

Gender Inequality And Rural Employment Generation Program In India

Uttaran Dutta*

Abstract

MGNREGA, a state-run employment-generation program, introduced in 2005-2006 in India, to provide sustainable livelihood and social security to the rural populations by creating wage employment opportunities for 100 days per annum. For more than one decade, this program influenced the lives of millions of women-workers in rural India. To make the program inclusive and effective, several gender-sensitive provisions were made, such as emphasizing equal representation of women (including widows and single women) through decentralization of power, and including gender-appropriate provisions (e.g., meaningful access to child care and crèche facility). Grounded in theoretical frameworks of subaltern studies and feminist studies, this paper analyzes the research articles and other published discourses by embracing a critical qualitative lens. Focusing on gender disparities and inequalities, this research investigates three aspects, i.e., positive influences of the program, critiques of the program from gender-inequality perspective, and scopes of improvement of MGNREGA.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Rural, India, MGNREGA

IN 2005-2006, the Government of India launched an employment guarantee program, namely Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), for the underserved population of the country. According to the government, the MGNREGA program “aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing one hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work” at the statutory minimum wage (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, [MGNREGA], 2009). The government outlay for the program is US\$ 7.91 billion in FY 2017-18 (PRC, 2018). As of now, the program has been implemented in most parts of India; and this initiative influences a large number of underserved and poverty-stricken population of India.

Hartmann, Patil and Dighe (1989) defined development as “a process of change to be set in motion and guided towards the objective of eradicating hunger, disease, injustice, exploitation and related ills that afflict vast section of the world’s population” (p. 17). In order to achieve these objectives, various countries formulate several plans and policies

of development. Employment Guarantee Programs are one of the initiatives taken by many countries to address the social inequality in subaltern sectors. However, scholars opined that most of the rural development initiatives in independent India were west-centric expert-led, and unilateral in nature; and they fundamentally neglected social, cultural, argentic aspects of the subaltern population (Hartmann, Patil and Dighe, 1989).

Discursive spaces can be conceived as systems of acquiring knowledge as well as representations of knowledge (Maciag, 2018). Escobar (1995) conceptualized development as a discursive process; he argued that the process of development is fundamentally intertwined with material, structural, and communicative factors. As a discursive entity, development processes strategically use their power to control marginalized spaces and (de)legitimize certain perspectives/agendas. To understand socio-political and economic nuances at the margins (e.g., in contexts of working-women in rural India), it is therefore crucial to understand and investigate situated negotiations, interventions, deprivation as well as the narratives that emerge

*Corresponding author: uttaran.dutta@asu.edu

from the below.

Increasingly, feminist and subaltern studies scholars are raising questions challenging the Eurocentric constructions and representations of the women. Particularly, in the context of the global South, women are portrayed as a marginalized monolith (Parameswaran, 2001). In describing gender inequality, scholars indicate that the gender-discriminatory power structures yield gender-insensitive development outcomes; which are instrumental for further deprivation of women (Pankaj and Tankha, 2010). Again, owing to marginalized conditions, women have to negotiate with less bargaining power and less access to political and socio-economical resources, which eventually affects their identities, social position, and agentic potentials in various discursive spaces. To address the issue of gender-inequality, the MGNREGA program took several gender-sensitive measures in principal. Examining the policy provisions and the implementation aspects of the program, many researchers talked about the strengths and the weaknesses of the program. Based on the findings/outcomes of the previous researches on MGNREGA, this paper will discuss 'how effectively does the MGNREGA program address gender inequality, and what are the potential scopes of improvement?'

Literature Review

To understand the nuances of gender inequality in MGNREGA context, the first two sub-sections address theoretical aspects of subaltern and feminist studies. The next sub-sections talk about the conditions of women workers in rural India. Subsequent sub-sections describe various aspects (such as history, policy, implementation mechanism) related to the rural employment generation program of India.

Subaltern studies Perspectives

The Subaltern Studies collective conceptualize the discipline as a domain of the study "that was initially inspired by Gramscian Marxism" (Chaturvedi, 2007. p.25). Guha (1988) one of the pioneers among the subaltern studies

scholars questioned the validity of interrogating subalternity from a classical Marxist perspective. The scholarship wanted to go beyond "the unreflexive, techno-economic determinism of a Marxian orthodoxy" (Chaturvedi, 2007. p.28) in understanding the complexity of underserved socio-political contexts of the global South. Guha (1988) opined, "the subaltern condition could be based on caste, age, gender, office, or any other way, including, but not limited to class" (Chaturvedi, 2007. p.26). For example, while the issues of 'caste' received some attention in South-Asian subaltern scholarship, in case of other under-privileged communities of the global South (e.g., in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia) various aspects of race, ethnicity, and other identity markers were examined. The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader edited by Iliana Rodriguez was an exemplar of such scholarships.

Challenging the Eurocentric approach, the scholarship, questioned the hegemonic politics and dominant moves that marginalized, silenced the underprivileged people from the discursive spaces. Guha (1988) showed the politics of the subaltern communities were independent and autonomous from the agendas of elitist politics; he noted, "it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter" (p.7). Subaltern studies scholarship also legitimized the importance and relevance of contextual and 'local' socio-political issues. Challenging the notion of understanding underserved spaces as marginalized monolith, subaltern scholars legitimized the "heterogeneity and ambiguity in within society" (Chaturvedi, 2007, p. 37) to study social-economic development of the global South.

