

NREGA - A Commendable Initiative for a Shift Social Change and Empowerment

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Abstract : The present study mainly focused on how the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) which is providing employment to the rural poor whose adult members voluntarily to do unskilled manual works in their respective areas. NREGA is one of the major social policies in India after its independence playing a crucial role throughout the nation to bring all the communities into one platform where the caste is one of the major taboos in largest democratic country in the world. The act is not only providing employment to the rural poor also trying for social empowerment of the rural poor particularly most marginalized groups in the society like as Dalits.

Keywords : empowerment, social cohesion, democracy, development and self-respect.

Introduction : India is not only largest democratic country also biggest social taboo country in the world, where we cannot image Caste is the one which rapture the society in different ways and along with caste; poverty and unemployment are the major obstacles for the development of the nation. Poverty and unemployment are the major distortions in every nation throughout globe and all the nations like developed,

developing and under developing are trying to alleviate poverty since centuries but all these some extend failure to eradicate the poverty from its roots. Alleviate the poverty throughout world is the primary agenda and first goal of the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals (MDGs & SDGs). Recent reports of United Nations Organizations (UNO), there are 836 million people are still in extreme poverty fighting for the everyday basic amenities and all of those one in every five are getting less than \$ 1.25 income per day particularly in developing nations. Poverty alleviation is the focus and ultimate aim of the every welfare state and in its policy agenda, eradication of poverty and unemployment is the very difficult task to policy framers.

As the world largest welfare state India which is also a developing nation focusing on eradication of poverty as its primary agenda, even after more than 50 years of Independence India still has the world's largest number of poor people in the country. Of its nearly one billion inhabitants, an estimated 260.3 million are below the poverty line, of which 193.2 million are in the rural areas

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and 67.1 million are in urban areas. We can rightly say India lives in villages and rural areas are the backbone of its nation but more than 75% of poor people be inherent in villages only and poverty level is not uniform across India.

In the process of eradication of poverty the central government has started so many welfare schemes and policies for the upliftment of the rural poor in general and dalit people in particular. For the first time our freedom fighters and policy makers of independent India understood the importance of productive and fairly remunerated rural labor. They protect the right to work, along with the right to health, in the Directive Principles of State Policy, the principles on which Indian law is fundamentally based. It was not until in 2005, however, that the right to work became codified as law. Based on this the then government, the United Progressive Alliance government led by Congress under the leadership of Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh had taken an innovative initiation to provide the employment as a right in the name of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005 is an Act with the aim of guarantying the 100 days of employment for the rural poor with the objectives of asset creation, quality of life and eradication of poverty.

NREGA as an Act : In country like India, where human workforce is the major resource in development of economy, mechanism to systematically utilize this force at grass root development has been

overlooked for many years since independence. The enactment of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005 is indeed a significant development in this regard. In other words it symbolizes the achievement of a very long civil society and people's movement towards ensuring right to food through ensuring right to work.

The Indian Parliament passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in August 2005, which provides for a minimum of 100 days of guaranteed employment to every rural household. Initially the act came into force in 200 poorest districts and has later been expanded to another 130 districts. Currently, it has extended to cover the whole country. MGNREGA has placed a judicially enforceable obligation on the state to provide unskillful, manual work within 15 days of a person making an application, within a radius of 5 km from the applicant's residence. Failing this, the state government is to provide an unemployment allowance.

This programme was launched at Bandla Palli village, Ananthapur district of Andhra Pradesh on October 2nd 2006 by the prime minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh and the day itself it has launched in 200 districts throughout the Nation later it has been promoted and implemented in 682 districts country wide. Since its inception the programme was trying to reach its primary goal to provide employment opportunities for the poor in

the rural assuring hundred days of employment those who are volunteer to do unskilled physical work in rural areas in a financial year which leads to eradication of poverty and also creating the durable assets through the income for rural poor. There is no amplify in asserting NREGA is the only world largest employment providing scheme for the rural poor, there will be at least 25.33 crores of workers in availing the work in 6,861 blocks throughout the nation in a single day⁹.

