

## Analysis of Gandhian Economic Philosophy MNREGA and Inclusion of Rural Poor (Women)

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### Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's vision and philosophy to strengthen rural development by making women as participants and actors in the process of development has been the task of ensuring the inclusive growth. Gandhi's economic philosophy is firmly fitted to the inclusive and participatory development of villages. He expressed his concerns and commitment for village when he said, "for me, India begins and ends in the villages" (Gandhi 1979). The purpose of economic practices therefore, remains to ensure equitable and sustainable development where all unemployed workers would get living wages through strengthening rural economy. It is therefore evident that the village focused economic approach not only reflects the vision and wisdom of Gandhi to empower India through rural development but also provides a comprehensive policy inputs to the decision-makers to ensure more inclusive, welfare oriented and participatory developmental paradigm. He envisioned an economic practice that is more egalitarian, inclusive and free from class divisiveness. Gandhiji wanted a society where each would get according to his talent and labour. He believed that the first priority of government is to ensure every citizen the basic necessity of food and clothing. According to him food and clothing are the basic prerequisites for economic development (Koshal and Koshal 1973). The introduction of present National Food Security Bill by the central government is essentially in the fulfilment of Gandhiji's dream of a hunger free India. (Swaminathan 2012).

India is a country which is made up of small villages. More than 60% of the population peoples lives in the villages today Villages are the representative of Indian Culture. Gandhiji's message 'Go back to villages' is very important today. When villages in India will develop automatically the country will make progress. To develop villages means to make overall development irrespective of caste class and gender in that villages according to Gandhian thought. Gandhiji always tried to give special privileges to the marginalized sections of Indian society which included harijans, women and children. Gandhi has often quoted that if mankind was to progress and realize the ideals of equality and brotherhood, it must act on the principle of paying the highest attention to the prime needs of the weakest sections of the population. And Gandhian economics places importance to means of achieving the aim of development but with means being non-violent, ethical and truthful in almost all spheres. In order to achieve this means he advocated trusteeship, decentralization of economic activities, labour intensive technology and priority to weaker sections. Gandhi said that the survival of any economy is made possible only when it is free from exploitation. This is the view of Gandhi each and every women must be empowered without the overall development of females, they cannot develop their families we can't deny that female is an inseparable part of a family. To empower females and make them self dependant Gandhiji's conception of Swaraj was "full economic freedom for the toiling millions. As far back as 1931 he wrote that the "Swaraj of his dream was the poor man's Swaraj" and emphasized that freedom was meaningless

unless the basic necessities of life were guaranteed to the masses.

However, after independence the State for rural development<sup>1</sup> in India initiated to provide direct supplementary wage employment to the rural and poor women through many programmes and schemes. Its outreach has been inadequate in view of the dimension of the unemployment and gender and social security mechanism in rural areas. This got reflected in many of the reports like Towards Equality(1975) and Shramshakti Report (1988) which said that women issue was not only an economic or social issue but structural and political and could not be resolved on fragmented or isolated basis .

The introduction of MNREGA(initially termed as NREGA) marks a paradigm shift from all earlier wage employment programmes as it provides a statutory guarantee and a right based framework for wage employment. Inclusion of excluded social groups is the means to development, social justice and communal harmony. Development without a careful embedding of social democracy, justice and equity, results in the consolidation of prejudice, stratification and social exclusion rather than the reverse.

## Empowerment and Inclusion of Women and Rural Poor

Rural women in our country suffer from being both economic and social invisibility. Economic invisibility comes from the perception that women are irrelevant to the wage and market economy. Social invisibility is the result of the general status of second class citizens. The modern term empowerment got long back reflected in Gandhi's vision of emancipation when he stated that social emancipation was as critical as political emancipation. Gandhi, throughout his life, struggled very hard for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden, making significant contributions for the development of the status of women in India. Women under his ages took a milestone to step towards reestablishing their identity in the society. Gandhi's inspiring ideologies boosted their morals

and helped them to rediscover their self-esteem. Analyzing empowerment we can say that it also has many facets. It allows for political empowerment, economic empowerment ,legal empowerment, human resource development or capacity building and beyond. It covers the right based approach because it invites the active intervention by the human agent not just to claim one's right within existing resources but also to develop one's potential. Gandhi was not a pure economist, his intention was to develop the society. For him economics is certainly an important factor in this direction but not a sole factor. Of course now it is accepted by the economists that the ultimate aim of economic development is social development , building up a happy and healthy society.