In examining subalternity from the critical perspective of power, the scholarship conceptualized subaltern populations and their agencies as the "primary organizing principle for political mobilization" (Chaturvedi, 2007, p. 15). Subaltern Studies scholars also documented how the marginalized populations historically enacted their agencies in negotiating the socio-cultural and political processes by disrupting and challenging the hegemonic structures (Bhadra, 1997; Chakrabarty, 2000; Guha and Spivak, 1988; Haynes and Prakash, 1992). Emphasizing

'cultural' aspects of subalternity, Chakrabotry (2000) opined, "culture is the 'unthought' of Indian Marxism" (p. 18); thus, the approach the scholarship could be seen as a departure from 'economism' of Marxist approach.

Women's subject position and their marginalized conditions were some of the major concerns of subaltern studies. Spivak (1988) raised the issues of subalternity related to gender and subaltern woman (especially in the colonial and post-colonial contexts). She maintained that in the mainstream discourses, the subaltern women's voices and agentic capabilities were portrayed as 'devoid of agency' by the hegemonic forces. Thus, in investigating the nuanced dynamics of gender and power, subaltern scholars were "centrally interested in interpreting the culture that informed subalternity, while also addressing concerns about history, politics, economics, and sociology" (Chaturvedi, 2007, p. 28).

Feminist Perspectives

Feminist perspective too, legitimized the issues of "class, caste, and colonial history and women's subtle forms of agency" (Parameswaran, 2001, p. 79) in understanding the conditions of subaltern women. Scholars like Subramanyam (1996) noted, in the dominant discourses, women of the developing countries often portrayed as "a composite, singular 'Third World woman'-an image which appears to be arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse." (p.192). Mohanty (2003) opined that such discourses essentially depicted "the West" as the "implicit referent, i.e., the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others" (p.52). For instance, in several anthropological and social scientific accounts, South Asian women were often portrayed as 'authentic village woman', who was passive, oppressed entity, or as a victim of patriarchy and who "constantly battles poverty, famine, and the trials of mothering numerous children" (Parameswaran, 2001, p. 83).

Legitimizing contextual politics and locally situated knowledge, feminist scholars challenged and criticized such universal claims and

objective knowledge production (which includes issues of representation of the others) practices. They essentially emphasized on the aspect of multiple perspectives and argued that the acts of representations are essentially partial, situated and socially constructed (Abu-Lughod, 1990a; Behar, 1993; Parameswaran, 2001). Purkayastha, Subramaniam, Desai & Bose (2003) commented that feminist perspectives situated the study of women of various ethnicities, linguistic and cultural origin within the interactions of the state, neo-liberal forces and the conditions of subalternity. In Indian context, they further noted that the "[d]ebates and disagreements on gender issues have to be understood with reference to the multilingual, multicultural nature of India, which has led to the development of different perspectives on gender, intersectionality, and power inequalities" (p. 505).

Apart from the issues of identity and representation, feminist scholars also legitimized the issues of the empowerment and emancipation. Hegde (1996) noted, "[f]or feminist scholars, the purpose of epistemology is to contribute to an emancipatory goal and work toward the larger project of empowerment and exposing the oppression that women endure" (p.312). Similarly, for examining and foregrounding the issues of women agency, Antonopoulos (2007) described four mechanisms in the context of women's empowerment at the margins, they were- (i) maternal education (associated with child rearing, education, and health aspect), (ii) economic empowerment (related to income, investment/ contribution and other financial issues), (iii) intra-household decision-making power (i.e. individual bargaining power and negotiation with patriarchy within home) and (iv) community level empowerment (issue of voice in societal spaces and leadership issues). In the context of contemporary India and development initiatives these issues were relevant and worth considering for understanding gender inequalities.

Woman-workers in rural India

India is the second most populous country in the world after China, with a population of more than 1.3 billion. India is also the largest democracy on the globe, and home to one third

of the world's poor (Olinto, Beegle, Sobrado and Uematsu, 2013). Approximately, 66 per cent of the total Indian population lives in her villages (World Bank, 2017). The rural areas of India are largely poverty-stricken. Most of the rural subalterns are daily wage laborers and many of them are landless. Approximately more than half the population is dependent on the agricultural sector to earn their living (Holmes, Sadana and Rath1, 2010).

In the context of gender inequality, Thorat and Sabharwal (2011) noted that increasing disparity, on one hand, caused poverty and resource-scarcity, and on the other hand, hindered access to basic needs and services, which ultimately affected populations at the margins including the rural women. The World Bank country study (2001) on "Gender and Poverty in India" talked about various problems, negotiated by underserved women; for example the Indian women were largely denied access to productive assets, both materially (such as access to land, financial and material resources) and symbolically (such as access to education, training for skill development); eventually these scenarios deteriorated their economic agency (Nandal, 2005). Holmes, Sadana & Rath1 (2010) showed that apart from economic aspects, the issues of caste, ethnicity, gender, age and religion were important in the context of gender inequalities in India. For instance, World Bank, 2009 report suggested that owing to marginalization, women received lower wages compared to men. The report further showed, in the domestic sector women spent considerably more amount of time (approximately 17% more) compared to men.