In the part of field study selected Kalava konda panchayat to know the performance of NREGA.

Social Transformation : NREGA programme provides the employment to the rural poor and to unskilled labour irrespective of caste, religion class and region. With this agenda all registered card holders in the scheme have to participate in work which was allotted by the scheme. The actual scenario in the village filled with lot of disparities with caste, class, religion etc. there will be caste discrimination from the dominant communities to the scheduled caste people. After the launch of NREGA in the panchayat these types of situations has took its change to a positive in the village. Majority of the villagers worked as they all are poor but has not bothered about the disparities in the communities among them. This was the first step and success of the programme mapping towards social

transformation with accumulating different community. People working together irrespective of any social stigmas like discrimination and exclusion.

Social Cohesion : Social Cohesion is the set of characteristics that keep a group of people able to function as a single unit and it is defined as a cohesive society that work towards the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust and proposals to its members by the opportunity of ascendant mobility like rising from a lower to a higher social class or status. Social Cohesiveness is the positive approach for the inclusive society. MGNREGA programme maintains this type of atmosphere in worksites among different community workers and also workers from various religions. In Kalava Konda panchayat with the progress of scheme with different works allotted all workers from different communities worked together without disparities. They worked together with sharing their problems and happiness at the worksite. This situation prevails not only in worksite but after the work also they use to meet and discuss the issues which were not happened earlier in the village before MGNREGA programme. Focused group discussion respondents happily expressed their feelings that they are very happy that they are feeling the togetherness with the dominant caste people which they never dreamt in the village. They happily said that it was only happened through NREGA

⁹http://mnregaweb4.nic.in/netnrega/all_lvl_detail_s_dashboard_new.aspx

which gave self-confidence and of Self-respect along with togetherness.

Social Integration : Social integration is a vibrant and organized process in which all members take part in discussion to manage and sustain peaceful social relations and which does not mean forced assimilation. Social integration is focused on the need to move toward a safe, stable and a society by patching conditions of social disintegration and social exclusion and by escalating and strengthening conditions of social integration towards peaceful social relations of coexistence, collaboration and cohesion. In Kalava Konda panchayat NREGA witnessed this scenario among the workers after the launch of the programme. Though scheme provides employment only for 100 days but after the completion of the tenure also members are being so much transparent in all of their various work, personal, faith and local community interactions. If they face any difficulty with in the programme or any problem in the village regarding the need of development, all members and workers with in the scheme cooperatively stood in one stand and fought for the solution. This is the real achievement for the building inclusive societies which is a progressive development of the society and as well as the nation.

Social Empowerment and Social Equity : The world largest employment generating scheme is MGNREGA which not only provides income to the rural poor but also trying to building the inclusive societies

and bringing all the socially excluded groups under one platform with providing opportunities and resources for the better development of the most vulnerable groups in the society. The caste hierarchical India kept a group of people outside of the society since ages. After independence, with the initiation of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar the government has started social welfare activities for the welfare of these people and trying to develop these groups with various policies and programmes. Among those schemes and programmes MGNREGA is the flagship scheme which is successfully implementing and resulting in reaching the goals of the scheme that are mainly eradication of poverty, employment generation to rural poor etc. In this regard scheme penetrated into core of the rural society where we have social taboos prevalence is bit higher. Social taboos like as caste, class, religion and region plays predominant role in rural areas. Even in Kalava Konda Panchayat also these types of taboos prevailed earlier but after the launch of the MGNREGA programme situation started changed. Villagers were about to overcome the social taboos like caste discrimination by doing work all together irrespective of caste, class, religion and status. Their thinking have changed and they started breaking the social barriers which leads to both Social empowerment and also maintaining Social Equity among the village community and fraternity. One of the beneficiary Mudi Krishnaiah replied for the question posed to him that "is there any prevalence of

social equity with in the scheme or through the scheme", he replied that earlier there was no that much interactions and mingling nature between Dalits and OBC community people in the village but through MGNREGA programme both community people are working together collectively in this process we developed good relations among us and we are continuing the same cohesive nature. Even OBC people are also talking and mingling with us without any disparities, he also said that this atmosphere is very healthy because only by having association with NREGA scheme.

