

**EMPLOYMENT TO SCHEDULED TRIBE WOMEN THROUGH GREEN JOBS
UNDER MGNREGS**

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests : Socially, culturally, communally this work doesnot affect anybody including Government

Abstract

Considering the status in respect of possession of cultivable land, Scheduled Tribes (STs), among all the social groups are most affected by gradual marginalization consequence of which dependence on casual wage earning is increasing. Situation in the irrigated areas is slightly convenient as it provides opportunity of wage labor in agriculture field though it hardly meets the requirement for the survival of the families. MGNREGA assures commitment of the state towards those underemployed jobseekers from marginalized section through providing guaranteed employment of 100 days for each household in a financial year. This Paper seeks to explore the role of MGNREGS in providing employment to those ST households from which demand and participation of women tend to increase in a village of West Bengal. Based on secondary data and field enumeration, context specific analysis shows how these ST members of SHGs collectively get involved to work in plant nursery schemes assuring particular number of days of employment in each financial year. The process of inclusion reveals factors combining technical proficiency and collective strength acquired by the poor women as well as

commitment of the Gram Panchyats towards execution of the environment friendly initiatives under MGNREGS. The case demonstrates uniqueness in term of SHG – Panchayat interface to build up sustainable natural resource based asset through wage employment schemes. With this guaranteed employment, resource poor ST women wage seekers are now capable to utilize wage earning opportunities to increase access to cultivable land and other revolving assets.

Key Words: MGNREGS, Nursery work, Scheduled Tribe, Self Help Groups (SHGs),

Introduction

Poverty among the ST population is still alarming in many aspects. The ratio of marginal workers to total number of ST workers as revealed in 2011 Census, confirms that a large number of ST population are still not adequately employed to live a decent life. As per 2011 Census, out of total ST workers in India, 35percent are marginal workers. Out of ST marginal workers 19 percent of them worked for less than 3 months at the time of enumeration while 81percent worked from 3-6 months. At the same time 50 percent of the total ST workers were found as available for work or seeking employment at the time of enumeration. Almost 3.27 percent of ST Households were found as “landless households are getting major part of their income from manual casual labour” and this category seems to be the most vulnerable as they are deprived of the land as most critical resources to protect security of livelihoods. Secondary data available from National Sample Survey organisation (NSSO) 66th round, 68th round and 69th round⁴ shows that landlessness is growing among the tribal population.

Statement of the problem and the area of study

In West Bengal, as per Census 2011, 5.80 percent of total population belongs to ST. Among total number of ST population, 91.65 percent are distributed in rural areas of the state. From the point of employment status, their condition seems to be significantly backward in the state as 85.96 percent ST households are considered to be deprived households. It is higher than the whole country (74.48 percent). Landless ST households are getting major part of their income from manual casual labor is 56.42, this is also higher than the whole country.

In this context, Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) directly target those rural poor who are largely dependent on manual work and it is one of the most important interventions for fostering inclusion of the underemployed section of the country including resource poor ST

population through ensuring adequate employment opportunity in the rural areas particularly for the landless agricultural labour. The prime aim of the programme is to provide livelihood opportunity to those ST households who were the farmers once with resources but gradually because of encroachment, displacement and other activities made them as landless resource poor. In this context, it is necessary to study how far MGNREGS generate income and employment to them. Hence, West Bengal which has a good number of ST populations has been taken as reference.

From the data available in MGNREGS website it is observed that there is gradual decline in man days created by ST households from 2012 to 2018 in West Bengal. In 2012-13 man days created by ST workers was 9.95 percent to total man days created by the workers in the state while it has gradually come down to 8.5 percent in the year 2017-18, whereas significant increase in overall participation of women in MGNREGS work in West Bengal. In 2012-13 man days worked by women shared 33.7 percent of total man days which has gradually increased to 47.58 percent in the year 2017-18. As MGNREGS promotes unbiased approach allowing participation of willing workforce in public work and assures equal pay; it encourages inclusion of the individuals who are distressed and are in need of additional employment for survival. Reason for decrease in ST person days is an emerging issue which calls for intensive investigation. At the same time, as work participation rate among women of the ST families is comparatively higher than other social groups, their response to MGNREGS can also reveal significance of giant budget programme in addressing the issue of inclusion of women of the resource poor ST community in the context of a particular area of the state.