Government of India Census 2001 data showed that the participation of rural women workers in agricultural jobs had increased from 25.6% to 43.4% over the period 1961-2001. It further indicated that about 83% of the working-women in rural India were associated with the agricultural sector—the least productive sector, which caused widespread poverty especially among women (Dasgupta & Sudarshan, 2011). As workers, women often had to negotiate with extreme weather conditions (drought, flood, etc.) and uncertainties (oftentimes the agricultural outputs were heavily dependent

on the meteorological fluctuations). Moreover, women often had to obey informal contracts and domestic or normative arrangements as well as to compromise and/or settle for less. Moreover, they faced a variety of gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities. Owing to physical/biological reasons, women oftentimes could not take part in labor intensive, hazardous and difficult jobs; this factor often aggravated the conditions of inequality (Sudarshan, 2009). The conditions of lower mobility of women could be explained by several factors; such as childcare responsibilities, household works, patriarchal norms of the society, lack of information and skill set (Sudarshan, 2009). Consequently, women oftentimes had to negotiate various adversities; for example, (i) they had to accept jobs at extremely low wages, (ii) they did not have any work security/social security benefits in the job market, (iii) they belonged to the unorganized labor sector, i.e. they did not get any protection from Government or non-Government organizations (Nandal, 2005).

Previous Employment Guarantee Programs in developing nations

In India, the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) was introduced in the state of Maharashtra in the year 1972-73 to address an acute drought situation all over the state. According to the provisions of the EGS-Act all adults in the rural Maharashtra availed a right to work as an unskilled laborer. The primary purpose of such public employment generation programs was to provide some sort of social security by creating a minimum income-generating opportunity; and accordingly the rural populations were offered work within 15 days (of the registration process). Various non-agricultural jobs were performed in the ESG program; such as "rural infrastructure especially agriculture, (which includes minor irrigation works), soil conservation, afforestation, desilting of tanks, stone-cutting, and road construction and maintenance" (Antonopoulos, 2007, p. 25). Programs like ESG were undertaken in various developing countries as well. Since the seventies some of the countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America introduced such programs; for example,

Indonesia (Padat Karya), Argentina (Jefes De Hogar), Botswana (Labor Based relief programs), Bangladesh (Food for Work) undertook such initiatives (Dasgupta & Sudarshan, 2011). By introducing these programs, the governments took responsibilities in creating/ promoting employment opportunities in the global South (Antonopoulos, 2009). Oftentimes, those programs were undertaken to address some socio-economic crisis in the rural sector; for example, incidents like economic depression or recession, post war reconstruction, and natural calamities such as floods, earthquakes compelled the government to initiate those programs (Sudarshan, 2009). These public employment generation programs also tried to address the issues of gender inequality as well by creating access to material (material and financial assets) and symbolic (education, skills) resources (Sudarshan, 2009).

History of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, India

Since the 1970s, the Government of India started taking several measures such as food security programs, self-help group or self-employment programs to reduce the poverty as well as to increase employment opportunities and social securities (Sudarshan, 2009). During those periods, two trends were observed in the rural economy of India—on one hand, the proportion of agricultural laborers was increased (from 37.8 percent in 1971 to 45.6 percent by 2001), and on the other hand, the size of the marginal peasant households in the rural sector was also increased (from 66.6 percent in 1982 to 79.6 percent in 2003) (Bhalla, 2007). Kumar, Suna, and Pratap (2010) opined that the declining trend of employment in non-agricultural sections in rural or urban sectors was one of the reasons for such growth of agricultural laborers. Subaltern peasants (especially scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women) were the worst sufferer in their struggle for survival.

Again, according to Government of India, (i) growth in national GDP was declined (from 3.08 percent per annum during 1980-81 and 1990-91 to 2.38 percent during 1992-93 to 2003-

04), (ii) the growth rate of crop and food grain output as well as their availability also declined (Kumar, Suna, & Pratap, 2010). In the backdrop of the scenario the Government of India tabled the National Rural Employment generation Act (NREGA) 2005 in order to (i) bolster the livelihood resource base (ii) to create long-lasting assets for the rural subalterns (Kumar, Suna, Pratap, 2010). The NREGA program was notified on 7th September, 2005 and came into force on 2nd February 2006. On 2nd October, 2009 the program got renamed after Mahatma Gandhi, as 'Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act' (MNREGA).

Goals of MGNREGA

The aim of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2005 was to provide the livelihood and social security to the rural subalterns by ensuring a minimum of 100 days of wage-employment per annum to a rural household whose members offer to do unskilled manual work. Fundamentally, the government of India undertook an 'inclusive growth' approach for reducing the poverty; i.e. through public works, the program aimed at reaching millions of rural households to improve livelihoods and standard of living. The program had several objectives, such as (i) to offer wage employment opportunities, (ii) to provide sustainable rural livelihoods through enhancement of material resource base, i.e. supporting production (and growth of) long-term assets and (iii) bolstering locally situated rural governance through the processes of decentralization, answerability and transparency. Thus the program aimed at generating a social safety net for the vulnerable subalterns by offering alternate employment source (especially when they had to negotiate with scarce or inadequate employment opportunities) (Kumar, Suna, and Pratap, 2010).

