

**THE RETICENCE IN MGNREGA WORKERS:  
AN ACCOUNT FROM NAMKUM, JHARKHAND**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present paper is a part of my Ph.D. research work. The paper is titled, "The reticence in MGNREGA workers: An Account from Namkum Jharkhand," and is entirely based on fieldwork surveys, interactions with the workers, and observations collected from the worksites and fields. A primary account of any public policy based welfare program (here MGNREGA) and its implementation mechanism, practices, and patterns become very important for understanding the program's actual administration and practical implications. With the government doing budget cuts and expressing its intentions of not continuing the scheme, irresponsible handling of schemes and inadequate attention and intervention in the administration of the MGNREGS at the grassroots (village level), the workers under the MGNREGS seem to have lost the drive to seek work under the MGNREGA and participate in it. Ironically, the MGNREGA, innovatively promulgated for the workers, claiming to take into account their needs and requirements, the workers claim to have no say or voice in its implementation. What is most striking and saddening is their silence on the sabotaging and denial of their rights and entitlements under the MGNREGA, which is meant to be "their scheme." To understand this phenomenon and make the MGNREGA a workers Act, one needs to understand the worker's point of view. Thus, The paper has been written, keeping in mind the objective of providing an insight to the readers about workers' perspective towards the MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT, i.e., MGNREGA.

## Introduction

The present paper is an effort to explain the observable reticence in MGNREGA<sup>1</sup> workers with the help of observations and inferences from a field study conducted in the Namkum Block of Ranchi district in Jharkhand.

The preliminary field study was conducted in November 2018. It started with visits to the concerned block offices and meeting with the officials involved in the administration of the Act and implementation of the schemes. It came into notice that the MGNREGA workers and the officials are on strike demanding better work conditions and hike in the minimum wages. The minimum wage in Jharkhand at that time (2018) was Rs.168, and it had continued to be this low for over 5-6 years, three years before the government raised the wage from Rs.167 to Rs.168 after a long period of protest and demand (as informed by the workers). Apart from the previously taken up work, not much work was happening under the scheme in that period. The workers were being called out and persuaded to continue working for the completion of previously taken up work.

Namkum has a total area of 415.61 sq km, where urban area is 13.75 sq km and rural is 401.86<sup>2</sup> sq km. It has Households of 28756 of the total population where the number of rural households is 23299, and the urban household is 5457, and the important crops are paddy and wheat. The area primarily has small farmers engaging in subsistence agriculture and daily wage seekers. While understanding the employment or livelihood pattern of the workers, it was observed that they mostly engaged in daily wage works or work on either their agricultural fields or fields of others. When confronted about participation in MGNREGA, they expressed their disappointment about meager payment in the MGNREGS<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> “An Act to provide for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country 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 and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto”, URL: <https://nrega.nic.in/rajaswa.pdf> (Accessed on 10 March 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Government of India, Directorate of Census Operations, Jharkhand, “Census of India 2011 – Jharkhand: District Census Handbook, Ranchi 2011”, p. 28, URL: <https://cdn.s3waas.gov.in/s32b8a61594b1f4c4db0902a8a395ced93/uploads/2018/04/2018042966.pdf> (Accessed on 13 February 2020).

<sup>3</sup> MGNREGS implies the Schemes that are being undertaken under Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act.

They argued that the wage paid to them under the MGNREGS was so low that they could hardly manage their daily affairs. The payment of wages also took a lot of time, which made working under the MGNREGS futile as they didn't have anything in their hand for their daily household needs by the end of the day because most of the times they could not receive wages at the end of the day. They indicated that by going to the cities, they get at least double the amount of the wage provided under MGNREGA on the same day by the end of the day so that they can carry out their living in a sufficient manner. I enquired whether they had an understanding of the process of creation of mandays and the payment after that and also about awareness of unemployment allowance or compensation in the case where the payment was not made under 15 days of completion of work, to which they seemed to be well informed. They said that there is no limit for them to wait for the wages, and there haven't been many times when the wages were paid on time. The issue they stressed most about was the inadequate wages which made working under MGNREGA futile. Therefore, underpayment and untimely payment restricted the workers from working under the Act.

Thus, the status of MGNREGA observed was:

- Good level of awareness among the workers about the Act and the underlying schemes as in clarity in processes of availing jobs and planning of works to be undertaken in the villages
- Fewer works were being taken up due to the non-timely payment and lesser wages.

