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National Rural Employment Grantee Act Unique Reference To Vidarbha Region Of Maharashtra: People's Experiences

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Abstract:

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (NREGA) aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing the households hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year. This research paper tries to flag some of the issues that are likely to come up in the debate of performance in implantation of National Rural Employment Grantee Act (2005) or accomplishment process and how the Act's contravention is going in field, with unique reference to the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. This paper is based on the people's experiences regarding the NREGA in rural Vidarbha.

KEYWORD:

Contractor, Distress, Employment, Wage, Work.

INTRODUCTION

1. BACKGROUND:

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was enacted on 7th September, 2005. It is aimed to provide a minimum guaranteed wage employment of 100 days in every financial year to rural households, willing to do unskilled manual work and the wage rate fixed by the Act. National Rural Employment Grantee Act was launched by central government. People's organization call MKSS (Mazadoor Kissan Shakti Sagathana, Rajasthan) had great effort in the formation of this Act. The salient features of the Act are: it is Grampanchayat responsibility to provide the work within 5 km of one's residential area, and registration will be free-of-cost (NREGA, 2006). Act also ensures unemployment allowances if the household is not provided with employment within the specified period of time. Employment is given within a 15 days after the application for the work, if the work is not given; then daily unemployment allowance is supposed to provide to the applicant. Act also endure that, the work should be provided within a 5 km village area, in case; if the work is provided beyond the 5 km, then extra wages of 10% are payable to meet the additional transportation and living expenses. The work site should be facilities with the crèche (nursery school), drinking water, shade have to be provided etc. This is nothing but an important step towards realization of right to work in the rural areas. Within short period of time this Act received wide attention from various disciplines'. In correlation, this paper tries to flag some of the issues that are likely to come up in debate of implementation of NREGA at field level, with a unique reference to the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra.

1.1 Vidarbha: Is one of the most distress regions in Maharashtra. 50,481 farmers' suicides are recorded (NCRB). The reasons behind suicide are stress of agrarian crises, loan, low price for yield, high prices of seeds, pest attacks, insufficient seeds or pesticides at market level; crop disease, crop failure, unpaid crop-loan, overuse of fertilizers, pesticides (IGIDR, 2006 & TISS, 2005). Also socio-economic factors such as impending marriage of younger sister, and many other reasons; which leads to the farmer suicide in this

area. After the announcement of third packages, the suicides are continually going on, this region as like more negated area by the development activities. In this region not only labor but also marginalized farmers as well as medium farmers are also engaged in this NREGA work for the livelihood; because the farmers are already in agriculture stress. For labor group after farming, the livelihood depends on the non-farming activities; NREGA is one of the welfare-program for the labor group to overcome on the livelihood issues, because it offer the security to the rural people by providing guarantee of 100 days of wage employment within a financial year. Now let's light on the Act is performing in this region.

2. METHODOLOGY:

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai (TISS) carried out the baseline survey on rural livelihoods; under the title study of Vidarbha Sukhi Baliraja Initiative (VSBI). The baseline survey of rural livelihoods had covered 6 most distressed districts of this region namely Akola, Amravati, Buldhana, Washim, Wardha and Yavatmal. The baseline survey of rural livelihood conducted during August-November 2009. The investigation had covered 6,690 interview schedules and 105 focus group discussions. The survey was conducted in 71 villages. Structural interview scheduled with close and open ended was form for data collection, pretesting had done and later the revised interview scheduled was used for data collection. In the household questionnaire, the main economical activities recorded as per more hours spend in the activities, those ages is 18+ including male and female, one year before the survey, the data was asked from the respondent. The village questionnaire was filled by the field supervisor, from the various stakeholder of the village administration. Many of aspect was covered which includes a) population, land, water b) livestock, crops and livelihoods, c): religion, caste, recreation and transport facilities, d) physical, educational & health facilities f) social organizations, and program beneficiaries g) government functionaries and NGOs, h) beneficiaries of NREGA/MREGA in last one year.

The household survey covered various aspects such as household background, population characteristics, education, school attendance, vocational skills, economic activities, fertility, contraception, disability, illness, mortality; food habits, child feeding practices, nutritional status of children, adolescents and ever married women of reproductive age; land holding and crop cultivation, storage and sale of crops, livestock holding; household income and expenditure; social participation and social security nets; and loans and savings etc.

105 FGDs had conducted with different segment of the society during the study, such as farmer group (male/female) landless labor (male/female) and SHGs (male/female). The disintegrate of FGDs has given in the following table.1; as per sex and group wise, total number of FGDs was carry-out during the whole investigation.