Provisions for women in MGNREGA

In order to ensure social security the program emphasized on the gender equality aspect. According to the provisions, the

Government of India insisted that the woman laborer should represent at least one third of the workforce. Moreover, to ensure gender equality the program recommended decentralization of power and equal representation of both the genders in the local-level committees and the social audit process (Holmes, Sadana and Rath, 2010). The MGNREGA offered several gender specific provisions to facilitate full participation from the rural women; some of them were (a) equal wages for men and women participants, (b) emphasizing equal representation of women in the planning and monitoring processes of the program (e.g. as per the provisions, adequate woman representations in local Vigilance and Monitoring Committee and in gram-sabha [village level committee]), (c) adequate women representations in the evaluation process (i.e. women representatives should be included in the social audit process), (d) attention to child care aspects such as crèche facilities near the work-site, (e) availability of work in nearby locations (within five kilometers)—this particular provision, particularly was to benefit women-workers as they had to take household responsibilities, therefore travelling long distance might create inconvenience for them, and (f) help widows and other single women to participate in this program (by recognizing a single person as a ‘household’) (Dasgupta and Sudarshan, 2011).

MGNREGA Implementation mechanisms

MGNREGA program designates the local governments (i.e. the Panchayats) as key players/implementers at the village and block levels so that “the village council gets the power and duty of monitoring all works and there are no contractors allowed in any manner” (Kumar, Suna, & Pratap, 2010, p.15). Government of India uses five layers of agencies of governance to implement the MGNREGA program; they are Gram Panchayat (village level), Panchayat Samiti (block level), Zila Parishad (district level), state government, and central government.

(Table 1 about here)

The Gram Panchayat (or village council)

prepares village level plans and sets up of local bodies for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation process at the local level. The Panchayat Samiti (block level body) is responsible for coordinating the planning, designing and implementing activities between the village and the block level. The Zila Parishad (district board) works towards preparing the annual district plan and for coordination and implementation of the program at the district level. The state government is assigned two major tasks: (i) building the village centric networking for employment generation, (ii) setting up the Employment Guarantee Council (EGC) to ensure effective resource flow between the government and the Gram Panchayat. The central government (and the Ministry of Rural Development) acts as the nodal agency, they are responsible for all-India level overall planning, policy making, monitoring as well as evaluation activities related to MGNREGA.

Methods

Methodologically, this research embraces a critical qualitative lens. A Critical perspective is invested in interrogating societal power dynamics to examine the situation of people as well as their voices and agencies, particularly those who are at the margins. To investigate the situation of women-workers in rural India, particularly in the context of MGNREGA, the critical lens study their lived experiences from economic, political, cultural as well as historical perspectives. While studying women’s experiences and activities, this paper pays attention to several structural and contextual aspects including the access to resources, provisions, and effectiveness of MGNREGA, as well as policy and institutional aspects. Focusing on rural women-workers’ lives and socio-economic dynamics, this paper analyses secondary texts (e.g. findings of previous researches, excerpts, and records), which specifically pay attention to gender inequality issues. In doing so, several research papers on MGNREGA, written by sociologists, social scientists, anthropologist, gender and development studies scholars, were examined for content analysis. Those papers

were written focusing on to gender inequality and rural employment in India. For literature search, several key words were used, such as MGNREGA, NREGA, India, social inequality, gender, employment generation, feminism, subaltern, rural, etc.

An approach based on grounded theory was employed for analyzing the contents of MGNREGA related documents, which follows guidelines and methods of the qualitative research (Charmaz, 2008). The policy, impact and implementation aspects of MGNREGA were carefully analyzed and several categories/codes were created. I used open, axial, and selective coding to develop understanding of the interview transcripts and filed-notes. Coding is a process, which helps researchers to break down data into smaller chunks, compare them, categorize them, and make connections among them. In the coding process, constant comparison technique (Glaser, 1965) was used to compare and contrast the themes and concepts that emerged from the discourse of those documents/ papers, which yielded several open codes. Open coding was done based on the words, phrases, sentences and their meanings. Then the open codes were analyzed and after that axial and selective coding process were conducted. This process helps to understand various theoretical and practical aspects of rural employment generation and gender inequality in the context of India.

Results and Discussions

As a result of the coding process, several overarching themes were found, which are presented in next sub-sections, they are—positive influences of the program, critiques of the program from the gender-inequality perspective, and scopes of improvement of MGNREGA.

Positive Influences of MGNREGA on Rural Women-Workers

MGNREGA, after its inception, i.e., since 2006-07, provided millions of employment opportunities in the rural sector. Scholars noticed an increase in the participation of women; for

example, during the first decade, nearly 15% growth of the women-participation was noticed. The MGNREGA program and increased women-participation had several impacts and influences on quality of life and working conditions in rural India. An increase in average wages had also influenced the overall income-scenario and savings of the women participants (Dasgupta & Sudarshan (2011); on one hand it caused “an upward movement of female market wages” (Ravi & Engler (2009) p. 8), and on the other hand, it potentially played a crucial role in poverty reduction. Sarkar et al (2011) noted that socio-economically MGNREGA helped rural women in several ways, some of them are—(a) per capita raise in annual income, (b) enhanced financial capacities to spend more on food, children’s education, and (c) increased savings and more access to health. The MGNREGA program influences the lives of rural women in several ways. Firstly, higher wages from this program causes “a significant improvement in terms of women’s earning opportunities and increased contribution to the household income” (Holmes, Sadana & Rath, 2010, p. 15). The economic empowerment of poor women potentially equipped them to fight against poverty and hunger, and thereby meaningfully contributed in developing the rural spaces as well.