For rural development major focus had been productive absorption of under employed and surplus labour force of the rural sector hence direct supplementary wage employment to the rural poor through public works, many programmes were initiated by the Govt. of India, namely NREP , Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme and Jawahar Rojgar Yojana. Currently Sampoorna Gramin Rojgar Yojana but these also seemed inadequate. In view of this an urgent need to ensure at least some minimum days of employment in the shape of manual labour to every household in the rural areas.

## MNREGA: Paradigm Shift From Earlier Wage Employment Programmes

The concept of creating employment in public works is not new in India as stated above but the most critical difference now is that people's entitlement, by law to employment, is mandated through MNREGA for the entire country. It marked a paradigm shift from all earlier wage employment programmes as it provided a statutory guarantee and a right based framework for wage employment. The legal mandate of providing employment in a time bound manner is underpinned by the provision of unemployment allowance. Unlike the earlier wage

employment programme that were allocation based MNREGA is demand driven. The act stipulates that wages will be equal for men and women but with commitment to ensure at least 33% would be women. By generating employment for women in the villages, can play a substantial role in economically empowering women and laying the basis for greater independence and self esteem.

MNREGA being a national Act and about 90% of the funds for works come from the Centre the central government is duty bound under the Act to put in place mandatory operational norms to protect labourers' entitlements. Moreover, it is unique in the sense that it is sensitive to working conditions of workers, especially women, as it advocates for providing accessible worksite (within five kilometer of the workers residence), crèches etc for women with children below six, at least one third of work opportunities must go to women and gender parity of wages, etc.

## Empowerment , Social Justice and Equity under MNREGA

Since the 1990's women have been identified as key agents of sustainable development and women's equality and empowerment are seen as central to a more holistic approach towards establishing new patterns and processes of development that are sustainable. The World Bank has suggested that empowerment of women should be a key aspect of all social development programs (World Bank, 2001). To quote Kabeer(2001), it explains the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." Being right based approach it invites the active intervention by the human agent not just to

claim one's right within existing resources but also to develop one's potential. Empowerment of women is a gradual and complicated process which involves changing the way of thinking of the whole society. In short, we can say that women can be empowered through processes i.e, (a) access (b) conscientisation (c) participation and (d) decision- making. Along with it is Social Equity which refers to the right of everyone to enjoy a rewarding quality of life, as well as to the expectation for fair and equitable distribution of the benefits and costs among different social groups and individuals - a step to enable progress systematically towards social inclusion and to ensure equity in the society and overall development process.

The present paper aims at analyzing how far and to what extent women from socially disadvantaged sections getting benefits of livelihood sustenance and employment from MNREGA and assessing how far the act has been instrumental in providing space to women in achieving the goal of social security as well as fulfilling the aim of economic redistribution and social equity on the basis of a few case studies from the state of Uttar Pradesh .

Now let us analyse have picture of women laborers participation in MNREGA. It was fund that during the financial year of 2008-09, out of the total laborers, 47% were women in India which rose to 51% in the year of 2009-10. That means the involvement of women in MNREGA moved upward, if seen in a national perspective. However, state wise variation is also marked as in some states inclusion of the women is a matter of concern which the table given below indicates at. The national percentage is almost 50%.

**Table 1: State wise Women's Participation in MNREGA**  
(Women Workers as a % of all MNREGA workers)

States	2008-09%
Tamil Nadu	82.01
Kerala	71.39
Rajasthan	69.00
Andhra Pradesh	57.75
Karnataka	49.75
Gujarat	46.54
Tripura	44.56
Uttaranchal	42.77
Chattisgarh	42.05
Madhya Pradesh	41.67
Maharashtra	39.99
Sikkim	36.73
Orissa	36.39
Haryana	34.44
Mizoram	33.62
Manipur	32.80
Meghalaya	30.87
Assam	30.85
Himachal Pradesh	30.11
Arunachal Pradesh	29.58
Nagaland	29.36
Jharkhand	27.17
Bihar	26.62
West Bengal	16.99
Punjab	16.29
Uttar Pradesh	14.53
Jammu & Kashmir	1.08
All India	49.33

Source : Official data available (for the first four months of the financial Year) at [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in) as on July 17<sup>th</sup> 2010