Table: 1 Total number of FGDs conducted by target group and sex of participants						
Group	Sex of participants				Total (N)	Total (%)
	Male	Female	Combined			
Farmer	32	3	1	36	34.3	
Landless laborer	13	20	9	42	40.0	
SHG member	5	22	0	27	25.7	
Total (N)	50	45	10	105	100	
Total (%)	47.6	42.9	9.5	100	*	

Source: Vidarbha Baseline Survey of Rural Livelihoods, 2009 TISS, Mumbai.

All FGDs started with the brief introduction of the survey team as well as FGD participants. The FGDs had conducted as per the convince timing of the participant, so the daily livelihood activities should not be disturbed. The table.1 shows that, total 105 FGDs conducted in the whole investigation. Higher numbers of i.e. 42 FGDs were conducted with the labor group (male 13, female 20 and 9 combined), 34% FGDs was with farmers (male and female) but most of the FGDs were with the male persons. In correlation with landless labor group 13 FGDs with male labor, 20 with female-labor and 9 FGDs was mixed group i.e. male-female. The higher percent of FGDs conducted with labor group 40%. Group wise, 47.6% of FGDs were conducted with the male according to the sex category. It was supposed to conduct at least 2 FGDs per village, but in some village the FGDs were not conducted due to various reasons. After the formal

introduction of survey team, general profile of the participant was recorded it includes name, age, education, marital status, total family member, occupation etc. Keeping in the mind that the data should not be missed therefore in each group one facilitator and two recorders were used in each FGD. The check list was prepared for the FGDs, so the data can be collected and it was the basic guideline for the facilitator and to the recorder.

Subject related with socio-economical aspect, livelihoods had discussed in the FGD, and implementation of NREGA was one topic discussed in the whole investigation. During data collection process, voice of voiceless came out through FGD. The checklist of NREGA started with what is NREGA? Distance of the work place, whom to approach? What are the provisions under this Act; did you applied for job card? Did you have the job card? If yes, where you worked, wages you got? Nature of payment, how many days you had worked? and many other checklists point was covered. Some of the key topics are highlighted in this paper.

4. KNOWLEDGE OF NREGA:

In Surkundi village of Washim district, the people have not demanded work as they were not aware that they have to apply for it; in spite of having job card. They were in impression that Gram-panchayat will declare and ask them to join for the work. People were not aware about the Act, which is only made for labor and specific groups. In few FGDs participant said that the awareness level among the labor group have been seen very less; such as regarding the job card, distribution process, work applications, period between work application and work getting. It is significant point that labor workers have less knowledge about this minimum wages under NREGA. Greater parts of people are aware about the NREGA in some form and also most went for registration and got the job card also. In few villages of Wardha and Yavatmal districts the participants were not aware about the NREGA scheme. It may probably that in these villages (or concerned gram panchayats) no work under NREGA has been initiated or the work might have been given to some contractors without the knowledge of the public. When briefly explained to the participants of the FGDs about the NREGA, some participants of these villages voiced that the Gram panchayat members might be aware of all these (about the Act) but what about the poor laborers for whom the Act is meant for. They felt that if the gram panchayat did not bother about them (the public) who else will bother about them and how they will survive.

4.1 Lobby of big farmers: In few FGDs participant strongly said that maximum land holders has opposed to implementation of NREGA in Village. As they feared that it would result in shortage of labor and increase wage rates for their farm activities. This point was raised and expressed in a few FGDs conducted in the villages of Amravati and Akola districts. The geographical background plays a vital role in agricultural productivity. In Vidarbha region, Amravati and Akola districts have a few good sources of water (irrigation facilities in some places) as compared to the other districts of Vidarbha region. In these districts landless laborers are mostly engaged in agricultural activities and not in non-farm activities. Land holders have strong lobbying with local gram-panchayats and bring pressure on them do not to start work under NREGA. So that they get enough laborers at low wages to work in their farms. In fact most of the gram-panchayats the elected representatives are mostly big farmers and they themselves are controlling to the Act. It is from the words of a village sarpanch from Amaravathi district; who is also a big farmer, "Why do you want to work under NREGA? If you want work; come to my farm." Even the big farmers have political power and so the marginalized groups are not able to do anything against them.

4.2 Job card and employment: In many villages, households have registered for job card under NREGA for job card and obtained job card but not obtained any work under this Act. FGDs in Yavatmal and Washim districts revealed that gram panchayat officials demanded Rs. 30 to 50 from the households who wanted registration or demand of the work under NREGA. The Act says that, the registration is free of cost (NREGA, 2005). In Borgaon Grampanchyat of the Akola district, people have reportedly paid Rs. 30 per household for registration but they are not yet received the job card.

In Nakashi village of Akola district, a group of women reported that work came under NREGA but they were told that it was very hard work and do not meant for women. It was a common statement in many villages that their job cards were set-aside by the Gram Panchayats on the ground that the job cards should be with the gram-panchayat and not with the households. They felt that it was done only to misuse it by making entries in the job card as if the households were provided employment.