The economic empowerment provided them a sense of financial-independence; e.g., women in various parts of India became less dependent on their male-partners financially (Venubabu & Sudhakar, 2014). Such an economic self-sufficiency aided the rural women to (a) spend money for their own purposes and that too by their own hand (Sahoo, 2014), and (b) contribute money for their family members as well as take part in household decision-making process (Ananta, 2016). Scholars have noticed that the women spend major part of the earned money on food, clothes and medicines (Dasgupta & Sudarshan, 2011).

MGREGA also enhanced women’s quality of life and standard of living in rural India. The program helped improving women’s social position and protections as well as livelihood security (Kaushal & Singh, 2016). MGNREGA potentially emancipated them from the vicious cycle of debt (usually they got trapped by the

local moneylenders and could never get out of the vicious cycle). In addition, economically empowered women started repaying their loans more independently (Dasgupta & Sudarshan, 2011). Moreover, wage-increments aided reducing gender differences in many places of rural India; consequently, women earned more respect from their family members as well as from society at large (Ahanger, 2014). In addition, financially the program aided many rural women workers to get loans from banks, post-offices, and other business organizations. Further, Khera & Nayak (2009) showed that, MGNREGA has several positive influences on the rural working conditions in India; some of them are, (a) the program protects subaltern laborers from participating in extremely straining and poorly paid jobs, (b) the program has clear demarcation of working hours and tasks, whereas many of jobs in rural sector has no clear guidelines in this respect, and (c) the program also protects the rural laborers (especially women workers) from various exploitations including sexual exploitative and health-hazardous work conditions (Khera & Nayak, 2009).

Scholars showed that the program impacted the overall household conditions as well. In rural India, to compensate limited family-income, many children had to participate in locally available low-paid jobs; therefore, the children had to quit their education. Some study showed that many of the rural women started sending their children to school (Kumar, Suna & Pratap, 2010) after receiving benefits from MGNREGA. Economic empowerment also gave the rural women more access to healthcare facilities, particularly to avail medical services and medicines. This was particularly beneficial for the participating female-workers and their children (and sometimes for the non-earning family members). Kumar, Suna & Pratap (2010) further mentioned that an “improvement in rural environment and sanitation” was noticed after introduction of the program (p.19). Studies also showed that, better economic situation improved their mental health as well; Dasgupta & Sudarshan (2011) commented, “NREGS... reduces anxiety levels among participating households” (p. 21).

Many believe that unlike the private

landlords and contractors the government led MGNREGA program provided a sense of dignity to the women workers. Khera & Nayak (2009) commented the feeling of respect/ dignity “is also a very significant benefit for women workers” (p. 23) as the workers often experienced threat, exploitations and even sexual abuse from the private contractors. It was also noted that MGNREGA program increased the social interaction between male and female workers which eventually improved informal safety-nets in rural sector (Holmes, Sadana & Rath, 2010). Migration is another important issue in the context of job opportunities in rural India. Owing to several reasons like wage-disparities, availability of job, and nature of job many rural workers migrates to urban and suburban job sectors in India. As the women usually had to travel less in order to do a job under the program, the migration of rural women came down substantially in many parts of India (Kareemulla et al 2013), which also improved their quality of life. Less travelling not only helped them to save money, but also aided them to avoid the risks associated with migration (Khera & Nayak, 2009).

Critiques of MGNREGA from Gender-Inequality Perspective

Though MGNREGA had many positive impacts on the lives of the rural women; scholars pointed at several drawbacks of the program as well. Holmes, Sadana & Rath (2010) commented, “A closer look at the number of days of work and the actual provision of wages suggests a rather more unequal picture of the gender dimensions of MGNREGA” (p. 7).

The program faced many criticisms related to the implementation of the project, in particular. The effectiveness of the implementation varied considerably from one state to another. Local governments often failed to do the needful in many instances. Kumar, Suna, Pratap (2010) noted that in many districts of rural India, “Panchayats do not exist, or are non-functional” (p. 14). Some of the administrative issues noted by scholars include—(a) irregular and irregularity in payment, (b) lengthy and complex bureaucratic process in receiving job-

cards (such as registration, providing proof and documents as a part of the application process, problem associated with the application and allocation for employment), and issues related to transparency and monitoring of quality of work (Mishra, 2012). They further noted that, owing to the nature of job (particularly, in terms of level of difficulties), and socio-cultural barriers many of the jobs were not offered to women; as a consequence, women workers got fewer days of employment on MGNREGA (Holmes, Sadana & Rath, 2010). Such scenario lead many women workers to migrate (in distress) instead of applying for jobs at their vicinity. Moreover, Dasgupta & Sudarshan (2011) showed, though the rate of women's participation in the program was high, but the "rural female unemployment has also been on the rise, and is higher than rural men's unemployment rate" (p.23). Therefore, scholars have opined that MGNREGA became top-down and supply-driven in nature (Mukhopadhyay et al 2015), which resulted in gradual decline in the average number of days of employment per family, and made the program minimally effective in reducing rural poverty (Gaiha and Jha 2012).

On contrary to 'demand driven' program implementation (as suggested in the program-provisions), the local administration oftentimes initiated the works on their own. Consequently, limited number of work opportunity was created at the local worksites; Khera & Nayak (2009) commented that in such scenario, "work is rationed, and women are expected to make way for men" (p. 18). Again, owing to household responsibilities the women laborers often found it difficult to migrate to urban or semi-urban areas in search of work opportunities. Consequently, the rural women had to take jobs like casual farmers, wage laborers and unpaid household workers.