Literature review

Some of the recent studies on participation of STs in MGNREGS reveals significance of the programmes and at the same time critically analyze the gaps in the process. Recent Study undertaken by Nail (2019) criticizes the role of gram panchayats in creating employment while Laxmi, Jampala and Dokku (2018) and Mathur and Bhat (2017) shows increased and spontaneous response of women workers. When Srikant and Rao, R (2017) indicate increased opportunity has resulted in increased income of SC and ST community through MGNREGS work Joshi and Desai (2017) find inclination of poor Scheduled Caste (SC)/Scheduled Tribe (ST) HHs to participate in the programme and show that as compared to other types of work, women feel comfortable to work in MGNREGS. On the other hand, Bhattacharjee (2017) emphasizes on the decreased rate of

participation of the ST and SC which meant exclusion of the poorest of the poor from the benefit. Varied experiences revealed in the discussion of the earlier papers indicate scope of further field study to explore the trend of response of STs households dependent on wage earning to MGNREGS in the context of a specific area of West Bengal.

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the level of participation of the ST households, especially of the women of those households in MGNREGS work
2. To find out the factors responsible for particular trend in participation pattern.

Methodology

To fulfill the objective of the study, random sampling method was followed.

Belati Gram Panchayat of Birbhum district of West Bengal was selected for study since constant participation of women from ST households in plant nursery under MGNREGS is reported from 2012-13 to 2017-18. From Belati Gram Panchayat, members of five Self-Help Groups who are being consistently benefitted from wage employment of nursery work under MGNREGS during study period were selected. Investigation was carried out with the help of secondary data and primary data collected through structured interview schedule and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) held with SHG members and panchayat functionaries. Simple percentage method is adopted to analyse the data.

Study area

Belati Gram Panchayat comes under administrative jurisdiction of Illambazar block of Birbhum district in West Bengal. Out of total population of the Belati Gram Panchayat 17.46 percent belong to Scheduled Tribes who are distributed in four to five small hamlets like Kulupdanga, Danga Para, Pakurtala and jambunipara. Most of them are landless or possess small patches of land and primarily depend on manual work in the agricultural field.

Results and Discussion

It is observed from MGNREGA database that total man days worked under MGNREGS in Belati Gram Panchayat has decreased from 2013-14 to 2018-19. Total man days worked by ST workers tend to decrease during the same period. The number of ST

households participated in MGNREGS has also declined from 419 in 2013-14 to 185 in 2017-18. The following table shows the year wise distribution of man days worked during 2013-14 to 2018-19 (up to October). In Belati Gram Panchayat during 2013-2014 out of the total man days (1,85,670) created the share of ST were (13.50 percent) but the total mandays created during 2014-15 have decreased too much (22,789 days) but the share of ST (15.81 per cent) has increased, whereas there is a fluctuation from 2015-16 to 2017-18. But suddenly, it has increased to 19.08 percent for STs. Here one thing could be noted is when the man days created by others are decreasing and at the same time the man days by STs are increasing.

The fluctuating pattern indicates influence of single or multiple factors determining the participation of ST workers in MGNREGS. In the year 2012-13 the number of ST households worked were 449 which have come down to 185 in the year 2017-18. Reduction in number of ST households participating in MGNREGS indicates that benefit of work is not being accessed by a large number of ST households. In term of completion of 100 days work limit, percentage of ST household under this category widely varies. It was 12.25 percent in the year 2013-14, it declined to 7.34 percent in 2015-16, and in 2016-17 it again declined to 6.38 percent, in the year 2017-18 it increased up to 13.16 percent. This trend may be explained by variation of demand of MGNREGS work due to availability other opportunities to the ST households. On the other hand, it may indicate factors relating to unavailability of work or denial of the demand by the Gram Panchayat.