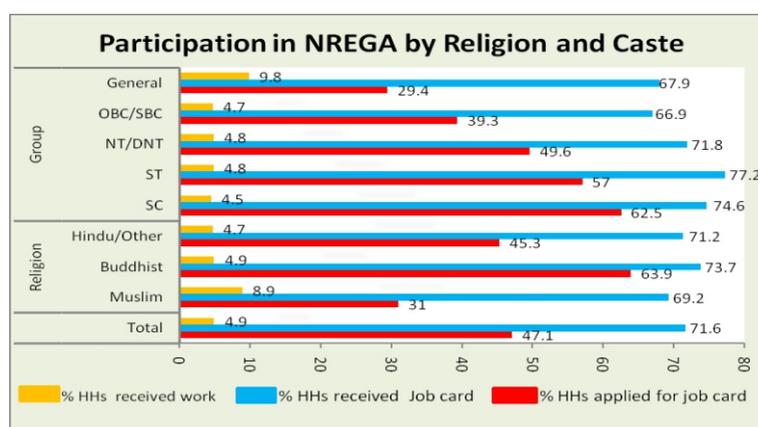
Table .2 Percent of households applied for job card under NREGA, percent of households received job card, percent of household received work by religion and Caste				
Characteristics	Total	% HHs applied for job card	% HHs received job card (among applied)	% HHs received work (among job card holders)
Total	6690	47.1	71.6	4.9
Religion				
Muslim	471	31.0	69.2	8.9
Buddhist	995	63.9	73.7	4.9
Hindu/Other	5224	45.3	71.2	4.7
Group				
SC	1246	62.5	74.6	4.5
ST	1084	57.0	77.2	4.8
NT/DNT	937	49.6	71.8	4.8
OBC/SBC	2861	39.3	66.9	4.7
General	562	29.4	67.9	9.8

Source: Vidarbha Baseline Survey of Rural Livelihoods. May, 2010 TISS, Mumbai

Table.2 and graph 1(p, 6), gives the summary of participation in NREGA as per religion and caste wise. The graph highlights that 63.9% Buddhist households applied for the job card, which is higher as compare with other social group and 31% Muslim. The total percent of households received job card is high, that is 71.6%, (among applied) but only 4.9% of household received the work (among job card holders) during the 2008-09. In social group; 62.5% of SC household applied for the job card, and among them 75% received the job card, among those who had applied but only 4.5% had received the work under the NREGA. In few villages participant reported that the work was not provided even after the written application, no any unemployment allowances are paid to the applicants. Irregularities in the wage payment, along with delay in wage payment in this work said by labor.

4.3 Grampanchayat: According to the FGD participants of many villages in all the districts that they had approached the gram panchayats seeking work under NREGA but the gram panchayats had told them that they had not received work order from their higher authorities and so they were not in a position to provide employment. As it was a common excuse by the gram panchayats the people were tired of asking for work and in due course they stopped asking them. It may be one reason for the very low demand for work reported in the official statistics. The other reason is that people do approach the gram panchayats and ask for work but the demands are made only orally, and application is filled if and only when work is allotted. Further even if people submit any work-demand application in writing the officials do not accept it and if accepted they won't register or record it. But there are issues in demand and supply side only, people they are demanding for the work but problems are mainly with supply side. The big farmers lobby brings pressure on the Grampanchayat to do not start to work under this Act because they have of fear of loss-of-labor.

Graph 1: Percent of households applied for job card under NREGA, percent of households received job card (among applied), percent of households received work (among job card holders) by religion and caste.



4.4 Nature of work: In few villages it was found that laborers preferred working in the farm rather than NREGA. Those had worked under the NREGA, they said that the wages are paid according to the work performed and in a prescribed task, and the work must be completed in order to earn the minimum wages, which is quite difficult said by labor. Another labor added that; for example in digging, the prescribed task consists of a given number of cubic feet, but the nature of soil is different from place to place which also affects on the wages rate. In few villages of Amravati and Akola districts where irrigation facilities are available, laborers often get higher wages. Because of these factors laborers give priority to agriculture labor work rather than NREGA. However during lean season they desired to work under NREGA but still they do not get it.

4.5 Delay in wage payment: Regarding payments under NREGA, payment of wages is much delayed and involved lengthy procedure of opening or having an account in a bank or post office. The authorities crediting the wage amount into the account and then laborer goes to the bank/post office and withdrawing the amount. Even people are willing to go through these procedures, the problem is that the laborers often do not know when the amount will be credited into their accounts and they walk between the bank and the gram panchayat to find out if the amount has been credited into their account. On the other hand if they do agriculture labor work they get ready wage payment and also get some grain during harvest season. Delays were reported for disbursing the wages beyond the maximum prescribed time. Further they can go to their farmer-employer and borrow money in case of emergencies. Labor said that they are unable to earn the minimum wages; these points are expressed by participants especially laborers in most of the FGDs conducted in all the districts. This was also one of the reason therefore labor refused to come, when they found that the wages are too low. Similar account came from many of the villages in this region.