Gender bias and discrimination was another aspect of poor implementation of the program. As a result, some of the gender-sensitive provisions of the program were never implemented carefully in the real life scenario. For example, studies showed that (a) in many jobsites the crèche facility was not provided, (b) no childcare facilities were provided in the MGNREGA worksites; consequently, many of

the breastfeeding mothers could not take part in the program. Research also suggested that in-laws and older daughters often took care of the younger children (Holmes, Sadana & Rath, 2010). Owing to the lack of gender sensitivity in designing and implementation of the MGNREGA program, many children had to abandon their education and do household work. Dasgupta and Sudarshan (2011) described it as "promoting girl child labor in the home" (p. 19). Scholars such as Ravi and Engler (2009) opined that often school-going girls had to stay back at their respective home to undertake the household and childcare activities. Therefore, in the long-run the program potentially created a more illiterate future generation and that eventually it de-developed the country. Moreover, in MGNREGA, there was no provision for flexible working hours for women; as a result, they had to negotiate with time and work pressures in the market and household (non-market) activities. On the ground of gender inequalities, scholars further noted that women were often excluded from the heavy-duty and regular works. Holmes, Sadana & Rath (2010) showed, "Women are often given 'soft' work such as moving the soil when wells are dug, which requires fewer days" (p. 9).

Further, delayed payment was a crucial issue that affected the participation of women workers. Khera & Nayak (2009) opined, "When the wages do not come on time, they are often forced to return to previous, less preferred forms of employment" (p. 22). Mainly women headed families or single women suffered a lot from the problem of delayed payment. The Government designated local Banks and post offices for distributing the wages; but scholars like Dasgupta & Sudarshan (2011) opined, "... while payment through banks or post offices could increase their control, this will be so only when several assumptions are met (banks are close to their residence, women know how to operate their own accounts)" (p. 28).

In the context of gender inequality the issue of legitimization of the woman's voice and emancipation is crucial. Pankaj & Tankha (2010) noted, "gender-discriminatory power structures and relations lead to, and perpetuate, gender-lopsided development outcomes, which are the main causes of women's deprivation" (p. 49). As

marginalized members in patriarchal society, in most part of India women have to negotiate with various social, cultural and institutional barriers. For example, in many parts of India women were not allowed to work outside their home as per the social norms (Khera & Nayak, 2009). Owing to marginalized conditions, the voices of women also remained delegitimized in the spaces of interactions. Therefore, they had to negotiate with the scenarios like unequal division of labor in the household and lesser (or no-) intra-household bargaining power. Furthermore, participation of women in open meetings was oftentimes criticized by the male dominated society. Apart from that, in reality often the single, divorced and separated, and old women were excluded from the program (though, as per the provisions of MGNREGA they can be included) (Sainath 2007). Quoting one such deprived woman—Bandi Lachmamma, Sainath (2007) noted, ““THEY DON'T want widows,” Bandi further said, “I could not find work at those sites for more than a few days. After that, they turn you away if you are single, without a male partner.”” (p.1). MGNREGA needed to address such issues (like, irregularities, discriminations and corruption) in order to ensure sustainable empowerment of the women workers (especially when they were mostly unorganized laborers).

Scopes of Improvement

Dasgupta & Sudarshan (2011) legitimized the importance of ‘citizen consciousness’ and commented that participants’ cognizance “may have had limited impact on leakages and other malpractices, conflicts over implementation issues between groups at village level should be seen as a positive factor, an indication of empowerment and the strengthening of ‘voice’” (p. 22). Similarly, while talking about the program implementation and women's empowerment issues, Pankaj & Tankha (2010) opined that although the women-participation rates were high, but the actual representation of women “in processes like work selection, social audit, mobilization of civil society, and share in the control and management of assets created is not encouraging” (p. 48). In other words, the

inadequate or ineffective representation of women and their voices essentially delegitimized the gender and inequality issues especially in the local and regional level. In ensuring women emancipation through MGNREGA, women should have adequate representation in the gram panchayats (local-governments), community planning and monitoring committees and other administrative bodies. For example, gram panchayat members were supposed to (a) certify eligibility of workers, (b) issue job-cards, (c) decide/ prioritize works, (d) monitor/ evaluate quality of works, etc. Khera & Nayak (2009) observed, “a large number of women respondents said that they do not go to gram sabhas (community-level meetings), because they are either not welcome at the gram sabhas or that they think it is not a meeting that women can attend” (p. 23). Consequently, the voices of women remained largely unheard and often were erased in the discursive spaces. Dasgupta & Sudarshan (2011) opined that the program needed to recognize, women's inputs and opinions, locally situated socio-economic dynamics, contextual politics and power relations in order to create entry points for the voices of the subaltern women.