Gender segregated data collected from database maintained at Gram penchant level, shows another significant aspect in respect of inclusion. Out of total man days, man days created by women is gradually increasing in the Gram Panchayat. It is also found that percentage of man days worked by ST women against total man days worked by women is also increasing. The following table 1 shows participation pattern of women ST workers in Belati Gram Panchayat.

Table: 1

From the above table it is revealed that during the study period total woman days created is increasing that too from 2015-16 to 2018-19 it has increased manifold. Another point to be noted is the woman days created by the ST women against total woman days

have also increased gradually. During the last two years of study, it has increased more than 50 percent. Even within the ST category, the man days created by the ST women are more than 50 percent during the first three years and it has increased to 60 percent till the end of the period.

As noted in the methodology, five SHG groups have been selected with 10 members each. They are (i) Hipir Hirpir (ii) Srijan (iii) Kalpana (iv) Pt. Raghunath and (v) Alchiki. Out of 50 respondents 88 percent of them are in the age group 20-35, 8 percent are in the age group 36-50 and 4 percent are in the age group of 51+. In the case of educational status 74 percent of them got only primary level of education followed by 16 per cent who got secondary level of education and 10 percent of the respondents are illiterate. However, all of the members irrespective of their educational status have participated in MGNREGS work. Most of SHG members belong to HHs which possesses small size of land and they have to depend upon wage earning to supplement family income.

Table: 2

It is observed from table 2 that Srijan is the only SHGs where 100 percent of the members are dependent on cultivation of own land. Hipir Hipir is the SHG where majority (70 percent) of the members depends on wage earning from agriculture whereas 50 percent of the members of Pt. Raghunath depend on wage earning from agriculture. Among all the SHGs, dependence on manual work is found to be highest in Kalpana (40 percent). Out of 50 members 36 percent depend primarily on wage earning from agriculture, 30 percent on cultivation, 26 percent on wage earning from manual work other than agriculture while 4 percent on animal rearing and rest 4 percent on services in other sector. So, there is intra member variation of primary occupation of SHG as well as inter SHG variation in proportion of members attached with particular occupation. Lean period in agriculture between March to June is critical for most of them who particularly depend on wage employment. However, irrespective of their primary occupation, all the members of five SHGs have worked equal man days under MGNREGS during study period.

Benefit of MGNREGS

Benefit of wage: Permissible works under MGNREGS include water conservation, drought proofing (including plantation and afforestation), flood protection, land

development, minor irrigation, horticulture and land development on the land owned by scheduled tribe. Following the guidelines, Belati Gram Panchayat has provided work related to improvement of natural resource based assets during last few years. Gram Panchayat level data shows that among all the works done under MGNREGS, nursery raising for plantation on public land is the major work where fifty ST women are being given assured work for thirty to forty days in a year during the period between 2012-13 and 18-19. Other schemes where women ST workers participated include land development, vermicompost pit under IBS (Individual Benefit Scheme), school building cleaning and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna etc. The following table 3 shows total man days worked by ST women from 2012-13 to 2018-19(up to October) in nursery rising and land development schemes.

