for minor changes to the scheme so as to address local development challenges and priorities.

STRENGTHENING OF THE WEAKER SECTION

Among the beneficiaries, 76 per cent fell under the Below poverty Line (BPL) category and the remaining 24 per cent in the Above Poverty Line (APL) category. The categorization of the respondents showed that 75.71 per cent is from backward classes (i.e., OBC- 57 %, SC- 18.14 % and ST -0.57 %). These figures point towards the fact that, socially backward classes and weaker sections, who are struggling to avoid starvation are the chief beneficiaries of the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS in Alappuzha district. It means that, the scheme is moving in the targeted direction, by strengthening the livelihood of the marginalized and weaker sections. The findings of Jose Chathukkulam and Gireesan (2007) also brought out the fact that the scheme has reached the target group.

It reveals the fact that Mahatma Gandhi NREGS in Alappuzha district could bring a large section of the rural poor under the umbrella of economic empowerment. Thus, it is imperative that bringing all the poor under the scheme is the first step towards poverty alleviation.

INVOLVEMENT OF SC/ST FAMILIES IN THE SCHEME

As shown in Table 2, 18.14 per cent of the beneficiaries covered under the study belong to Scheduled Castes and 0.57 percent to Scheduled Tribe families. Taking together, all the GPs in Alappuzha district, during the year 2012-13, Job Cards (JCs) were issued to 21586 SC families and 433 ST families. This constituted 10.12 per cent and 0.20 percent respectively, of the total number of JCs issued in the district during the year. The total number of families provided employment was 140341 during 2012-13 in Alappuzha district. Out of this 17,263 (12.30 percent) were SC families and 317 (0.23 percent) were ST families.

TABLE 2: NO. OF PERSON DAYS GENERATED IN ALAPPUZHA DISTRICT DURING 2012-13

| Sl. no: | Block | SC | | ST | | Others | | Total | Women | |
|---------|--------------|---------|-------|-------|------|---------|-------|---------|---------|-------|
| | | Nos | % | Nos | % | Nos | % | Nos | Nos | % |
| 1. | Ambalappuzha | 34194 | 6.06 | 2702 | 0.48 | 527222 | 93.46 | 564118 | 556801 | 98.70 |
| 2. | Aryad | 44206 | 4.99 | 2859 | 0.32 | 839038 | 94.69 | 886103 | 866754 | 97.81 |
| 3. | Bharanikkavu | 157602 | 21.33 | 268 | 0.04 | 580688 | 78.63 | 738558 | 711949 | 96.39 |
| 4. | Chambakulam | 67798 | 12.98 | 0 | 0.00 | 454368 | 87.02 | 522166 | 510025 | 97.67 |
| 5. | Chengannur | 160028 | 37.10 | 249 | 0.06 | 271023 | 62.84 | 431300 | 411888 | 95.49 |
| 6. | Harippad | 113293 | 10.43 | 1497 | 0.14 | 970776 | 89.43 | 1085566 | 1025956 | 94.50 |
| 7. | Kanjikuzhi | 35100 | 25.22 | 2869 | 0.21 | 1353722 | 97.27 | 1391691 | 1352119 | 97.15 |
| 8. | Mavelikkara | 130720 | 35.88 | 581 | 0.16 | 233007 | 63.96 | 364308 | 355497 | 97.58 |
| 9. | Muthukulam | 102751 | 8.98 | 1475 | 0.13 | 1040252 | 90.89 | 1144478 | 1090494 | 95.28 |
| 10. | Pattanakkad | 112278 | 10.84 | 3294 | 0.32 | 919525 | 88.84 | 1035097 | 1005526 | 97.14 |
| 11. | Thycattusery | 104496 | 14.58 | 6128 | 0.86 | 605993 | 84.56 | 716617 | 669453 | 93.41 |
| 12. | Veliyanad | 67220 | 12.04 | 0 | 0.00 | 490669 | 87.96 | 557889 | 544488 | 97.59 |
| Total | | 1129686 | 11.96 | 21922 | 0.23 | 8286283 | 87.81 | 9437891 | 9100950 | 96.42 |