4.6 Contractor: The most novel and remarkable feature of NREGA is ban on the use of contractors. Because it's becoming a threat to the NREGA even some rage of work undertaken by Grampanchyat was given on contract (Tanshree Sood, 2010). During baseline survey it was found that, in few cases, the labors were hired from outside villages by the contractor. This point was strongly expressed in some of the FGDs conducted in the villages of Akola, Amravati and Yavatmal districts. In few study villages like Manki a village of Akola district and Dhanora a village of Yavatmal district it was found that the work was done by JCB machines and the labor was taken from outside the village for the NREGA work.

4.7. Worksite amenities: As per the Act there should be provision of few facilities at the worksite such as i) drinking water ii) shed facilities, iii) crèches facilities and iv) first aid; but labor accounted that no such facilities were provided at the work site. In few survey villages; we came to across that even the applicant were not aware about these facilities by the concern stakeholders. But nothing concrete has been done in the ground to improve implementation of the NREGA at the village level from implementation side, for the more effectiveness of the work.

4.8. Socio-economical background: We had interviewed total 6,690 households, the survey households consisted of 78% Hindus, 15% Buddhist and 7% Muslim. 19% of Scheduled Castes, 16% Scheduled Tribes, 14% Nomadic and De-notified Tribes, and 43% belongs to Other Backward Class. In the surveyed population 60% of households possess agricultural land (owned, en-titled or leased-in). However only 54% of the households cultivate land and among them 29% are marginal-farmers, 37% are small-farmer, 21% are semi-medium farmers, 11% are medium-farmers and only 2% are large-farmers.

4.9 NREGA participation during 2008-09, Rajaretnam et al, 2010

The survey data shows that 47.1% households registered for job card

71.6% households received job card (among applied)

33.7% Households received job card (among all HHs)

4.9% Households received work (among job card holders)

Mean man-days of work received by households 66.5%

Percent of female workers among all workers 29.3%

Mean days of work by males workers 47.7%

Mean days of work by females workers 45.2%

5. CONCLUSION:

With the data from household survey and FGDs, the functioning of the NREGA Act in this region

that is considered as highly distressed. In the study population almost all adult males and most of the adult females are engaged in some kind of economic activities and the major activities are own farm activities and agriculture labor work. In this region only a few males and females can be classified as exclusive cultivator as many males and females are engaged in both own farm activities and labor work. It may probably due to the fact that much of the land in the Vidarbha region is non-irrigated and for marginal and small landholding households the land income may not be sufficient for their livelihood and that compel them to work in others farm also as laborer.

47% of the households in the study population have applied for job card under NREGA and among them nearly 71.6% have received the job card. But among them, only 5% of the households have received work under the Act for an average duration of about 45 days in one year. Even the percent of received work under NREGA by religion and caste wise is very less.

The FGDs conducted with landless laborers, SC/ST members, marginal-small farmers; showed that people are generally aware of the Act, majority of households applied for job card and among them most of them also received job card but the expected job did not come in their way.

In few villages; it was found that the contravention of guidelines is going on by the stakeholder. The job card was kept in the Grampanchayat cupboard but it was not distributed to the actual applicant, in few cases the Grampanchayat officer asked for the money (bribe) for the registration under NREGA.

It is common that the daily wage earner needs the money at the end of the day's work, to fulfill the essential needs; the labor (he/she) cannot wait for a week and for 15 days for the wages. The unhappiness was observed among the labor group regarding the nature of wage payment based on the work performance scale.

The lobby of big farmers is not in the favor of the NREGA work, they have fear of loss of labor power. In few villages, the work was carryout through contractor and even in some cases the JCB machines were used for the NREGA work, which is totally contravention of the NREGA Act. As per our FGDs data the contactors are increasingly becoming threat to the NREGA in this area.

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NOTES

1. Labor organization working in Rural Rajasthan
2. Compiled from National Crime Record Bureau; Accidental deaths and suicides in India, 1995-2010
3. Grampanchayat is one institution under the Panchyathi Raj Institution.
4. A village headman as per Panchyathi Raj Institution
5. Earth moving machine (J.C. Bamford a British manufacturer of heavy industrial and agricultural vehicles)
6. Up to 2.5 acres of land
7. 2.6-5.0 acres of land
8. 5.1-10 acres of land
9. 10.1 to 25.0 acres of land
10. More than 25 acres of land
11. A person in implementation of this act such as Sarpanch, Gramsevak etc

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