Table: 3

The table 3 shows that nursery raising and land development scheme itself has created 14,740 man days for 50 ST women workers in Belated during 2012-18 which is 18.38 percent of the total man days worked by ST workers during same period. From 2017-18, there is an increase in man days worked by ST women under nursery scheme. The total amount of wages earned from nursery and land development scheme is Rs.25,66,617 which is 16.19 percent of the total wages earned by ST workers in the Gram Panchayat during 2012-18. Field investigation reveals that due to success of nursery scheme and demand from other ST women, Belati Gram Panchayat has given special initiative to increase number of saplings to be grown in the nursery which will be raised by the women ST workers. 50,000 plants are being raised every year by the Gram Panchayat through MGNREGS work allotted to ST women. 50 ST women belonging to five SHGs are usually allotted work under the scheme It has been made a practice to allot the work to women members of five SHGs each of which was given to nurture 10,000 saplings. Work under nursery and other schemes were available in the period between March and June when labour demand in agricultural activities becomes limited in those areas.

Mobilisation and role of Panchayat: Schedule 1 of MGNREGA has included large number of works allowing stronger synergy between MGNREGS, agriculture and other natural resource based livelihoods. According to MGNREG Act this programme has enough scope of creating Green Jobs “directly or indirectly contributing to preserve or restore the environment”. The emphasis on natural resource based activities automatically

expands scope of income generation for the resource poor households. Keeping the focus of the programme in view, Belati Gram Panchayat has shown its prudence in giving priority of tree plantation work for which nursery raising scheme was converged with MGNREGS.

Nursery raising activities by the SHGs was started in the year 2011-12 when SHG formation was considered as a key programme under Mahila Kisan Swasaktikaran Pariyojna (MKSP) which was a project under National Rural livelihoods Mission (NRLM) a centrally sponsored poverty reduction initiative. The ST women were given priority in the process as a consequence of which their access to institutional facilities has been gradually enhanced. All of the members were intensively trained by professionals of Loka Kalyan Parishad, the Project Implementing Agency of MKSP in nursery technique to enhance their capacity in the particular activity. Members of five SHGs namely Kalpana, Pandit Raghunath, Srijan, Alchiki and Hipir Hipir SHGs have proved their competency in this sector and worked every year in the nursery scheme. Subsequently, following the executive instruction of the state government, ST women SHGs are being selected by the Belati Gram Panchayat, ranked according to the level of efficiency in nursery management and allotted the work to those who are selected on this basis. All of the women ST workers belong to ten different SHGs among which Alchiki, Pandit Raghunath, Srijan and Hipir Hipir SHGs hold highest position in respect of days worked by the members from 2012 to 2018. Field investigation reveals that while allocating the nursery related work, members of Alchiki, Kalpana, Srijan and Hipir Hipir are preferred by Gram Panchayat because of their experience, group strength and competency in nursery management. Apart from these SHGs, members of other SHGs are allotted nursery work on rotation basis or demand placed by them. New workers are also being adopted from other SHGs which are formed by ST women members. At a time these fifty members of five SHGs are allotted work in nursery scheme. It is observed that whenever ST members of those SHGs worked in a scheme, they worked as a group and worked equal man days. It is reported by the members that social bondage has helped to improve the quality of work.

Benefit other than wage: ST women have been benefitted from MGNREGS in different ways. In Nursery work, wage is the major component. Saplings in the nursery are basically raised for plantation on different public places of the villages. Gram Panchayat determine the land for plantation and distribution of saplings is done under the supervision of MGNREGA supervisors of the respective village. Out of 50,000 saplings grown in the MGNREGS nursery, 2000 saplings are given to the SHGs. In this case, apart from wages

earned from nursery work, those workers find an opportunity to earn additional income from selling of 2000 saplings to the private customers in the village. Since 2016, women workers from Alchiki, Hipir Hipir and Kalpana SHGs are cultivating winter crop like mustard, vegetable etc on the land which are developed under MGNREGS. They could earn wages for land development under MGNREGS and at the same time manage the land for cultivation. The women are doubly benefitted from these works enticing both wages and assets for them. This has extended an opportunity of crop cultivation and help to gain additional income. They are continuing this practice for the last 4-5 years. Practice of managing land for cultivation on the basis of oral contract or lease system is becoming predominant among these women. Animal sheds particularly pig sheds seems to be another useful assets created on tribal land. Thus MGNREGS has enabled landless or resource poor ST households to expand their land capital even though on temporary basis for further income generation.

