National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Its Impact on Rural Society-A Socio-Economic Study in Khejuri, East Medinipur, W.B.

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Abstract
National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) enacted on 2005 and brought into force from February 2006. Considering the basic objective of NREGA, I have identified six important areas in order to understand the impact of the act on the people and society in Khejuri-I Panchayat Samity, Purba Medinipur, W.B. in the year 2012-13. From the findings of the study it has been observed that NREGA develops economic condition of rural people by providing guaranteed employment besides formal economic activities. The Act reduces rural poverty and enhances the economic stability of rural people. The act helps to develop rural infrastructure through asset creation. NREGA also plays a significant role towards women empowerment. By getting additional income from the scheme poor women in rural area have contributed to their family and their economic, social and political condition become strengthen. At the same time this situation reduces gender inequality. From the study it has been observed that the status of education and health among the beneficiaries increased to a large extent. Additional income of the family helps the villagers to think about education of their children. NREGA helps to reduce the nature and volume of rural-urban migration. This act strengthened social security of vulnerable group in rural area. As a result general quality of life among rural people has changed towards positive direction.

Key Words: Asset Creation, Guaranteed Employment, NREGA, Rural-Urban Migration, Women Empowerment.

Introduction
NREGA stands for National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005)’, the flagship welfare programme of the U.P.A Government enacted on September 2005 and brought into force with effect from February 2006 in 200 most backward districts; covering all districts of the country within next five years. The objective of the act is ‘enhancement of livelihood security of rural household by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work’. The basic objectives of the act are:

- Generating productive assets
- Protecting the environment
- Empowering rural women
- Reducing rural-urban migration
- Fostering social equity

The NREGA marks a paradigm shift and stands out amongst other rural employment programmes as it empowers the rural population with a legal right and employment guarantee through an act of parliament, unlike other wage employment programmes. The act targets
unskilled laborers in the rural sections of this country which includes landless labors, SC’s/ST’s and women. Dating back as early as the 19th century, formal establishment of Employment Guarantee Schemes (EGS) has been a staple of relief policies in response to natural disasters and economic downturns worldwide. NREGA came as a culmination of long list of Wage Employment Programmes, starting from NREP which came into effect from 26th January 1979 to NFFWP that was brought into effect by the UPA government as an interim measure before the promulgation of NREGA on 14th November 2004.

NREGA guarantees at least 100 days of unskilled manual work to any willing rural household. The people are given a right to work, however limited, and the programme implementing agencies are duty bound by act to provide them work against demand within 15 days of application of work or pay unemployment allowance. The demand driven nature of the programme better targets the allocation of programme fund. The allocation of fund is based on the labour budget which assesses the likely labour demand for the coming year. A reward–punishment approach enshrined in the Act - that 100% of the unemployment allowance, to be paid on failure to provide work on demand, has to be borne by the State government- ensures that the implementation of NREGA is done in a manner that the spirit of the ‘Right to Work’ is respected by the states. The approach also lays stress on the State Governments and the Panchayeti Raj Institutions to ensure that labour demand is correctly assessed and seasonal schemes are ready for meeting the demand for work. In the process of giving employment, the act aims at creation of durable assets and enhancing the livelihood resource base of the rural poor (Chakraborty, 2007).

The act puts transparency and accountability on the forefront and addresses the core issues of corruption that ailed the previous wage employment programme by totally banning the contractors, ensuring people’s participation in planning process, prescribing an elaborate system of record keeping, 100 per cent monitoring of works, 100 per cent Muster Roll watch, 100 per cent Social Audit and putting all NREGA documents within the purview of Right to Information Act. NREGA ranks amongst the most powerful initiatives ever undertaken for rural employment in India.

NREGA in Khejuri-I Panchayet Samity

There are 25 Development Blocks in Puba Medinipur district. I have selected Khejuri-I Panchayet Samity as my study of analysis because it plays a significant role regarding the implementation on NREGS. Khejuri is the part of coastal Bay of Bengal and situated at the west bank of Hooghly estuary. Geographically, it is a part of Contai Sub-Division under the district of East Medinipur. Khejuri is divided into Khejuri-I and Khejuri-II Panchayat Samities. Khejuri – 1 Panchayet Samity comprises of six Gram Panchayets namely Heria, Lakshi, Tikasi, Kamarda, Birbandar and Kalagachia. Total population of this Panchayet Samity is 1,58,172(Census,2011) and the number of male and female population is 81,908 and 76,264 respectively. In this area nearly 32 per cent of total Population belongs to scheduled caste and other backward category, that are the weakest section of the society. It is an economically backward area and nearly 30 per cent of the total households belong to below the poverty line.
Occupation wise distribution of population reveals that majority of total population is small and marginal farmers. A sizeable section is land-less labourers. In such a socio-economic scenario NREGA provides a significant role for the overall development of people in the locality.