Source: Compiled from Primary data

Table 2 depicts that, out of the total employment provided during the year 2012-13, women occupied 96.42 per cent. The participation of women belonging to Scheduled Caste was to the extent of 11.96 per cent of the total. However, the participation of Scheduled Tribe is found very less (only 0.23 per cent). Of course, the number of families belonging to ST, is also very less in Alappuzha district. The percentage share of the participation of SC families in the scheme indicates that the financial position of these families could be strengthened to that extent. A study by Nair and Anoopkumar, (2009) also has pointed out the increased participation of the people belonging to SC/ST category.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF MGNREGS

Eradication of poverty through economic empowerment of the rural poor is one of the major objectives of the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS. This is done through providing job opportunities to them. The impact of Mahatma Gandhi NREGS on the economic condition and the level of poverty can be measured by comparing the position before and after joining the scheme. Data collected in this respect from the beneficiaries are analyzed as under;

MAJOR SOURCE OF INCOME BEFORE JOINING MAHATMA GANDHI NREGS

The major source of income of the beneficiaries under the scheme was ranked as shown in Table 3. The table makes it clear that among the workers, only 56 per cent (336 Nos.) had a specific source of income before joining the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS. Among the mates, 58 per cent (58 Nos.) had regular source of income. The remaining respondents did not have any regular source of earning. It is also clear from the table that among the beneficiaries who had certain source of income, unskilled labour and employment in coir factories were dominant in Alappuzha district. Out of the total number of beneficiaries covered under the sample, 19.29 per cent (workers plus mates) were offering their services as labour. This was their regular source of income. Similarly, 14.43 per cent was working in coir factories. Taking together the workers and mates, 9.86 per cent were engaged in other types of work. Only 3.29 per cent of the beneficiaries were engaged in agriculture. It is particularly noted that engagement in fishing activities was comparatively lesser (3.5 per cent of workers and 2 per cent of mates) among the respondents covered under the study.

TABLE 3: MAJOR SOURCE OF INCOME OF BENEFICIARIES BEFORE JOINING MGNREGS

| Sl.No. | Source of Income | Workers | | Mates | |
|--------|--------------------|---------|------------|-------|------------|
| | | Nos. | Percentage | Nos. | Percentage |
| 1 | Govt. Job | 6 | 1.00 | 3 | 3.00 |
| 2 | Agriculture | 19 | 3.17 | 4 | 4.00 |
| 3 | Business | 8 | 1.30 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 4 | Labour (unskilled) | 114 | 19.00 | 21 | 21.00 |
| 5 | Cashew Factory | 14 | 2.30 | 1 | 1.00 |
| 6 | Coir Industry | 86 | 14.33 | 15 | 15.00 |
| 7 | Cottage | 7 | 1.20 | 0 | 0.00 |
| 8 | Fishing | 21 | 3.50 | 2 | 2.00 |
| 9 | Handicraft | 1 | 0.20 | 2 | 2.00 |
| 10 | Others | 60 | 10.00 | 9 | 9.00 |
| 11 | Nil | 264 | 44.00 | 42 | 42.00 |
| Total | | 600 | 100.00 | 100 | 100.00 |

Source: Compiled from Primary data

Thus, the most important factor traced out from the above analysis is that 44 per cent of the workers and 42 per cent of mates were not having a particular source of income before joining the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS. It implies that, the scheme could clearly provide a source of livelihood to a major section (43 per cent) of the rural poor and secured their lives. On the basis of a study, Mukherjee and Sinha (2011), has remarked that that the income from Mahatma Gandhi NREGS alone can be a substantial part of the target income of the poor.