The Block Development Officer enumerated his personal and official efforts to encourage more and more demand for work under the Act. He showed me many MGNREGS worksites and a new type of work that has been taken up to make the work more appealing to the workers, namely plantation of mango orchard in a village in Laalkhatanga. The mango orchard was suggested and planned by the block and the C.F.T.<sup>4</sup> officials. It was planted on a privately owned

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<sup>4</sup> C.F.T implies Cluster Facilitation Team, part of non-governmental organisation that work for facilitation of implementation of various government schemes and programmes. In Namkum, they were employed under a contract and trained by a non-governmental organisation, "UDHYOGINI". The C.F.T helped a lot in bringing about awareness and understanding of the MGNREGA in the block. They engaged effectively with the MGNREGA workers and made them aware of their rights and entitlements and encouraged them to demand work and participate in the MGNREGA. They worked for active participation of the workers and greater transparency in the operation of the scheme.

piece of land by one of the MGNREGA workers and also had alternative cropping of vegetables done in the farm that could act as a source of income while mango trees took their time to yield produce for commercial use. This is kind of a new work that adds novelty in the MGNREGS and can help the workers in a very sustainable way. Unfortunately, it is not doing well for attracting more demand for work from workers under the MGNREGS because the very basic issue of daily wage based livelihood continues, and most of the workers cannot wait long for vegetable or fruit produce and need daily income from working under the Act. Thus, we see that the very essence of the Act that was to provide income-earning opportunities and to create worthwhile assets in the village is getting marred by factors such as low wages and delay in payment and is discouraging workers from seeking employment under the Act.

The B.D.O<sup>5</sup> outlined a few important factors that were creating gaps in the implementation of the Act. The **generation of the F.T.O (Fund Transfer Order)** wherein, faulty and overlapping F.T.Os have been generated that have caused delay and other problems in the payment of the wages. He also pointed out the issue of **pending muster rolls**, which lead to payment-related problems. There were issues related to D.B.T. (Direct Benefit Transfer) and linkage to Aadhaar card. He also expressed his concern over the declining **mandays** and informed that even when they fixed the minimum number for mandays to 30, even 30 of these were not being generated. He agreed that the reason underlying this is lesser wages and delays in payment affecting demand for work. **Demand generation** was also an interlinked problem with the above, where the officials indicate that although there is sufficient material now, no new works are being taken up. There were problems in **Geotagging** as the works are now required to be geotagged, but the workers in the schemes are not technically sound to do so; also, they do not have advanced mobile handsets with the help of which they can do it. Even if everything is available, there is an inherent issue of mobile network and Internet connectivity that makes geotagging an impossible task for the locals and the workers. **Pending schemes** disrupted the formation of new schemes as old schemes are pending and being dragged from one financial year to the next one. This is also hindering the initiative of 'Yojana Banao Abhiyaan'. **Lack of communication between official** was also a major hurdle as there is a serious lack of communication between the officials involved in carrying out the various functions under the Act, this leads to an ideational and

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<sup>5</sup> B.D.O. is the Block Development Officer of the block, here, Namkum.

technical deadlock in the administration of the schemes. He acknowledged that the above factors are discouraging the workers from participating in the Act.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS**

### **Workers Response Side**

Most of the workers belong to the scheduled tribe category and have no educational background. They practice subsistence agriculture and daily wage work. Most of them have awareness about the basic entitlements such as right to work, minimum wages, etc. but not many are aware of the compensation that should be paid in case of delay in payment, if work is provided beyond 5 km, time limit for provision of work, i.e., within 15 days of application for work as there is very less participation in awareness meetings. There is a serious lack of interest in participation for the selection of work in the gram sabha, and not many are aware of new works that can be taken under the Act. There is no clear understanding of complainant authority, i.e., where the workers can approach in case of work-related problems, and none of them have availed unemployment allowance. Most workers suffer in work due to non-availability or provision of tools for carrying out the work and also due to lack of technical assistance. Many workers have pointed towards the non-payment of material cost for the materials used in the schemes. So, the reasons for voluntary withdrawal from work mostly include long-duration taken for the provision of work, higher wages in non-MGNREGS works. The reasons for involuntary withdrawal from work mostly includes insufficient wages, delay in availability of work, and delay in payment. No worker indicated problems at work sites, but almost all of them indicated towards the apathy of the officials involved in MGNREGS regarding wages, timely payment, timely provision of work, etc., for, e.g., most of them have job cards but none of them are updated about crucial information like when was the work demanded and when was it provided. As a result, it can be noted that the highest number of the mandays generated was 50 for the last year in most of the villages in the block.

