

# NREGA: A Women's Programme

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Studies done by scholars like Narayanan, (2008), Vijayanand (2008) and Sharif (2008) show that in spite of many limitations the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) has become a women's programme. Narayanan and Vijayanand have restricted their study to one state each only, but Sharif has studied seven states. Their common conclusion is that the Act has a positive impact on women's employment opportunities and intra-household bargaining power. For example, Narayanan points out that the proportion of women workers was 73 per cent in Tamil Nadu, 59 per cent in Andhra Pradesh and 53 per cent in Karnataka. Vijayanand observed that the proportion of women workers in Kerala amounted to 80 per cent. He also informed that Kootumbashree members are actively helping the execution of the Act in terms of providing tools, keeping records and conducting social audit. Sharif has used qualitative and quantitative data from 3,200 households in 80 villages from seven states to come to the conclusion that the outreach of NREGA work is much larger for women belonging to community based organisations, panchayats and mahila mandals. All three scholars have noticed that women from SC, ST and OBC categories in the age group of 25-26 are coming forward to take up employment under NREGA in large numbers.

Both Narayanan and Vijayanand noticed that women's income level has increased as a result of their involvement in NREGA work. They participate more frequently in the **decision making process** in the family regarding spending of money than before because they now earn the minimum wage rate like men. In Tamil Nadu, men migrate for a couple of months in search of jobs, leaving women to work in NREGA. In these families, the women take lead to decide on various important domestic issues.

An research team of the Institute of Social Sciences was involved in an evaluation of a project on capacity building of elected women representatives (EWRs) in five states i.e. Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra. The project ran for three years (2004 – 2007). The team members conducted focused group discussions with elected women representatives and other women to elucidate relevant information regarding their knowledge about NREGA among many other things. Till then, only three states had implemented NREGA. It was found that women of the project areas were aware of many provisions of the Act including the provision on minimum wage rate. Women of Chhattisgarh were carrying their job cards with them. In Maharashtra, women complained that the work schedule under NREGA and the local economic schedule didn't match. Women from Madhya Pradesh reported that the job cards are kept with panchayat secretary who manages five to six panchayats and has been specially recruited for looking after the implementation of the Act. The women could give us the exact measurement of wells which were to be dug under the scheme.

The implementation of the Act suffers from various shortcomings. Women of Madhya Pradesh, for example, complained that there were no crèche facilities and children were either left with the family members or were brought to the work site and remained unattended. Narayanan has also

reported on this issue extensively. About 19 per cent women bring their children to the work site and leave them unattended. If the child is sick, the woman may not even come for work. Some children are sent to anganwadi centers where the timings are different from that of the work schedule. Children are also left at home with a girl child. In Orissa, women felt that the work was too hard and arduous for women. So they could not get the full minimum wages. In some places, single women did not get employment because of gender discrimination. (*References have been omitted.*)

## NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME

### TAMIL NADU

**CAG finds implementation of NREGS tardy:** The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has come down heavily on the Tamil Nadu government for 'tardy' implementation of NREGS in the southern state. In a report tabled in the state Assembly, CAG said that the state government was yet to frame the rules for implementing the scheme. "Scheme funds of Rs 100.46 crore remained unutilised as on March 31, 2007 with the district co-ordinators and village panchayats i.e. the expenditure under the scheme worked out to only 65 per cent of the funds available during 2005-07," the report said.

Further, of the 6.83 lakh households provided with work in the state during 2006-07 under the scheme, only 1,824 households were provided with work for 100 days, working out to a minimal 0.27 per cent. The report found that the unemployment allowance which has to be paid to applicants, who could not be provided with work within 15 days from the date of receipt of application, was not paid in any of the sample districts — Tiruvannamalai, Cuddalore and Villupuram.

### CHHATTISGARH

**Dantewala never heard of it:** A report of the Central Employment Guarantee Council in the Union Rural Development Ministry says that the state government did not make any attempt to implement NREGS in the Naxal-infested areas as well as areas which were not affected by the Naxal violence in Dantewada district. "Most of the people I met here had never heard of the NREGAS and knew nothing about their entitlements under the Act. This is shocking, considering that the Act has been in force in this area for almost three years," says author of the report, Jean Drèze, council member and economist.

### JHARKHAND

**NREGS meeting decides on wage hike:** At a review meeting of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, block development officers of East Singhbhum district were directed to hike the wage of labourers in accordance with the revised structure. The block development officers were told that the labourers should be paid Rs 110 per day as labour charge as against the earlier amount of Rs 90 a day. "Except for Ghatshila, Dumuria and Chakulia, all the blocks have already provided the labour budget. The blocks that are lagging behind have been directed to file the report fast. Reports provided by various blocks would help us in constituting the labour budget for the next financial year. It would then be sent to union government for approval," the official said. □