From the year 2007, Khejuri-1 Panchayat samity played an important role for successful implementation of NREGA. During the financial year 2009-10, 18294 households and 49,812 persons were registered under this scheme. In this period, 10672 households and 19787 persons had provided employment and the number of person days employment generated were 132422. Among 132422 person days employment, the number of S.C, S.T and others were 18613, 62 and 113747 respectively. In the same period, 67164 person days employment were generated for the women in Khejuri-1 Panchayet Samity. Till 31st March, 2011 26372 job cards were issued and 31 days employment per household were provided in the year 2010-11. As a result, the economic condition of the poor and backward people in Khejuri has increased significantly. This situation provides the opportunity to think about the education of next generation. Similarly the people have become conscious about health and hygiene.

One of the major objectives of NREGA is to generate sustainable community assets and while doing that generate mandays and thus income for the villagers. In Khejuri different types of works were implemented under the scheme. These are water conservation and water harvesting, irrigation canals including micro and minor irrigation works, renovation of traditional water bodies including desilting of tanks, land development, drought proofing including afforestation and tree plantation and rural connectivity to provide all-weather access. The successful implementation of such works not only generates job opportunities of the local people but also develop rural infrastructure which has improved the living standard of people in Khejuri-1 Panchayet Samity. At the same time, the rate of rural-urban migration has also decreased significantly due to available job opportunity in the locality. The present study highlighted the impact of NREGA on rural society and people in Khejuri-1 Panchayet Samity.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the present study are manifold which include:

1) To find out the impact of NREGA on economic life of people in rural area.
2) To find out the impact of NREGA on infrastructural development in rural area.
3) To trace out the impact of NREGA on gender equality and women empowerment.
4) To find out the impact of NREGA on the status of education and health of the rural people.
5) To find out the impact of NREGA on nature and volume of rural-urban migration.
6) To trace out the role of NREGA towards providing social security for vulnerable group in rural area.
7) Finally, to find out the impact of NREGA on general quality of life in the rural area.
Research Methodology and Sample Size

This study aims at understanding the impact of NREGA on different areas of rural society and people in Khejuri-I Panchayat Samity under Purba Medinipur district in the state of West Bengal. 300 households among 22572 households in 38 villages in Khejuri-I Panchayat Samity were selected through a stratified random sampling method and surveyed by using a semi-structured questionnaire. In order to examine the qualitative changes (not to make an estimate) in the process of implementation and to assess the impact on individual beneficiaries and macro factors like community assets, labour market conditions and migration, the same households and villages have been revisited.

The study has been undertaken in 18 villages choosing three each from six Gram Panchayats through stratified random sampling method. The villages are stratified on the basis of a few indicators like the total size of the population, the number of NREGA beneficiaries, literacy rate and the total SC population. All the households in the selected villages were listed first to stratify them on the basis of certain characteristics like beneficiary and non-beneficiary household, size of the landholding, occupational pattern, income and asset levels. Then, a total of 50 households, including 40 beneficiary and 10 nonbeneficiary ones, were chosen from each selected gram panchayat. The households were selected by using stratified random sampling method. The non-beneficiary households were selected for two reasons. One, there are chances that some deserving and willing households have not benefited from the scheme as yet. The inclusion of non-beneficiary households helped in understanding the reasons for their exclusion or for their inability to avail of the scheme. Two, the socio-economic profiles of these non-beneficiary households helped in assessing the demand for the scheme among various socio-economic groups. It may also be useful in estimating the number of expected NREGA beneficiary groups in both the concerned village and gram panchayat. The study followed both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection.

NREGA and Its Impact on Economic Condition of Rural People

NREGA aims to provide a steady source of income and livelihood security for the poor, vulnerable and marginalised. Overall, evidence suggests that NREGA does provide basic income assurance to a large number of beneficiaries (Rinku and Ravallion, 2005). In the financial year 2011–12 alone, nearly 5 crore households which is close to 25 per cent of all rural households in the country were provided over 209 crore person-days of work. In order to point out the impact of NREGA, I have identified some attributes which contribute to the enhancement of quality of life such as, i) Income levels before and after the scheme in vogue, ii) Status of loans outstanding against the beneficiaries at the time of inquiry, iii) Shift in means of livelihood, iv) Shift in expenditure pattern on food items and non-food items after income generation through the present scheme, v) Acquisition of movable and immovable asset by the beneficiaries during the year of implementation of the scheme.