Scholars criticized some of the provisions and policy aspects of the MGNREGA. Bhowmik (2009) opined that oftentimes the program, by legitimizing the aspect of ‘employment guarantee’, actually deemphasize the issue of ‘asset building’. He commented, “employment can be created anywhere and could include work that becomes unproductive in the future, such as building cart roads in the villages that are washed away in the first rains. If instead assets were accumulated, this would help create more employment in the future” (p. 131). Scholars argued that identification, creation and development of assets such as constructing wells, irrigation channels, building schools, and health centers might empower the marginalized population of the society in the long-run (Chaarlas & Velmurugan, 2012). According to the scholars, “Broadening the scope of types of works appropriate to rural productivity could also include a focus on healthcare, nutrition and literacy/skills programmes, as well as improving

market access and infrastructure for women and supporting investments and training in other agricultural activities” (Holmes, Sadana & Rath, 2010). They also criticized the compensation aspect of the act, they opined, “in its present form, the act provides compensation for the unemployed and makes them dependent on the state” (Bhowmik, 2009, p. 132).

Scholars like Kelkar (2009) raised questions about the gender inequalities and policy intentions of the program. He opined, “the gendered distribution of assets and resulting vulnerability of women substantially limits national efforts at overcoming poverty, thus indicating the need for policy attention to address persistent gender discrimination and the weaker starting point of women in ownership and control of assets” (p. 16). Along with the policy-matters, Dasgupta & Sudarshan (2011) opined that design and implementation of the program required to be improved in order to address the needs of the poor; they argued that due to corruption, the money and “benefits often do not reach the beneficiaries but are siphoned off by others” (p. 24). Khera and Nayak (2009) also showed that the illegal presence of contractors prevented the fair distribution of wages, and women became victims of the scenario. Moreover, the establishment of infrastructures such as crèche, adequate measures to ensure transparency and implementation of gender-sensitive provisions such as paying adequate attention to lifecycle vulnerability-aspects, especially during pregnancy and nursing, would make the program inclusive and sustainable

(Reetika & Nandini, 2009).

Conclusion

Dreze and Sen (1991) talk about two crucial aspects of social protection; they are—preventative (to save people at the margins from poverty) and promotive (to uplift/empower people out of poverty). Scholars have argued that MGNREGA “only helps the poor to subsist at a level below the poverty line (BPL) and that the intended benefits do not always reach them.” In other words, the program is minimally effective to end poverty and empower (in terms of health, education etc.) millions of economically poor population in the rural India. In the future, the program needs to be cognizant about a few aspects: (a) paying attention and responding appropriately to decentralize power, (b) bringing more transparency through eliminating corruption, (c) social suit needs to be strengthen to reduce leakage and fraud, and as and when possible, information technology can be utilized to bolster social audit. In addition, the program requires to pay close attention to (a) enhance contribution of women (qualitatively as well as quantitatively), (b) make provisions for unemployment allowances (as in many cases the government failed to provide 100 days of employment), (c) complete ongoing work (as the ratio of incomplete work is very high) for meaningful local-development, and (d) focus on skill development to make the impact of MGNREGA sustainable and contextually-meaningful.

Implementation Mechanism MGNREGA

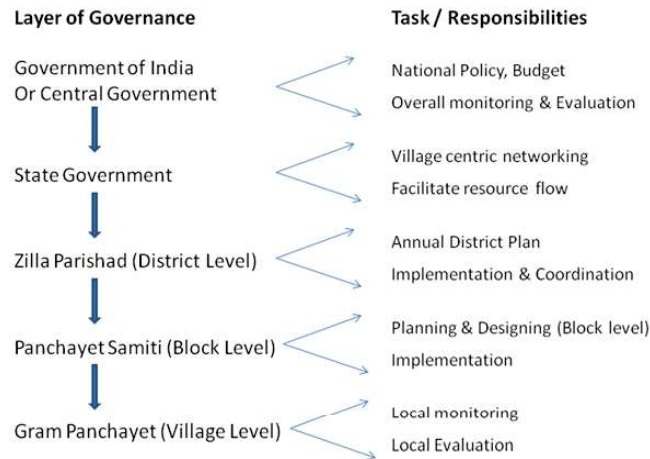


Table 1

Endnotes

These papers/documents are published in academic journals, books, government and non-government organizations' reports as well as presented at international conferences.

References

- Ahangar, G. B. (2014). Women empowerment through MGNREGA: a case study of block Shahabad of District Anantnag, Jammu and Kashmir. *Abhinav-National Monthly Refereed Journal Of Research In Commerce & Management*, 3(2), 55-62.
- Ananta, K.N. (2016). Empowerment effects of the MGNREGA on women workers: A case study of four village panchayats of Majuli, Jorhat district. *South Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary studies*, 3, 62-69.
- Antonopoulos, R. (2007). Employment Guarantee Policies and Related Gender Dimensions. 8th GEM-IWG International Conference Engendering Macroeconomics and International Economics.
- Babu, C. V., & Sudhakar, G. (2014). MGNREGA: Making Way for Social Change in Women's: A Case Study of Musunuru Mandal in Andhra Pradesh. *International Journal of Engineering and Management Research (IJEMR)*, 4(6), 1-5.
- Beverly, J. (1999). *Subalternity and representation: Arguments in critical theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bhadra, G. (1997). The mentality of the subaltern. In R. Guha (Ed.), *A subaltern studies reader, 1986-1995* (pp. 63-99). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bhowmik, S. K. (2009). India: Labor Sociology Searching for a Direction. *Work and Occupations*, 36(2), 126-144.
- Chaarlas, L. J., & Velmurugan, J. M. (2012). Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA): Issues and Challenges. *International Journal of Physical and Social Sciences*, 2(6), 253-261.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chatterjee, B. (2010). Political Theory and Citizenship Discourses: Cast(e) in the Periphery: Under