Difference in demand and interest between men and women: Field observation reveals that work demand by the male of the ST households is declining as work in private agricultural land is available with increase in area with double cropping facility through installation of river lifting irrigation system, pump sets etc at different locations of the villages like Pakurtala, Jamboni Para, Kulupdanga or other nearby villages. From focus group discussion it is revealed that wage employment in construction sector is becoming more attractive for the male workers who prefer those works to MGNREGS because of better remuneration as well as scope of immediate cash earning. There is another factor which seems to play an important role in declining interest towards MGNREGS. Belati is close to Bolpur and Illambazar where tourism and related job is becoming more attractive employment provider to the ST male. It appears that delay in payment from 4-5 months is restraining ST male from dependence on MGNREGS work. Same observation has been made by Aggarwal (2017) in case of Jharkhand where absence of payment guarantee in appropriate time is found to be important reason for losing interest in MGNREGS despite job requirement. On the contrary, MGNREGS seems to provide an additional assured income to those ST women who depend primarily on work in own field or wage earning from agriculture work in the local area. Nevertheless they are to withstand 4-5 months of delayed payment; a sense of payment guarantee gets more importance in the mind of the women. In many cases they consider the cumulative wage amount as savings and capital

for further investment. However, for poor women workers, delay in payment is difficult bear.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Case of Belati Gram Panchayat demonstrates a number of aspects related to significance of MGNREGS to ST households in the context of the particular village of West Bengal. Declining number of total man days as well as ST man days in MGNREGS works shows that job opportunities in other sector including agriculture are becoming available to the wage labours. Benefit of locational advantage has played a role in reduction of ST man days in general. At the same time, increase in share of ST man days in the MGNREGS work force confirm inclusion of needy households or workers from ST households in the scheme allowing minimum wages to those workers in the lean period. It also proves that seasonal under employment is still high among individuals of the ST households.

Enhanced share of days worked by women to total days worked by ST workers in general corroborate with the fact that women are more potential aspirants of MGNREGS work in the particular Gram Panchayat. Recognition of the proficiency shown by the women workers in nursery and other work indicate success of group strength of the ST women workers in public works. It is observed that each and every ST women who worked under nursery scheme belong to SHG. The members of the SHGs have contributed to the increase in man days created by ST women in Belati for the last seven years.

The participation pattern also confirms that ST women who worked in MGNREGS work got opportunity to work irrespective of their age, educational status and status of vulnerability. It confirms that MGNREGS could include all potential women workforce within particular five SHGs formed by women of the ST households in that particular village of the Gram panchayat.

Panchayat has facilitated the process through which women of those ST households could enable to acquire skill to do specialised work and it is the collective strength which has enabled them to access MGNREGS work uninterruptedly for last few years

Through providing Green jobs, Belati Gram Panchayat has taken a step forward to perform its institutional responsibility towards environmental sustainability which is one of the expected outcomes of MGNREGS.

Natural Resource based assets created under IBS (Individual Benefit Schemes) or on public places also indicates potentiality of direct or indirect income supplementation of the tribal households. Land development work has enabled ST women to increase their access to land resources in different ways through which these resource poor households manage to get benefit of production instead of mere wage money from land owners.