The Uttar Pradesh statistical profile of MNREGA between 2010-12 the revealed that out of the total 1149.39 lakhs

employment provided to households among the marginalized section including women percentage of SC has increased in comparison to ST and Women. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2: Statistics about MNREGA in Uttar Pradesh**

	As on November 2010	As on July 2012
<b>Employment provided to households: Person days [ in lakhs]</b>	40.87729 Lakhs	72.98702 Lakhs
<b>Total</b>	1149.39lakhs	2653.01
<b>SCs</b>	307.15 [26.72%]	836.94[31.55%]
<b>STs</b>	16.6 [1.44%]	33.12[1.25%]
<b>Women</b>	179.22 [15.59%]	454.63[17.14%]
<b>Others</b>	825.64 [71.83%]	1782.95[67.2%]
<b>Total fund</b>	2783 Crore.	6224.67crore
<b>Expenditure</b>	1842.07 Crore.	5062.22crore
<b>Total Works</b>	1065130	1317834
<b>Works completed</b>	1369	230167
<b>Works in Progress-</b>	1063761	1087667

Source: Ministry of Rural Development at [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in)

## MNREGA, Social Inclusion, Social Justice and Empowerment

Locating MNREGA on the map of gender and social inclusion, social justice and empowerment is very important to gauge its overall impact, especially the impact of wage parity on decision making capacity of rural women? Is there an increase in their bargaining powers as individuals and within the household and also community? The very intervention of designed to reach the socially excluded, most vulnerable and economically weakest groups to transform their lives.

After its implementation it has been subject to much scrutiny, and assessed with mixed findings, in terms of its design and objectives as such, its impact on the socially disadvantaged, and notably on women.

As stated above mixed responses are coming from different about the scheme. Some states have shown good results and some are lagging behind. (The Hindu, 2008) It is increasingly recognized that the NREGP has the potential not only to generate more employment directly and

indirectly, but also to transform rural economic and social relations at many levels. Its huge potential is evident particularly from the enthusiastic response of local people, landless and marginal farmers and women workers wherever information about the programme has been properly disseminated. (Frontline, 2008, ) Women in rural areas seem to have become confident about being integral contributor to family expenditure and about being assertive about their identity space in public sphere.

## Jobs to Women

The participation of women in the MNREGA was below the stipulated minimum of 33%. UP and Bihar were at the bottom with women accounting for only 5 and 13% of the MNREGA in the initial phase with gradual improvement in later years.

## Case I

Mania from Naugarh block in Chandauli district who subsists on rice and salt on most days, managed to

scrape together Rs 25 for her photo that is mandatory on the job card. She doesn't know that of the Rs 2.3 crore that the district has been allocated by the Central government for the MNREGA, four per cent has been set-aside for "administrative costs. Having paid Rs 25 for her picture Mania went to the village Pradhan for her card. A month later she is still waiting after the Pradhan asked her to traverse the 27 kilometres on foot to Naugarh several times to get her job card. Like her, most of the other families in Pathror are yet to get their job cards, and their guarantee under the Act is a distant possibility.

## Equal Wages

The demand for equal wages and opportunities under the Act is aimed for through the provision for 33% preference for women workers. However, here it is important to note that this provision is not part of main Act but of the Schedule. This implies that it can be amended at any time without much effort. It is important to note how gender divisions affect work allocation and wages. In Gorakhpur district it has been observed that a digging work site will have few men and more women, who had to wait for their turn to collect mud. This has a negative impact on their output and wages. As the wages are calculated on the basis of measurement, the women - although they have spent all day at work - get a lesser wage. Women have also been asked to come for work with their male counterpart. This insistence creates problems for widows, deserted women, women whose husbands have migrated.

## Case I

Meena of Gorakhpur district said women are being denied work saying that only 33% work is for women and once that quota is over there will be no more work allotted to them. The story is almost same in many other states – under one or the other pretext women are kept away from their right to work.

## Allocation of Work

The Act which guarantees 100 days of employment per household at minimum wage is the first piece of legislation that compels the State to provide a social safety net for impoverished rural households but in most other states the promise of 100 days of assured employment is still a distant dream.

## Slowing down of Migration

In Gorakhpur district has somewhat controlled the rural masses from migrating to urban areas. enabling women to work, as well. There is a general trend of low migration in the areas where assessment was carried out and workers have started to repay their debts.

### Case I

A gram pradhan Indravati Devi of Gorakhpur district says that the implementation of the MNREGA has helped my fellow villagers. Now they don't have to shift to the cities in search of work, they get employment over here now. There are 360 employment cards that have been issued in this village alone.