The data regarding reported income before and after joining the scheme from the respondents depicts the positive change brought by NREGA in the economic condition of the beneficiaries. In Table-1 it is evident that a sharp decline in percentage of respondents with income less than
2000 from 43.67 per cent to only 8.67 per cent. On the other hand there is rise in percentage of respondents with income 2000-5000 from 45.33 per cent to 67 per cent prior to and after the scheme. It is also important to note here that the percentage of respondents with income more than 5000 increase from 11 per cent to 24.33 per cent after joining the scheme. Repayment of outstanding loans or debts is been facilitated by NREGA. 71 per cent of total respondents were indebted to money lenders and many of them reported that they could repay their debts partially from the income generated by NREGS.

Propensity to labour work as a means of livelihood is evident from this study. A noticeable shift is reported by samples from agriculture and other farm labour to labour work as their prime mean of livelihood. This is mainly due to the direct income of wage employment under this scheme. But no concordance exists among respondents regarding continuous availability of this opportunity. Expenditure pattern of beneficiaries on non-food items before and after the scheme documents no significant difference in this study. There is an increase in acquisition of movable and immovable assets like vehicles and live stocks after the scheme reported from everywhere.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly Income</th>
<th>No. and Percentage of Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before the Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than Rs. 2000</td>
<td>131 (43.67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs. 2000-5000</td>
<td>136 (45.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs.5000 and above</td>
<td>33 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21 per cent of total respondents reported that they brought T.V, fan and other electronic goods with their NREGA income. At the same time no significant difference is reported in case of possession of gold, renovation of houses, availability of portable water facility and construction of toilets or purchase of land etc. before and after the scheme. Income from the scheme was mainly used for clearing the debts and meeting daily needs of the beneficiaries. As the number of work days available to them was limited and regular payments were not done in many places there is a strong negative feeling among the samples towards the ability of this scheme in transforming the lives of poor rural people. They refuse to acknowledge the benefit of this scheme as they are not able to experience any notable change happened in their lives due to NREGA.

**NREGA and Women Empowerment**

As a rural wage employment programme, NREGA recognised the relevance of incorporating gender equity and empowerment in its design (Kar, 2015). Various provisions under the act and its guidelines, aim to ensure that women have equitable and easy access to work, decent working conditions, equal payment of wages and representation on decision-making bodies. From financial year 2006–07 up to financial year 2011–12, around Rs 53,000 crore have been spent on wages for women and around 47 per cent of the total person-days generated have been by women. Significantly, female share on works under NREGA is greater than their share of work in casual wage labour3 market across all States. Women are participating in the Scheme much
more actively than they participated in all forms of recorded work. This may support the hypothesis that NREGA creates decent and favourable work conditions for women. For instance, NREGA’s stipulation of work within 5 kilometres of the village where the job applicant resides makes participation in the Scheme logistically feasible for women who may have limited employment opportunities available to them, given their role and responsibilities in their households.

There is much that the NREGA promises from the perspective of women’s empowerment as well. Most boldly, in a rural milieu marked by stark inequalities between men and women – in the opportunities for gainful employment afforded as well as wage rates – NREGA represents action on both these counts. The act stipulates that wages will be equal for men and women. It is also committed to ensuring that at least 33 per cent of the workers shall be women. By generating employment for women at fair wages in the village, NREGA can play a substantial role in economically empowering women and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem. Employment at NREGA worksites seems to have raised both enthusiasm and expectations among women workers (Xavier and Mari, 2014). Women workers unanimously affirmed that the benefits from NREGA employment were high and that they would like to get more days of work in a year.

By putting cash incomes into their hands, NREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. The field data suggest that women workers are more confident about their roles as contributors to family expenditure and their work decisions, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere. Another important point that emerged from the survey is that women workers were, by and large, receiving their wages in person, rather than through husbands or other proxies. Further, it helps them to keep themselves away from the clutches of local moneylenders. A significant percentage of workers (almost 34 per cent) also spent their NREGA wages on their children’s education. The other large expenditure regularly met through NREGA wages is health care, with around 40 per cent of the respondents having spent earnings on this. All this taken together seems to sketch out the beginnings of a marked shift from the previous role of women.