There are aspects which demonstrate critical gaps as well as prospective issues to be addressed for effective execution of MGNREGS. It may be concluded that MGNREGS can provide assured work to the needy section of the potential workers of the poor households if it is appropriately planned and supervised as in the case of Belati where nursery raising is the prime work through which 30-40 days of employment could be guaranteed for fifty ST women during study period by the Gram Panchayat. However, allotment of Nursery raising work is a process which is found to be predetermined by the Gram Panchayat and seems to be quota based instead of demand based work. It is found that 10 percent of the members who need additional employment to sustain their family could not get single additional day other than allotted for nursery, land development etc. Demand was also not formally registered. Investigation shows that workers are under impression that work can only be allotted equally to all members within a group and demand for additional work cannot be granted by the Gram Panchayat. It is found that intergroup difference in economic status are not considered for providing additional work to the ultra-poor members like widows with limited resources. Same observation is found in the field observation made by Narayanan (2014). MGNREGS being a demand-driven scheme must provide employment to anyone who seeks work and there would be no rationing at all so that anyone who desires work is indeed granted work. In practice, there is evidence of employment *rationing* found in the case of Belati. However, 30-40 days of work is made assured to the ST households who were in need of additional wage during the period of unemployment. Gram Panchayat has shown its commitment to provide employment to the ST households through nursery work but from the point of view of asset creation for further employment generation; institutional role is not so promising. Regarding selection of plant species emphasis was primarily given on quick growing fuel

wood. Multiple needs may be considered while selecting the species for plantation to generate further employment or economic opportunities for the tribal households in future. Since women SHG members are active in term of participation in MGNREGS work, they may be integrated in the consultative process to enhance usefulness of the assets and to select schemes preferred by them. Post plantation supervision is an important work which may be carefully designed along with nursery work. Desired impact of MGNREGS can only be achieved through green job initiatives which may contribute to the environmental sustainability. Women ST workers who are inclined to do additional work may be engaged in supervisory work to improve survival rate of the trees planted on public places. Instead of mere making provision of wage distribution, it is desirable on part of the Gram Panchayat to focus on appropriate designing of land development work so that it can enhance opportunity of land based employment in the village. The extent of benefit harnessed by the families of those tribal women in Belati Gram Panchayat and level of commitment of the institution towards employment security of the poor tribal households expands scope of further study on role of Panchyati Raj Institution in inclusion of ST households in MGNREGS work

Aknowledgement

Members of Belati Gram Panchyat, MGNREGS supervisor, members of SHGs and staff of Loka Kalyan Parishad are acknowledged for allowing the authors to use necessary data and for extending cordial support in field enumeration.

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Tables

Table: 1 Distribution of percentage of women man days, percentage of ST women man days against total women man days and ST women man days to total ST man days in Belati Gram panchyat

Year	Percentage of women man days against total man days	Percentage of ST women man days against total women man days	Percentage of man days worked by ST women against total ST man days
2013-14	24.00	4.01	50.00
2014-15	26.98	4.27	50.00
2015-16	43.58	5.15	50.00
2016-17	45.50	6.65	60.00
2017-18	55.32	7.15	60.00
2018-19	52.38	9.64	60.00

Source: www.mgnregs.nic.in and data available in Gram Panchayat office

Table: 2 Distribution of members according to primary occupation

Name of SHG	Number of members in SHG	Percentage of members to total members in the SHGs according to their primary source of income				
		Wage earning from agriculture	Wage earning from other manual work	Cultivation	Other service	Animal rearing
Hipir Hipir	10	70.00	30.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Srijan	10	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00
Kalpana	10	40.00	40.00	0.00	10.00	10.00
Pt. Raghunath	10	50.00	30.00	10.00	10.00	0.00
Alchiki	10	20.00	30.00	40.00	0.00	10.00
Total	50	36.00	26.00	30.00	4.00	4.00

Source: Computed

Table: 3 Distribution of man days created under Nursery and plantation and land development scheme during study period

Year	Total days worked by ST women	Total ST women workers	Total wages earned by the ST women workers
2012-13	1905	50	2,50,772
2013-14	1905	50	3,31,470
2014-15	2110	50	3,67,140
2015-16	2155	50	3,74,970
2016-17	2050	50	3,60,800
2017-18	2050	50	3,91,550
2018-19	2565	50	4,89,915
Total	14,740 Man days	Total	Rs.25,66,617

Source: Data available from job cards of workers (SHG members)