- standing Representation of Dalit Women and Politics in India. *Asien*, 50-67.
- Chatterjee, P. (1986). *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: A derivative discourse?* London: Zed.
- Chaturvedi, V. (2007) A Critical Theory of Subalternity: Rethinking Class in Indian Historiography, *Left History*, 12(1), 9-20.
- Cheney, G., & Cloud, D. (2006). Doing democracy, engaging the material: Employee participation and labor activity in an age of market globalization. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 19, 501–40.
- Cloud, D. (2001). Laboring under the sign of the new. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 15, 268–78.
- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Garikipati, S. (n.d.). Feminization of Agricultural Labor and Women's Domestic Status: Evidence from Labor households in India. 1-20.
- Garikipati, S. (2006). Feminization of Agricultural Labor and Women's Domestic Status: Evidence from Labor Households in India. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=951199> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.951199>
- Giddens (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, A. (2001). The globalizing of modernity. In D. Held & A. McGrew (Eds.), *The global transformations reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social problems*, 12(4), 436-445.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the prison notebooks. New York: International Publishers.
- Guha, R. (1988). The prose of counter-insurgency. In R. Guha & G. Spivak (Eds.), *Subaltern studies* (pp. 37-44). Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- Hartmann, P., Patil, B.R., & Dighe, A. (1989). *The mass media and village life: An Indian study*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Hayes, P. (2005). Introduction: Visual Genders. *Gender & History*, 17 (3), 519–537. Hegde, R.S. (1996). 'Narratives of silence: Rethinking gender, agency, and power from the communication experiences of battered women in South India.', *Communication Studies*, 47(4), 303 – 317.
- Holmes, R., Sadana, N. & Rath S. (2010). Gendered risks, poverty and vulnerability in India, *Overseas Development Institute*, 2-23.
- Kaushal, S. L., & Singh, B. (2016). A Study of Women Participation in MGNREGA in Himachal Pradesh. *Productivity*, 56(4), 382-391.
- Kelkar, G. (2009). Gender and productive assets: implications of national rural employment guarantee for women's agency and productivity. Paper presented at the FAO-IFAD-ILO Workshop on Gaps, trends and current research in gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: differentiated pathways out of poverty Rome, 31 March -2 April 2009.
- Khera, R. & Nayak, N. (2009). Women workers and perceptions of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in India. Paper presented at the FAO-IFAD-ILO Workshop on Gaps, trends and current research in gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: differentiated pathways out of poverty Rome, 31 March - 2 April 2009
- Khera, R., & Nayak, N. (2009). Women Workers and perceptions of the National rural employment Guarantee act. *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV, 49-57.
- Maciag, R. (2018). Discursive Space and Its Consequences for Understanding Knowledge and Information. *Philosophies*, 3(4), 34.
- Moose, D. (2005). *Cultivating development: an ethnography of aid policy and practice*. Ann Arbor: Pluto Press.
- Mumby, K. D. (1997). Modernism, postmodernism, and communication studies: A rereading of an ongoing debate. *Communication Theory*, 7, 1–28.
- Pankaj, A. & Tankha, R. (2010). Empowerment Effects of the NREGS on Women Workers: A Study

- in Four States. *Economic & Political Weekly*, XLV (30), 45-55.
- Parameswaran R. (2001). Feminist Media Ethnography in India: Exploring Power, Gender, and Culture in the Field. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7 (1), 69-103.
- Prasad, P., & Prasad, A. (2000). Stretching the iron cage: The constitution and implications of routine workplace resistance. *Organizational Science*, 11, 387-403.
- Purkayastha, B., Subramaniam, M., Desai, M. & Bose, S. (2003). The Study of Gender in India: A Partial Review. *Gender and Society*, 17(4), 503-524.
- Ravi, S. & Engler, M. (2009). Workfare in Low Income Countries: An Effective Way to Fight Poverty? The Case of India's NREGS. 1-11.
- Sahoo, M. (2014). Impact of MGNREGA on Women empowerment-a case study of Cuttack district in Odisha. *From the Desk of Editor*, 201.
- Sainath, P. (2007). NREGP: no place for single women. Z-Net.
- Sarkar, M.(2004). Looking for Feminism. *Gender & History*, 16(2), 318-333.
- Scott, J. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Shome, R., & Hegde, S. R. (2002). Postcolonial approaches to communication: Charting the terrain, engaging the intersections. *Communication Theory*, 12, 249-270.
- Singh, A. K., Bhasin, N., & Lama, S. (2012). MGNREGA: a critical assessment of issues and challenges. *Indian Journal of Commerce*, 65(2), 151-164.
- Sinha, A.J. (2007). Visual Culture and the Politics of Locality in Modern India: A Review Essay. *Modern Asian Studies*, 41(1), 187-220.
- Sudarshan, R.M. (2009). Examining India's National Regional Employment Guarantee Act: its impact and women's participation. The Institute of Social Studies Trust. 1-30.
- Thorat, S., & Sabharwal, N. S. (2011). Addressing the unequal burden of malnutrition. *India Health Beat*, 5(5), 1.
- World Bank. (2017). Rural population (% of total population). Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>

Author's Biography

Uttaran Dutta is assistant professor of intercultural communication in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University, U.S.A. His research focuses on sustainable development and social change in marginalized communities. He co-developed cost-effective solutions - creating access to health and education, and building digital apps for preserving culture, together with local participants using local resources.