### Case II

Rita in Sitapur district said, Earlier my family used to go to neighboring villages and towns for works. Life has become relatively stable with the coming of MNREGA as our family can stay in the village and do some work under EGA. I have so far worked for 24 days under EGA and have earned Rs. 1800/- as wage i.e. around Rs. 60/- per day. No longer is our family forced to migrate for reasons of searching job.

In terms of employment MNREGA has impacted upon aspects, like rise in wages, slowing down of migration, creation of productive assets and change in power equations.

### Case III

Meera in Gorakhpur district has worked for 30 days under MNREGA so far and expressed unlimited happiness on getting opportunity to work and get paid subsequently. She said 'the program has provided her a ray of hope by ensuring a minimum livelihood.

## Emergence and Assertion of Women's Identity

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There has been emergence of women's identity and their empowerment with the coming of MNREGA. Respondents in all the states have been found to be very optimistic about its importance in their lives as well as the growing contribution of women workers to the sources of their households' livelihood. There is growing economic alternative to the local women workers who hail from an economically and social disadvantaged background. Perhaps for the first time, there is an assertive women's identity in rural India due to their participation in Employment Guarantee Program. Their confidence has grown manifold and their contributions to family spending have increased as well as women have become more active in social collectives. Some women have also become very assertive in talking about their rights as they have started feeling more important to educate their children and spend on healthcare as well.

### Case I

In Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh Madhuri (name changed), a widow said that MNREGA had 'changed her life' because earlier she was able to get work at Rs. 35 per day, whereas now she earns Rs. 100 per day.

### Case II

Meena (name changed) in Gorakhpur district had BPL card and had a little amount of land. After knowing about MNREGA works in her village through a public announcement she decided to work under it. So she along with her husband worked for 100 days and earned a good amount of money at the rate of Rs. 60/- per day. They have a small land, which is fulfilling their basic food necessities. Finally they decided to build a kuchcha -pacca house for them.

## Health line for Poor households

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It also seems to play a useful role as a "health line" for rural poor households: repaying the loan,

purchase of school books and uniforms and so on. Apart from meeting the subsistence expenditure a part of the wages is also being used for saving or investment. Across the states, MNREGA workers (men and women alike) reported using their wages to treat an illness in the family or for their own medical expenses. Nearly half of the female respondents said that MNREGA helped them cope with an illness in the family. Much of the economic uncertainty which afflicts the lives of the rural poor stems from sudden illnesses and chronic ailments.

## Improved Access to Education for Children

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### Case I

Laxmia widow of Chitrakoot district (name changed) has a son who studied in the X<sup>th</sup> class. She says that agricultural work is available only for a few months in a year and that too not regular basis. She had worked for 30 days in 2007-2008 and had used the income she earned to support her son's education. She felt satisfied that wages are paid every week and would like to get a card for her son so that he can work too.

## Creation of Sustainable Productive Community Asset

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### Case I

The MNREGA has a strong focus on creation of such structures which may enhance livelihood opportunities for the poor families. Works related to improve the water structures or building wells on the lands of the SC/ST families as well as ponds will definitely enhance the agricultural productivity for the small and marginal farmers including women who have to go far off to fetch water for their need.

Prem Kumari, the pradhan of Maseedha Ratan says that in Maseedha Ratan village in Mall block, the *adarsh talaab* (model pond) had been built at a place where the village panchayat used to meet. "This is a common meeting place for the villagers



and during festivals, a local *haat* (market) is also set up here. The villagers have planted several trees such as neem, sheesham, sehjan and papaya around that. Eight stone benches, two on each side, have also been fixed, along with a village pond chabootra for people to sit. A hand pump is also to be installed here. Around 254 villagers worked on the pond and now, three women from the village have been asked to water the plants everyday under the same MNREGA scheme. The pond was built at a cost of Rs 5.81 lakh and the payments were also cleared.

### Case II

Zarina Begum a village pradhan says that in village Nai Basti Dhanewa, in Malihabad, the pond has been constructed near an old temple. "We already had a small pond here, so under this scheme, we decided to beautify it and also ensure that it is cleaned up regularly. This will be used for community purposes". Viewed in a wider perspective MNREGA signalled a possible reshaping of State priorities in India through a democratic determination to provide real livelihood opportunities for the rural poor.