Community Mobilization and Social Coordination : In Indian typical caste based society persons from different communities assembling and working together that too in village circumstance is very rare and difficult task because of various social taboos but for the first time it was happened through the NREGA scheme throughout the nation. In the Panchayat also beneficiaries of the scheme belongs to different communities like SC, ST and OBC break those caste barriers and worked together and sorted out many problems of the village and stood positive for the development of village community. In this process village people developed the social coordination with in the village population. This achievement was most inevitable and it is only made possible through the NREGA scheme only.

Strengthening Grass Root Level of Democracy : Popular participation is the very backbone of democracy and it is the vital notion of Self-governance also, because in any democracy, decision making process initiates and ends with the people. In modern democracy, it rests in the hands of the elected representatives. Introduction of the Panchayat Raj system through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment is the most authoritative step towards energizing grass-root democracy in the history of independent India and which offers significant space for approachable and participatory governance. It reaches out to women, OBCs, SCs and STs with empowering provisions to integrate them into the mainstream political dynamics. In Kalava Konda panchayat also the power of local institution that is Grama Panchayat was extensive. Grama Panchayat took an active role in finding works and appealing to NREGA scheme by conducting Grama Sabhas in the village. Grama Panchayat involves in all activities of the programme and scheme also accepting the role of Panchayat Institution. This scenario in the village highlighting the strengthening process of grass root level of democracy in the village.

Economic Development and Inclusion : Before the MGNREGA programme the wages for the labour work in village was very less, it is like about Rs 70 to the male worker and Rs 50 to the female worker though they have done more work also the wages are very less and wages based

on per day basis but not on the basis of the work and performance they did. Emergence of MGNREGA scheme changed many scenarios regarding to the rural poor. At present the maximum wage of the worker in a day based on his /her performance is RS 192, in this regard an individual worker who works for complete 100 days with his/her maximum work performance they can earn up to Rs 19, 200 which is very fair amount to the rural poor. These scenarios setting path towards economic inclusion and development of the rural poor and also marginal sections. In the Panchayat beneficiaries are now in a position of having good livelihood and maintaining fair economic conditions. One of the beneficiary expressed her happiness that earlier my family economic situation was very pathetic but after the scheme launch our situation changed, in my family my husband, son and myself are taking part in the scheme, now our situation is very good and recently we had taken loan from bank and recovering the loan amount with the income that is from the scheme without any delay. At present my economic situation is very good and this situation only because of the scheme, I will always remember the scheme and I have always gratitude to the scheme.

Conclusion : MGNREGA is not only employment generating programme for the rural poor but it is also a revolutionary scheme in the history of the world and in the history of the in Indian rural development programmes MGNREGA is

trying to promote the welfare of the rural labour in Indian hierarchical society and also sincerely working for the improvement of quality of life, accelerating the economic growth, social progress and cultural development and also trying to provide the opportunity to live with dignity and realize the potential of all individuals also providing economic security and creating rural assets and can help in protecting the environment, empowering rural women, reducing rural urban migration and fostering social equity among others. It touches the every developmental aspect of the rural poor for their wellbeing. Every citizen of the nation talking about the MGNREGA is a people's Act. As per my understanding the Act is "of the people, by the people and for the people." This is the time to arrest the poverty, migration in rural areas and end the cultural dependency and low expectations and move towards a society in which we invest in people with discrimination and empowering and supporting them to participate and to be included. The policy makers should keep in their mind at the time of policy making that **"better policies for the better societies which should work for the inclusive societies."**

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