### **C.F.T. and Other Official's Response Side**

The C.F.T. or the Cluster facilitation team assists in the implementation of MGNREGA in the area. Many times, the Rozgar Sevaks are not from the assigned panchayats and don't live in the same area or surroundings. There is no arrangement for the rozgar sevak to visit the worksites. Thus, the worksites remain unchecked and non-monitored. The mates responsible for conducting schemes at the worksites are also not properly trained and adequately equipped. The remuneration provided to the local or grassroots level personnel is very meager and delayed. The frequency of awareness meetings is very low. They suggested that more efforts for awareness about the Act should be made through nukkad nataks, storytelling, hoardings, paintings, radio, etc. The effort to provide technical assistance, e.g., in the measurement of work, is very less, and it undermines the participation of work under the Act. D.B.T. linkage is a very big hurdle in availing payments. The C.F.T. suggested that the process of availing jobs should be made simple and clear and work should be provided as soon as there is a demand for work, delay in payment should be checked, non-payment of material cost wages should be checked, Grievance redressal mechanism should be easily available and accessible. Where the state boasts of initiatives such as 'Yojana Banao Abhiyaan,' in which the workers can make their own schemes, the encouragement at the level of local administration for involvement in the planning of works is very low. All the above factors further discourage the worker from participating, demand work, and put forward its grievances under the Act.

### **OBSERVER'S IMPRESSION AND CONCLUSION**

Many crucial observations helped create an understanding of the reserved and increasingly indifferent behavior of the workers towards the Act and also an essential insight into the mindset, attitude, hope, desire, and need of the workers, which are the very essence of the Act. The workers are utterly disappointed and disapproving of the present wages, even when in this year, the government raised the minimum wages from Rs. 168 to Rs. 171 in the state of Jharkhand. This raise in wages comes after a yearlong protest and continued strikes ranging from 6 to 7 months, the workers, after revision in the wages, call the amount "a mockery" of their needs. There is stagnancy in the approach of the effort of the officials for more involvement of the workers in the MGNREGS, mainly because of the inherent issue of lesser wages and delay in

payment. There is a serious decline in the will to demand work by the daily wage workers mostly because they don't want to work in such lesser wages. Even if the workers apply for work and start working under the MGNREGS, they get seriously discouraged because of the extreme delay in payment of wages. Even for the workers who use to demand work by planning schemes in their own piece of land like construction of wells, building of T.C.B.s or Dobhas, etc., the will to work is touching a very low point because first; there are non-availability of required tools, second; there is non-payment of material cost, third; there is very less technical assistance from the side of the administration and fourth; there are times when there is complete non-payment of wages to the workers involved in the work. The Partial or low awareness about the Act is also inhibiting the workers from seeking work under the MGNREGS. For instance, the workers know that they can give applications for work at any time of the year, and they get work accordingly. Still, they are not aware of the provision of compensation if work is provided after 15 days, some of the workers have just heard of unemployment allowance, but not even one of them has availed it. The workers point not out of towards the provision of one job card per household, which covers all the working members of the household. They claim that even if they try and indulge in the MGNREGS, the days provided for work when gets divided amongst the workers within the same household are not enough. There is no clarity about whom or where to approach in case of any issue that arises while working under the MGNREGS. To check data regarding work demanded vis a vis work provided, there is a complete void as there is no record of the work demanded and the officials claim that work provided for every demand whereas, the workers claim that they don't get work even after application or sometimes get work long after application.

Despite these grievances, they expressed their interest in working under the MGNREGA schemes owing to many reasons such as getting work closer to their homes, working in the village, and creative assets for their village, interaction with the other workers leading to a sense of community and community development. They said working under MGNREGA keeps them connected to their surroundings and their land. They expressed their hope that the state or the central government takes notice of their circumstances and demands and help make MGNREGA better and conducive for their work. The workers are tired of beseeching about concerned changes and additions in the Act that can make it much more behoveful for them. They hold that

unless the government tries to take into account their demands, they should distance themselves from the scheme. To quote a worker, "agar MGNREGA hamare liye banayi hai to kabhi humse kyun nahi poochte?" meaning if the government claims to have promulgated this Act for us, why does it not ever ask from us. I informed that there is provision of social audit to which they replied, "audit mein kaun jata hai, kaam pe jana hota hai aur waise bhi hum kahein kuch bhi, hoga wohi jo wo log karna chahte hain!". Thus, statements such as these point out some glaring contradictions inherent in the implementation mechanism where the very idea of MGNREGA being an act for people where they become the decision-makers, is getting marred.

This reticence of the workers, therefore, is an expression of loss of hope and trust in the intentions and administration of the MGNREGA for them.

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