### Barriers

But there had been social barriers too as stated below, which has emerged from the social audit in Uttar Pradesh .

### Gendered Social Norms Acted As Barrier

In Uttar Pradesh we met women who said that they had not been able to register as workers under the MNREGA and were told that this programme was "not for them". In Sitapur and Gorakhpur districts of Uttar Pradesh , there was a significant amount of hostility to female participation in MNREGA , both from Gram Panchayat functionaries and male relatives. Names of adult women were excluded from job cards and it was commonly stated that women 'cannot' work on worksites, that they are

'too weak' and that it is socially unacceptable for them to undertake this work.

### Case I

A "pradhan-pati" before public , declared that in Uttar Pradesh, "women do only two kinds of work: "boaaee" (sowing) and "kataee" (cutting). They do not do *mazdoori*". Indeed, several women during the social audit complained that the men prevented them from going to work at the sites claiming that it would reflect a loss of honour for them. They said "mahilaon se mazdoori karaenge to badnaami hogi".

### Case II

Madhuri of Sitapur district, pointed out that she has been turned away from several worksites – and that when there is an 'excess of workers' women are the ones who are turned away.

### Delayed payments also come in the way of participation of poor women

In Uttar Pradesh majority women workers reported that wages had not been paid within the stipulated 15-day period.

### Case I

Women mentioned that they received much lesser than the prescribed amount as wages. This has also led to a reduced demand for work. Banwari of Urauli Panchayat from Asothar block of Fatehpur district in Uttar Pradesh has reported that under MNREGA, workers are getting only Rs 50 per day as wages and that too on delayed basis.

### Continued illegal presence of contractors

Continued illegal presence of contractors is a significant negative factor affecting the availability of work and its benefits for women. On worksites where contractors were involved, many women workers said they were harassed, as compared to



only eight percent on contractor-free worksites. This affects the availability of work and its benefits for women.

### Case I

In Sandila block only a handful of women have been given employment to date. The social audit teams did not find a single woman who had worked and worse still, none of them were registered on the job cards. Even where women are the sole bread-earners, job cards have been denied to them.

### Case II

Shivpyari from Kondar village of Asothar block, Fatehpur district reported that the job cards of the workers were under the custody of the Pradhan and often the entries in it were found to be false.

### Lack of child care facilities

A proper working condition ensuring safety is a primary necessity particularly in the case of women. One can take the need for child care at the worksites since many of the women have their siblings with them when they go for work. Many girl children have been found to remain at home to take care of younger siblings while their mothers are on working on the MNREGA sites, and thus often missing out educational opportunities. Some children work along with their parents, given that the payment depends on meeting predetermined outputs, which often requires the involvement of whole families in completion of the work.

Other facilities like safe drinking water, shade for the period of rest and first aid facility were also required.

### Lack of awareness

Initially women thought they were not entitled to work on the public works sites because the type of work offered under MNREGA-funded schemes required hard physical labour, digging earth for infrastructure repair and the social norm is against

women doing a man's job.. Women were subjected to discrimination at the level of house-hold registration and issuing of job cards, including complete denial to single woman households in states like Uttar Pradesh . Khera and Nayak (2009) have found that apart from socio-cultural restrictions, the presence of contractors on the worksites (which is not legally permitted), a schedule of rates-based wages and delays in wage payment and lack of childcare facilities have restrictive effects on women's participation as workers under the NREGS.

### Conclusion and Challenges Ahead

Thus, MNREGA might have a welfaristic approach but more of that it gives rights to the people to demand, work and earn wages to live their life. In this context it becomes important where the most deprived, scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, women and the disables included in the programme and got maximum benefit out of it. It can be said that participation of women in MNREGA is certainly improving. From the above case studies of MNREGA, it appears that the said act seems to be contributing a great role in bringing social security in India as wages are rising, migration is coming down, productive assets are being created and the power equations are changing. And this has paved the way for social justice and bringing social equity by providing space for all social groups excluded on the lines of caste class and gender as well as helped poor women towards economic empowerment. However there been challenges like low awareness restraining participation and accessibility, issue of fund allocation, cases of accidents at worksites without any significant provision for redressal, manipulation in job cards and wage rates ,corruption , lack of awareness lack of political will as well as dissuading women to participate which need to be tackled properly on sustained basis then only the idea of empowerment of women, social justice and equity can be translated into a reality and relevance of its name after Gandhi would hold any meaning.

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