FAMILY INCOME

The data relating to the annual family income shows that the annual income of 66.1 per cent of the workers is above Rs. 20,000. The annual family income of 33.9 per cent of the workers was found below Rs. 20,000. A comparison of the source of income before joining the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS and the figures given in Table 3 reveals that 44 per cent of the workers did not have a regular source of income, which means their income was almost nil. However, the fact that, annual family income of only 33.9 per cent of the workers is below Rs. 20000 strengthens the claim that the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has resulted in to improving the income level of the rural population.

TABLE 4: ANNUAL FAMILY INCOME OF WORKERS

| Sl.No. | Annual Family Income (Rs.) | Workers | |
|--------|----------------------------|------------|--------------|
| | | Nos. | % |
| 1 | Up to 20000 | 203 | 33.9 |
| 2 | 20001 - 40000 | 183 | 30.5 |
| 3 | 40001-60000 | 110 | 18.3 |
| 4 | 60001-80000 | 53 | 8.8 |
| 5 | 80001-100000 | 21 | 3.5 |
| 6 | Above 100000 | 30 | 5.0 |
| | Total | 600 | 100.0 |

Source: Compiled from the primary data

Studies carried out by the Gandhigram Rural Institute in 31 grama panchayats in Kerala (2009) has also brought out the fact that the Scheme has resulted in to a marked improvement in the level of income of the rural people. The scheme could make its impact on the household expenditure; the average increase in household expenditure was Rs.1,172 per month. The Institute of Applied Management Research and Planning Commission, Government of India (2010) concluded a study with the remarks that as a result of income generation from the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS, the number of households in the low income group has reduced to half. They could move to marginally higher income group. The financial inclusion benefits of the scheme have been reported by Ambilikumar et al. (2015).

IMPACT ON WAGE RATES

The opinion collected from the non-beneficiaries about the influence of Mahatma Gandhi NREGS on the general wage rates are given in Table 5.

TABLE 5: IMPACT OF MAHATMA GANDHI NREGS ON GENERAL WAGE RATES (Opinion of non-beneficiaries)

| Sl. No. | Opinion | Nos. | Percentage |
|---------|------------------|------------|---------------|
| 1 | Highly Increased | 37 | 20.44 |
| 2 | Increased | 132 | 72.93 |
| 3 | Not Changed | 12 | 06.63 |
| 4 | Decreased | 0 | 00.00 |
| | Total | 181 | 100.00 |

Source: Compiled from Primary data

As is clear from Table 5, 93.37 per cent of the non-beneficiaries are of the opinion that the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has resulted into an increase in the general wage rates. Nearly 20 per cent of the non-beneficiaries are of the opinion that due to the employment opportunity under this scheme, the wage rates have increased highly. They also pointed out that, the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has resulted into an increase in wage rates particularly in agriculture, construction, coir and fisheries sectors in Alappuzha district. Among the non-beneficiaries covered under the sample, 6.63 per cent are of the opinion that the Scheme has not caused any change in the prevailing wage rates. It is also noted that none of the respondents under this category, opined that Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has resulted into a decrease in wage rates.

Perhaps, the increase in general wage rates may be an indirect benefit of the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS to the working class in the society. The opinion collected from the non-beneficiaries reveal that the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has resulted into a considerable increase of wages in the unskilled labour market.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has succeeded in achieving the targeted objective of removal of poverty among the rural people. In Alappuzha district, the Scheme offered employment and thus, income to the women and the weaker section of the society to a great extent. The fact that 97.3 per cent of the direct beneficiaries are women, 76 per cent belong to BPL category and 75.71 per cent are from backward classes shows that the Scheme has served as a source of income to the women and socially and economically weaker section of the society. The implementation of the Scheme in Alappuzha district has also resulted into an increase in the general wage rates. Nearly 20 per cent of the non-beneficiaries were of the opinion that due to the employment opportunity under this scheme, the wage rates have increased highly. Perhaps, the increase in general wage rates may be an indirect benefit of the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS to the working class in the society. Thus, the Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has become instrumental in improving the financial position, removal of poverty and improving capabilities among the rural people.

"The purpose of development is to enrich human lives, not richness of economy which is only a part of it"- *Amartya Sen.*

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