NREGA and Asset Creation in Rural Areas
Creation of sustainable assets that strengthen the livelihood resource base of rural areas is one of the key objectives of NREGA (Singh, 2013). Table-2 shows that since the inception of NREGA, around 146 lakh works have been undertaken; of these, almost 51 per cent are works related to water (water conservation, flood control, irrigation, drought proofing, renovation of traditional water bodies and micro-irrigation), and over 19 per cent works are related to rural connectivity. At such a scale, NREGA works have the potential to benefit rural communities by improving irrigation facilities, enhancing land productivity and connecting remote villages to input and output markets. Overall, studies suggest that while many productive assets have been created on the ground owing to good planning and execution at the micro-level, there is need for more focused implementation with regard to the creation of durable and sustainable assets under NREGA. This is also an area of my study.
Table-2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Works</th>
<th>Total No. of Works Completed from 2006-07 to 2011-12 (in Lakh)</th>
<th>Ongoing Works (in Lakh)</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Works Taken up from 2006-07 to 2011-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water conservation and Water Harvesting</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood Control and Protection</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drought Proofing</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrigation Canals</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renovation of Traditional Water Bodies</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works on Lands of SC/ST/BPL/SMF and IAY and Land Reform Beneficiaries</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Development</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Connectivity</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Works</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>146.2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (official website), http://www.mgnrega.nic.in

NREGA provides for creation of durable assets aimed at enhancing the livelihood resource base of the villagers so as to be able to eradicate the causes of chronic poverty. Hedging, gardening, planting of fruit/flower bearing trees as well as trees with good quality timber at the premises of Government owned schools, colleges, other educational institutions, hospitals, offices and other government premises were permissible works under NREGA scheme and could be implemented through Gram Panchayats. Excavation of individual ponds belonging to families other than SC/ST beneficiary/Patta holder/BPL could be taken up under NREGA as was prescribed in the SGRY Programme after executing an agreement with the beneficiary wherein the beneficiary would agree to share the excess water retained as a result of excavation for community usage like irrigation, fisheries, duckery etc. Water conservation and water harvesting, renovation of traditional water bodies, renovation and new excavation of irrigation and drainage canals were important areas of work under NREGA (Mishra, 2011).

NREGA and Rural-Urban Migration
In my study, I have used migration as a negative force. It is focusing on distress migration, that happens when people have to go to cities to find work due lack of sufficient works in their own villages. Rural-urban migration is a response to diverse economic opportunities across space. After implementation of NREGA in Khejuri-I Panchayat Samity, it is observed that the nature and volume of rural-urban migration has decreased significantly, as the villagers could manage jobs in their locality throughout the year. NREGA seems to have created reasons and opportunities for people to work and remain in their own villages. The strengthening of this perception in rural areas can have significant impacts on questions of security, health and children's education, all of which are often compromised, in one way or another, during
migration. 73 per cent of the total respondents said that neither they nor their family members had migrated from 2008.

NREGA has had a more direct and positive impact on reducing distress migration as compared to migration taken up for economic growth and other reasons (Jacob, 2011). My field data indicate that NREGA has reduced migration by providing work closer to home and decent working conditions. It is observed that the scheme brought down the migration levels from about 27 per cent to 7 per cent in different villages due to availability of work. In fact the reduction in distress migration is more apparent in the case of households that need to migrate with their families; the entire family is forced to migrate to cities due to limited work opportunities. This leads to a disruption of children’s education and access to family health care. It is observed that out of 600 beneficiaries, 35 per cent of the respondents felt that migration had been reduced in their families as a result of NREGA. Thirty-one per cent of the total respondents felt that their children’s education had been positively benefitted by NREGA.

Conclusion

The NREGA is a new life line of the rural people who earn their livelihood as wage earners. It also gears up the social relationship among the rural people which is a pre requisite condition to build a strong society or a nation. It also reduces the gender difference for some works which are in practice in rural areas. Overall, the scheme of NREGA has the great potential in enhancing income and livelihood security of the rural poor. Notably, NREGA has not been able to provide the employment that one would have expected. Despite making provision of 100 days of employment in a year, actual employment generation has been much below than 100 days in a year. In the matter of wage payment, in many cases, delay in wage payment is noticed. Procedural irregularities are also noticed at the stage of implementation of the scheme such as irregularities in conducting social audits and gram sabhas. However, as evidenced by the present study, NREGA is also not free from limitations despite having its positive impact on income generation, asset creation and above all improving standard of living. Obviously, if the remedial measures are taken to address the limitations, the effectiveness of NREGA would increase with experience and would go a long way in ensuring livelihood security to the rural poor in a sustainable manner and in altering the balance of power in rural society (Ambasta, Shankar and Shah 2008). The key lies in proper implementation and planning of the scheme as per the guidelines laid down in the Act.

In conclusion it can be said that even though NREGA has brought changes in the quality of life of beneficiaries especially from economically and socially backward communities, a lot more has to do to achieve the expectations of the society at large. People are still not empowered to use their right to demand and ensure transparency in the implementation of this scheme. It calls for intervention by authorities to ensure smooth functioning of this programme, free from malpractices and corruption so that it can act as a tool to rejuvenate the otherwise unproductive and under productive areas of our country.
References